

The Dread Pirate Tabor

A Novel of Love and Adventure

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This book is dedicated to Patrick MacGregor; a good friend and fellow furry without whom I would never have met a certain Rabbit pirate by the name of Tabor.

You're the best Patrick.



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Preface



This book began as a single story (*The Dead of Night*) written some three years ago at Halloween. It was meant to cheer up an old friend who was having a bad time of things. That story, based upon his furry character The Dread Pirate Tabor, was quick, it was fun, and it was done within the context of our writing group's Thursday Prompt. This is where a writing suggestion is given by the group leader and everyone writes something based upon it. We then read each other's story offering constructive critique when it is called for.

This was my first introduction to Captain Tabor Rabbit. We grasped paws and he pulled me into his world; something for which I shall ever be grateful. Everyone should be allowed to go on such an adventure.

Saying that, please allow me to clarify by explaining my method of writing: I don't write so much as I go into a story and record what I see. I plan nothing out and never know where things are going until I reach the very end.

Because of this style of writing the characters become my friends and much of what takes place settles in my mind as a real event. Because of this ability, which I consider a gift to be treasured, I am allowed to experience things which would otherwise be impossible for me to experience. I have laughed and cried real tears during the writing of this book. I felt true love and loss and observed my '*pretend*' friend's exploits when they were at their best and at their worst.

Some three months later and during the second story (*Noise of the Female Persuasion*) I found myself actually sitting upon the quarterdeck of The Queen while writing; that's

how deeply my mind sinks in. Later I was portrayed as the ship's figurehead; the long eared Fox holding a pen across her chest. What a ride I was given too.

This book does not have a political agenda; nor does it seek to raise up or put down anything that could be compared to real life. It is about love, adventure, loyalty and intrigue in the highest order. Once you begin, the story takes over and you will find the understanding that what a person 'might be' is not as important as 'who they are'. The characters of this book are who they are because that's what they were when I was introduced to them. I love each and every one of them.

Captain Tabor Rabbit and his shipload of male Rabbit pirates are gay. (a modern word representative of a particular male sexual lifestyle)

Captain Merdue De Hiss Cat and her shipload of female Cat pirates are lesbian. (a modern word representative of a particular female sexual lifestyle)

Captain 'Black Dog' Henry Babacomb of the Labradorean Royal Revenue Service is hard as nails and comes with a very disturbed past; a superb seaman and quite straight.

Lady Taverness Rabbit; voluptuous spy extraordinaire (to be left as a mystery)

Governor Louis Gulo Wolverine is 'total macho rolled into gray fur'; he is very straight and a males male.

And then there is the indomitable Duroc; the huge tattooed Polynesian Swine found marooned on a small island for eating his previous captain.

There are more too, all of whom beckon you to join them in this ribald tale the likes of which you have never ever seen before.

Warmly written with a smile...

Vixyy Fox



There Is Always A Beginning

The house was old and quiet. But for the ticking of the mantle clock and a knock on the door all was still.

“Yessss... just a moment,” a voice called out. “I don’t move quite as fast as I used to so hold your horses.”

An older gentleman with a cane came from the area of the living room and pulled the door open. At first he looked straight out and saw no one. Looking downwards, he found a small boy standing just to the side of the threshold. The child was about six years old, dirty looking and holding a small wooden chest.

“Well hello there,” the man said to him. “If you’re selling something, I’ve already bought one and don’t need any more.” Looking up he peered around the yard and street but there was no one else present; adult, child, or otherwise. Turning his attention back to the youngster he said, “I have a hunch you’re not selling anything are you?”

The child shook his head.

“You’re all by yourself?”

The child didn’t reply but only snuffed up the snot that had been peeking out of his nose.

“Tell you what,” the old gentleman told him, “I’ve got some oatmeal cookies in the kitchen. They’re store bought but not too bad. What say we have a few with a glass of milk and I’ll call the police department to alert them there’s a mean old pirate prowling the neighborhood?”

The child didn’t respond but just stood holding his small chest and looking up at the man.

“Talkative fellow, ain’t cha? I was referring to your chest there. Being the old busy body that I am, I figured you for a pirate and (he changed his voice to a corny pirate accent) that there bees yor treasure chest... yarrrrrrr...”

The boy still didn’t respond and the old man sighed.

“You know... once upon a time I had a treasure chest just like yours; and great stuff it contained for the imagination... wonderful stuff.”

The snot reappeared and the home owner, feeling his heart melt, took a handkerchief from his pocket. Unfolding it, he placed it over the boy’s nose.

“Blow,” he instructed.

The child blew once.

The grandfatherly figure told him, "Again."

There was a second attempt which sounded clearer.

Wiping the child's nose he refolded the handkerchief and tucked it back into his pocket.

"So what's your name?"

The child didn't say anything.

"OK, let's try something else then; what's your business here?"

The little fellow held up the chest.

"I saw that and as I said, it's quite impressive. Is this your pirate chest?"

He nodded.

"I would imagine it's full of gold and jewels and such, huh?"

The child shook his head no.

Bending down, the old fellow accepted the chest and looked at it closely. There was an inscription carved into the wood.

"What's this? Tabor? Why... that was the name of the pirate I knew when I was your age. He was properly known as 'The Dread Pirate Tabor' and was the very best friend anyone could ever have. He was always there for me... loyal to a fault. He kept me company when I was alone and that was more often than I care to admit. Where did you get this? It looks very old."

Hearing no answer or sound, he looked back down from his examination of the chest and found that he was now alone on the porch.

"How very odd," he remarked while looking around. "Boy? Where did you get to? Boy?"

Moving with difficulty, the old fellow sat in his front porch rocker.

"Well Patrick," he muttered, "We can't do much, but we can wait. Be patient. He'll be back. They always come back when they get hungry. You did, didn't you?"

Calling out he said, "When you come back, boy, we'll have those cookies and some milk. No need to be afraid. We'll call the police department and they'll find your family for you."

Setting his cane off to the side he contemplated the chest while rubbing his thumb across the carved name. It felt so familiar. Opening the lid, he looked at what was inside. The first thing he took out was a small figure of a Rabbit Pirate, crouched slightly and holding a cutlass.

“Well call me a lubber and keelhaul me for being stupid,” he muttered.

Looking out over the yard, he searched again for the child who delivered the chest but saw no one.

Patrick waited for better than an hour but the child never came back. During that time he took out all the pieces from the small chest and examined each in turn. They reminded him of so much that had passed. In time the sun went down and the street became dark. Putting everything back into the chest, he took it in one hand and his cane in the other, making his way to the bedroom where he turned on the electric light next to his bed and then placed each and every piece on his dresser top, carefully arranging them by who they were. Some were pirates, some were soldiers and still others were sailors, but all of them were animals.

Finally satisfied, he left again to fetch something suddenly remembered. Returning with his prize, he said, “Look here, Tabor, I actually still have the model I built of The Queen. Pardon the dust if you will and the missing rigging, but there she was up in the attic. It has been a very long time after all.”

Sitting on the bed, he looked at the lead figures arranged upon the dresser; but especially the little figurine standing to the fore of the others.

“What’s that?” he asked, “You don’t mind? Well that seems rather un-sailor like for the likes of you. You always told me, ‘The only thing worse than a cluttered deck and a messy compartment was a ropes loose end’.” He stops as if listening. “Yes, yes, the figure head,” he replied, moving the model around so he could look at it, “I made her special. She’s a long eared fox holding a pen across her chest. A bit odd for a pirate ship, I know. You’d think she’d be holding a cutlass or a cannon; but the pen is mightier than the sword after all. I think you’ll get used to her.”

Rising, he sat the ship upon the dresser and again rearranged the figurines, this time placing them on the ship’s main deck. Finally, picking up the figure of the Rabbit he carefully placed it upon the quarterdeck and smiled. “There you are Captain, the crew has been called to muster and all are present and accounted for.”

Moving back to his bed, he turned out the light. Rather than going to sleep, however, he lay watching the ship’s silhouette in the dim light of the moon shining through the window. Doing so, he felt much younger than his years allowed for.

Sleep finally took him and he dreamed.....

The Dead of Night

“Taverness...”

The word rolled off of my tongue as if it belonged there; and yet I had never before heard it spoken. Sitting up in the rickety bed, I crossed the room and peered out the window. The moon was full and reflecting brightly over the small cove below the Inn. I saw the ship clearly. Rightly it was not a large ship though it had a brigantine rig. Easily she could have packed on enough sail to capsize her in a good wind. But that she was fast, was a given under any condition.

“Ssssssss....”

I turned to the almost silent noise and found a hunched and crutched one legged Rabbit standing near the door of the room. His small guttering candle showed an empty eye socket sitting across from one that was occupied and full of life; though the moon’s luminosity cast no shadow of him on the floor. Strangely I was not startled, nor was I afraid. He held a finger in front of his lips indicating I should be still. For my part, I nodded. For his part he nodded back and then crooked the same finger indicating I should follow.

Pointing to a spot on the floor, he bid me stand exactly there. I did and felt the board give just the slightest bit under my foot; nothing more, mind you, than would indicate poor workmanship. When the board moved, he put his back against the heavy wardrobe and gave a push. To my surprise, it slid back quite soundlessly showing an entrance to a hidey hole... a small hidden room of convenience.

Again the strange fellow placed a finger over his lips and bid me enter this space, this time with some urgency. Normally, I might have unsheathed and held my blade to his throat seeking the meaning of his actions; but a stealthy noise in the downstairs part of the Inn caught my attention. It was not the sort of night noise a patron seeking his slumber would ever have heard so in I went asking no question... and receiving no answer for it.

In moments the Hounds of His Royal Majesty’s Revenue Service were at the bed upon which I’d been sleeping, hacking and stabbing it with silent cutlasses. Though I could not see, my long ears worked perfectly fine. Should I have been present in the bed no doubt there would have been several pieces of me laid out for display in the plaza of the King’s Court within a day or two; time given for travel.

At the conclusion of the hacking and slashing and stabbing what was left of the bed’s covers were pulled off and a match struck.

“Bloody Hell!” muttered one of the Hounds, obviously a Bosun by the sound of his curse. “That fuk’n pirate Hare done went and gots away again. That makes the sixth time I’s been on a party to snag the bastard and gots noth’n for my efforts.”

“Sixth time?” asked a civil voice. Strangely enough it was female and by the accent I would definitely judge it as belonging to another Rabbit. “Do you believe in co-incidences?”

“No M’Lady Taverness, I do not,” the fellow replied. I was sure I’d heard this voice before but could not place it; definitely it was a Dog but it could also have been a Badger... perhaps native to the Americas.

“Kill him,” the Doe replied softly.

There was a soft thump of a knife being buried to the hilt and came the slowly released air of death. Then there was a deeper thump as the body was allowed to slip to the floor.

“Word has it that Captain Tabor will meet his ship here in less than a fortnight,” a third voice offered. We could stay at the Inn as a guest and wait.”

“I will wait alone,” the Doe instructed. There was no doubt who was in charge. “Take your vessel and stay just off shore. If the pirate’s ship sallies to this cove you are to sink it with all hands. Should the ‘Dread Pirate Tabor’ show his retched face here I will see that he remains until the Revenue Service can manage to show up. Watch for two lanterns hung at opposite sides of the Inn. That will be your signal. When you arrive, you may hack him to pieces if you wish but rest assured; he will already be dead by my paw.”

I heard her footsteps move to the window and knew she was looking out on the same scene I had viewed earlier.

“Your ship carries too much yardage Captain Babacomb. It will eventually be your undoing.”

“Leave that worry to me, M’lady. I named her after you so it is good that she be so strong.”

“Strength can be turned against you,” was her reply. I could not even fathom who this Rabbit was that hated me so... but I was damned certain I would never underestimate her if we were to meet face to face.

“Babacomb... did you not kill another pirate here at the Inn?”

“Indeed, M’Lady; the previous owner and friend of the Dread Pirate Tabor’s mentor. He was made of iron that one was. He ne’er did break under the torture. That was better than five year ago and I’ve heard his ghost lives on still.”

I heard her foot thump into the ribs of the dead Bosun. “And now he will have some company. Leave now and take this refuse with you. Send a crew here to clean up the mess. Since there is no one present but the owner... take her with you. Keep her in irons against the possibilities she too is sympathetic. I will remain in her place.”

There was the sound of murmurs as her feet softly paced from the room and I could imagine this foul crew knuckling their brows in cowering salute as she left. Why was it sailors named their ships after women? I can tell you the fact for sure; it is because women are the far deadliest of all creatures.

And this led me to think of the ghostly visage who'd come to save my life... surely I would conduct a proper funeral service for him when I was once again safely at sea and then name one of our long boats in his honor; the one we trailed behind in case a sailor might fall overboard during battle.

Noise of the Female Persuasion

“Deck there! Sail dead astern!”

Captain Tabor looked upwards at the lookout perched some one hundred and fifty feet above the deck. The seas and the wind were both dead aft so the plump Rabbit sitting aloft had an easy ride. His legs hung down on both sides of the mast and his ample rump was comfortably perched upon the yard. This particular rump brought a gleam to the Captain’s eye as he watched its fur fluff about in the wind. Cupping his paws around his mouth, he queried, “Can you make out the ship Toby?”

“It be’s the Taverness, sur,” was the reply.

Tabor cursed under his breath. The Taverness was faster than the Queen in a following sea and faster still with a pushing wind. The pirate knew his enemy’s risk; with so much sail aloft he could capsize if the wind shifted unexpectedly. When it was from behind, however, his ship rode too damned well. It would seem the Hounds of His Royal Majesty’s Revenue Service were at his heels once again; the biggest and blackest of them being this particular ship’s Labradorean Captain.

Tabor turned and looked aft. He could see her top sails plain enough though she was still hull down in the water. “Captain Babacomb!” he hissed as if cursing and then spat overboard as if even saying the name put a bad taste in his mouth. He gripped the rail, his mind whirling as it judged possibility after possibility like a master chess player.

Fighting head to head was strictly out of the question; he was easily out gunned and out liveried.

Dumping his cargo of contraband accomplished nothing except making the ship poorer.

If a storm blew up there was a chance, but his sailor’s sixth sense told him this would not be. Not only that, but he expected the wind to hold steady well into the night.

“Tell me Smithe,” he finally said, turning to the Rabbit at the helm, “What do you make of things as they are?”

“Begging the Captain’s pardon,” the buck toothed Bunny responded, “But I think we’re buggered.”

Tabor chuckled with the double meaning. His best Helmsbunny rather liked being buggered. “I take it you’ve something in mind?” he asked.

“Other than the bunk in your cabin, sur; haul the long twelve back to the stern ta make sure we got a marlinspike shoved up our arse waiting to surprise his slippery dick short eights. That’d be one shot to two, but heavier and with greater range.”

Tabor smiled broadly. He enjoyed his crew... they were a tight knit lot with a good and bawdy sense of humor. “Not yet,” he said. “That would make us stern heavy and shave a good knot from our speed.”

The helmsman smiled and the pirate knew his filthy mind was playing with the word ‘knot’. “Devil take ye Smithe,” he told him plainly.

“And I hope he does, sur,” came the Helm’s reply with a smile. “You’re a true mind reader.”

“Tis easy to read a paper with but one word on it, my fine butt Bunny. Bear up a point, your mind’s in the bilges and the sails are beginning to luff.”

Tabor turned and watched his crew move about the business of sailing. They were a seasoned lot and little in the way of what Captain Babacomb could show them would disturb their routine.

“Should we break out the ordinance, sur?” one of them called out.

“Not yet Topsy... just keep her trim tight for now. When the time comes we’ll do what we must.”

“Better to die fighting than to hang!” another yelled to the verbal agreement of his mates.

Tabor nodded to this one. “Better not to do either,” he responded with a wink. “Raise the colors if you will please Mr. Bossley... we’ll confirm what they already know.”

The one who was thus addressed, stepped to the flag bag and attached a lanyard to a huge skull and crossed bones. As soon as it broke from the yard, there was a puff of black smoke from the other ship in reply. With a splash, the ball fell between the two ships just as the sound of the shot reached their ears.

“How long till he makes range?” the pirate asked his Quartermaster, though he well knew the answer.

“Two hours, sur. No more.” He then pointed to a fog bank just barely discernible in the distance. “If we change tack and run for the fog, less time I’m thinking... but... that one’s not a good place to be; even if you’re trying to escape.”

“Shoals?”

“That and worse, sur... it’s not a safe haven for anything afloat. The fog’s ever present, the rocks’r green with slime weed, and there be unholy things what live there.”

“And white are the bones what washes ashore,” chimed in the helmsman with a laugh. “You are such a fat drama whore Kelly.”

“And how is it I don’t know of this place?” Tabor asked the pair.

The Quartermaster nodded to the Fox sitting on the deck next to the quarterdeck’s swivel gun. She was scribbling away in a notebook somewhat oblivious to what was going on. “Ask the writer Cap’n. Mayhaps she knows the answer.”

“Writer?” the Captain asked as he turned to regard the vixen, his one eyebrow rising in the question.

The long eared female looked up and shrugged her shoulders. “I read the prompt ‘siren’ before starting this story and wanted to go with the screechy wailing thing on a fire engine; but it was the wrong type of siren apparently. I closed my eyes thinking of that and yet here I sit watching you.”

The Dread Pirate Tabor frowned at this bit of information... and then slowly he smiled. “Screechy wailing things,” he muttered. “Sirens...” he said almost to himself as he looked up at his crew, his brain beginning to grasp the answer. “Yes, and that’s it! That’s the solution!”

Fully facing the main deck, he gripped the rail with both of his Bunny paws and yelled out as loud as he could, “Listen to me my crew! We’re going there!” he pointed to the fog bank.

There was a splash some hundred yards aft of their stern, a second later it was followed by a distant boom.

“It’s a very very dangerous place,” he continued, “Home of the mythical Sirens. There will be rocks... there will be shoals... and there will be those great winged screechy females! That’s what the Sirens are m’lads... females perched high in the rocks just a singing their hearts out trying to get sailors to come close enough to wreck upon their shoals.”

His crew looked mystified.

The pirate laughed and pounded his fist on the rail. “How many of you sea going sex fiends has ever even looked upon a female’s breasts with desire... and your mother’s doesn’t count!”

There was a grumbling among them of ‘no’ and ‘not me’ as they all shook there heads; looking at each other to see if any had even dared suggest they liked girls.

“That’s the answer then!” Tabor yelled with a good amount of humor. “Their singing won’t have a bit of effect on us because we only like...”

He pointed a finger at them and understanding came upon his crew like light from a signal lantern when the darkening blanket is removed.

“BOYS!” they all responded together.

“That’s right! The Siren’s singing is nothing more than noise of the female persuasion!”

There was a silent moment as the crew digested this bit of information and then Dread Pirate Tabor continued.

“Being the right good seafarers that you are, you will also be aware that old Captain Babacomb Ballbreaker and his merry crew of His Majesty’s best sailors,” he placed a special emphasis on ‘sailors’, “Are all pussy hounds of the highest experience. I say; let the cold hearted harpies sing the bunch of them onto the rocks as the Taverness tries to follow in The Queen’s wake!”

“THREE CHEERS AND A HUZZA FOR CAPTAIN TABOR!” the ship’s Bosun yelled to an immediately cheering crew.

Amidst the din and clatter, the writer raised her paw signaling the good Captain to come close so she might speak with him.

“In your last story,” she asked softly, “The one with that very deadly doe Bunny... the one who wanted to kill you so badly; Lady Taverness. What happened to her? I believe Captain Babacomb named his ship in her honor? I thought for sure she would slit your throat.”

Dread Pirate Tabor smiled at her and chuckled in an equally soft manner. “She weren’t a she a’tall m’darling. She was a he with the nicest figure I ever did see. After the others left, I snuck out of my hidey hole and surprised him I did. Threw’im, blew’im, and tatoood’im; bing bang buzzle.”

The pirate winked at her who, in turn, appeared astonished.

“Weren’t he just a bit surprised and pissed like no tomorrow,” the pirate continued. “He’s got a nice little heart on his left shoulder now with my name in it. All the more reason, I suppose, that the good Lady has set the Dogs upon us with such a vengeance.” He touched the Fox on the forehead with an index finger. “A secret known by another is likely not to be a secret for long... eh?”

“I suppose not,” she replied.

As the ship slipped into the fog bank, a stray cannon ball skipped close alongside. In the sky above was seen a winged something with breasts; while the most lovely of songs was heard floating upon the wind.

And yet the Queen sailed on unaffected.

The Caveat Noir

The port town of Saylavee was hardly what one might call civilized. The local constabulary offered a protected harbor and a strong fortress meant to enforce its neutrality; but at an expensive price. Any and all were welcomed there; provided they pay the harbor fees and follow the few indelible rules. Breaking these rules carried very severe consequences. The bleached bones in the iron cages, exposed at every low tide bore mute witness to this. Worse than a death by hanging to a pirate, was that of drowning with the incoming ocean.

No one government had yet been able to break this place, though it had been tried several times. For this reason, and for its sworn neutrality, the island was a favorite supply point for ships of all types and nationalities... but especially pirates.

“I smell death,” Kelly intoned softly from his place at the navigational table.

“You are such a melodramatic old woman...” Smithe groused. “You always says that when we come here.” He kept his voice low. Any time the ship came in to port this was the rule; least an important command be missed and a rock find their hull.

“It’s the smell of Saylavee... it’s how the Guv’ner keeps it peaceful like,” their Captain told them. He spat over the side as if trying to clear the taste of the place from his palate. “He’s a Wolverine... they run the place, and he’s a stone cold Pirate just like us. He’s found his place ashore is all. Not a very good trade off in my book. Without movement the target is a little too easily hit and rightly so. That and too many of his citizens have found themselves stuffed into the cages.” He sniffed the air. “There’s something else smells here besides the cages though.” Turning to the Bosun standing by on the bows, he called out, “Depth Mr. Bossley?”

The Bosun cast the lead and came back with the call of, “By the mark; Twain.”

“That’un sounds vaguely familiar,” Smithe chuckled.

Tabor looked aloft, judging the wind in his one set top sail. It was still full behind them and the tide was on its way in, so The Queen was in no trouble. Even so, he had his crew keep the long sweeps on deck and ready should they have to row.

“My guts complaining and my nose is a twinging to the tune of Mackerel,” he grumbled. “I’ve a mind to turn us about and head back to the sea.”

“It’s the sea, sur,” Kelly responded, thinking his Captain was addressing him in particularly. “Mackerel’s fish and fish are a part of the ocean right enough.”

“Twasn’t what I meant ya old fool Rabbit. Male’s got Cods, and the other’s got’s Mackerels... and I smell’em sure enough.” He sniffed the air again. “And most likely Cat.”

Plump bottomed Toby was sitting in his favorite place up in the yards, keeping an eye on things. They all heard him rip out a good fart and then he called down to the deck as if it’d actually been a signal to get their attention, “Deck there... ship a’long side the jetty. She’s all secure like, but armed to the teeth... a good match for The Queen and no mistake.”

As they slowly came around to the inner side of the fortress, those on deck were able to see what their lookout saw. The other ship’s hull was forest green in color and her masts white... and many were the gun ports along her length.

“What do you suppose she is?” Kelly asked softly as his Captain snapped open his glass.

“She’s Cat, sure as I’m a Rabbit,” Tabor muttered after a moment’s inspection, “Her name’s, ‘Caveat Noir’.”

“What’s it mean, sur?” Smithe asked as he adjusted the ships wheel to stay on his given course. “I don’t knows the Cat language. Only time I heerd it, it sounded all spiky like and made my skin crawl.”

“It’s a warning,” Kelly said with a shiver. “It means they take no prisoners... they’z bad’uns among the bad’uns.”

“As bad as us?” the Captain asked as he snapped his glass closed. “I never been afraid of no Sea Dog; and I don’t suppose a Sea Cat would be any worse. Ease your helm Smithe; I want to come into the pier gently.”

Looking towards the tops, he called out, “Bring in the sail lads.” Looking to the deck, he said in a quieter voice, “Mind the jib, and stand by the sweeps. Don’t run’em out unless I calls for it... and if I does be double quick.”

He then motioned for his gunner to come onto the quarterdeck.

“Mr. Flopears,” he whispered when the Bunny was close enough. “Did you think to load one of the guns in the waist?”

“That would be against the Gov’ner’s decree,” replied the Rabbit, and then shook his floppy ears out of his eyes. “Course I did sur... I might not be smart, but I’m not stupid. The carronades is double balled and ready as a hard dick. Soon as we’re tied up I’ll discretely get’em undone again.”

“Good Bunny you are,” Tabor said with a wink. “You’re up for a fling later?”

“Glad to sur,” he said with a grin. “Grab my ears like they was hand’lin lines’n call’s me pincushion to yer prick and I’m a happy Bunny.”

The Captain clapped him on the shoulder, winked, and then sent him back to his post.

When the ships were amidships of each other and at a distance of only a pistol shot, Tabor gave the other a hard professional look, watching for any weakness he might use against her in the future. What Cat’s that were still on board lounged around, some cleaning themselves and only a few of those watching the other ship come in. He felt his skin crawl and so opened his glass again and looked closer.

“Tell me Kelly,” he said softly, turning to his Quartermaster and handing him the glass, “What you notice of that other crew aside from the fact that they are all Cats?”

The Rabbit sniffed the air, but found no scent since the wind carried from the wrong direction. Rubbing his eyes, he squinted through the glass and then promptly sneezed. Closing the glass, he covered his mouth and pretended to go into a coughing fit.

“ALL FEMALE...COUGH COUGH... EVER LAST COUGH ONE OF’EM... COUGH.” He then wiped his nose on a ragged sleeve, hawked, and spat overboard in the direction of the other vessel.

The words ‘lesbian ship’ were quickly whispered from one bunny to the next until the entire crew was aware.

The Queen continued slowly towards the dock and as her quarterdeck passed that of the Caveat Noir the door to her captain’s cabin opened. A Cat in a crisp blue uniform decked out in some five pounds of gold foppery came on deck; followed by a demure Bunny Doe who promptly opened a parasol and covered her face. Just as the first monkey fisted line was tossed over to the waiting port’s docking crew, recognition hit the pirate like a twelve pound round shot. “Lady Taverness!” he nearly shouted.

The parasol went up over her head and she smiled at him just as the Caveat Noir ran out three of her guns. Flopears just as quickly had his crew run out their one.

“Hard about!” Tabor yelled to Smithe. “Sweeps out and put your backs to it! Fend off! Fend off!”

There was a dull boom from the fortress guarding the harbor and a huge ball landed right between the two ships. The splash soaked Rabbits and Cats alike.

“STAND DOWN!” called a garishly uniformed Wolverine from the dock. It was the Governor himself. He’d been hiding behind a mound of bailed sweet clover with a contingent of his soldiers. “STAND DOWN ON ALL SIDES,” he cried out through cupped paws, “OR I WILL MAKE THE SIGNAL TO SINK BOTH SHIPS!” There was

no doubt that he had absolute authority to do so too, not that he would; better to take a ship as a prize.

The Captain of the Cat's vessel began instructing her crew in a loud yet controlled voice. Her strange language sounded almost musical. Just at quickly, Captain Tabor began doing the same thing, settling his crew and making things as ship shape as he could under the circumstances.

It would appear they were to dock after all.

Governor Gulo sat sipping a glass of expensive port wine. In front of him stood the Captain Cat and the Captain Rabbit, both in chains and both flanked by two heavily armed soldiers, all of whom were also Wolverines.

Through the open window of his fortress there was only the black of night, though at a further angle, both dimly lit ships could be seen moored to the pier. Gulo had discretely made sure that his prisoners had that view.

“The penalty for bearing arms in Saylavee, Captains, is death... but of course you knew this and chose to ignore it in any case. How very stupid of you both. In case you are wondering Captain Merdue De Hiss Cat, my Chief Gunner reported your attempted bribe. I have added it to ‘our’ treasury... thank you very much.” He said this last with a nod of his head. “Of course, after learning of your plan to sink The Queen and then escape under my poorly aimed guns, I prepared my own surprise... and here we are, eh?”

Swallowing the rest of his wine, he thumped his goblet down upon the table. “What do you have to say for yourselves?”

“Men are all dis’gusting peegs,” the feline Captain hissed in her strange sounding accent.

“It is strange to hear you say that,” he told her softly, shifting in his seat, “Being that I will make judgment upon you in but a few moments; especially since I might be swayed?”

She made no reply.

“For the record,” he continued, rising from his table, “I have met Swine who would turn your insult into a compliment. They are a nice law abiding people and very stout fighters. Under the circumstances, and since we are in such close proximity, you may address me as Panzer if you wish.” He smiled at her, leaving nothing to the imagination concerning his desires and how he might be swayed. When he received nothing in return, he turned to the Rabbit and growled, “You, however, may address me only as Governor. What do you have to say in your defense?”

The Bunny Pirate bowed slightly, and replied, "I was but defending myself and my ship, Governor, sur."

"Ah yes... so you were. I will concede that point. Very well then, I am ready to pass judgment." Standing, he said to one of the soldiers present, "Open the cages we have prepared for our prisoners."

The Wolverine addressed nodded, clicked his heels together, and then moved to the back of the room. With a rattling of chains, the two cages were opened in readiness to receive their next offering to Gulo's law.

Placing his paws behind his back, the Governor told them, "I will give you both a choice." Turning to the table, he spread out an old looking map. Taking his empty goblet, he placed it upon one end and the empty port bottle on the other to hold it open. "Sail together, retrieve what is buried here," he placed a finger upon the map, "Bring it back here; and I will forget about the empty cages at the back of the room."

Tabor's eyes looked to the map and he smiled. "Agreed," he replied quickly, "And if Hissy Pants there chooses not to go I'll do it by myself."

Captain Merdue De Hiss Cat glanced at the map, and then looked up to the Wolverine. "Eye offer dee same... leaf him'ere and I will retrieve wat you wish."

"Together or not at all," the Governor growled, "It will take the full capacity of both your ships."

The pirates exchanged glances and then nodded.

"And now, to seal the bargain," Panzer told them with a smile, "You must kiss each other passionately on the lips."

Both of the pirates immediately spat upon the floor and looked totally disgusted; where upon the cages behind them were again rattled loudly.

Their kiss, sealing the agreement, was then held for a slow ten count as further punishment... counted out loudly by the Governor and his soldiers.

Flight

The not so Lady Taverness paced the quarterdeck of the Caveat Noir staying to the shadows. She was a prisoner with no cell; but a prisoner none the less. The night was dark with no moon and she was very alone... but she liked being alone.

Her eyes turned to the hulking fortress which jealously guarded the harbor. Its lights twinkled merrily in the near distance as though a party were taking place. She could only imagine what was happening there and she hoped whatever it was; it was very painful.

On the top of the fortress flashed the strong singular beacon of the harbor's light. Maintained and operated by the fortress garrison, it was the Governor's pride and joy; a gift from the Labradorean King, who was purportedly seeking a peaceful relationship with the island. The beacon was lit by a very large oil lamp, its light compounded by the use of polished prism like lenses. It had been given a flashing code by the Governor of three turns per minute. This was accomplished by the use of a huge dead weight clock mechanism, the chain fall weights of which were dutifully pulled to the top of the tower at every sunset.

The light had actually been her idea. In the giving, Labradorean engineers were also supplied to do the construction. They'd surveyed the entire fortress, marking every strength and weakness. The tower's exact height was also dutifully recorded. Given this information, and a clear sighting of the light, an invading fleet would have an exact range to fire their guns by. They would also have a clear reference for an unfettered approach to the harbor written upon their charts. Or at least they would have; had the information not been unwittingly intercepted by a certain Rabbit pirate.

The Lady Taverness hadn't had the time to make a copy of this valuable information so she'd been looked down upon by the Labradorean King as a failure. This, along with some truths and a few lies about her actual loyalties, had condemned her to the gallows as a spy... which she actually was; and working both sides of the coin. Initially she'd been employed by the Governor of Saylavee to spy on the Labradorean King. Working both sides of the equation had always been fun for her and it essentially doubled her already lucrative income.

As she looked towards the fortress, she marveled at how odd and thought provoking life could really be. That the buck in doe's clothing had actually fallen in love with the very pirate who'd done in her trust with the King was even more remarkable. Her paw went absently to the small tattoo on her shoulder, and she smiled. Seeing him killed now would please her to no end, though killing him with her own paw would be so much more delicious.

She'd been imprisoned.

Flight from the Labradorean Kingdom had been achieved at the expense of only a few prison guards; and this with the simple aid of a small silver butter knife. In short order, she'd met with known agents, had forged documents drawn up, and then absconded with one of the ships belonging to the King's Cutter service. It had even been captained by a buffoon who'd made the mistake of falling in love with her. The fact that the Dread Pirate Tabor still lived showed that Captain Babacomb was not the sailor he'd claimed to be.

She smiled to herself as she thought of him. The male of the species could be fooled so easily. He'd not even been aware that the female parts allowed him were not even female. He was so madly in love with her that he'd even changed the name of his ship to that of her own. She'd liked that ship. It had a power to it; armed to the teeth and quick of line. Grief struck her when word came down it was gone.

The Lady Taverness, in a very unladylike manner, spat over the side. Oddly there was no sound of her spittle hitting the water. Looking over the side, she saw the shadowy outline of a ship's boat. It was empty.

A dull thump stirred her from her reverie, and she turned to look at the guard posted by the gang plank, thinking perhaps he'd burped. She found him sprawled upon the pier, a black Dog standing over him and whispering to someone near the waterline. This peaked her curiosity and she walked softly toward the pier side of the quarterdeck.

There was no point in calling an alarm; there was no one else aboard. The Cats and Rabbits of both ships had been taken off and housed in the village under watch. By chance, or not so much by chance, she'd been overlooked when they were ushered ashore at bayonet point. As she was sure to be shot or hung by the Governor as soon as he realized who she was, hiding below decks seemed like a good idea. For now it was assumed she'd simply been an unwitting passenger; and so it would stay until the 'great' Captain Tabor made some sort of lame inquiry before he could be slung over the side of the fortress and into the ocean... properly caged.

That she wouldn't be able to watch him die disappointed her.

Clearing her throat she calmly addressed the Dog. "There's no one on board either ship. Being that you just rendered the only guard unconscious there is no longer a need to whisper, though I would not be too noisy."

The Dog, startled, looked up at her with anger in his eyes. When his eyes found her, that anger suddenly melted away and his jaw dropped open for just a moment. "By all that lives and breathes," he hissed, "Is it truly you Lady Taverness?"

She knew that voice.

"Captain Babacomb? I thought you were dead."

“I thought I was too M’lady,” he replied in a hushed tone, “It was terrible... terrible I tell you. We were hot in the wake of that bloody Tabor, our bow chasers finally coming into range. We would have had him in a matter of an hour...”

“Shut up!” she ordered him softly. “What’s past is past. I care not what happened... how many men do you have with you?”

“Fifteen brave souls, all rowed here in our ships boat. Praise God for the light on the top of that fortress.”

“What of your ship?”

“Shoaled and the hull broached like a keg of rum. The rest of the crew waits for us there, made dumb by the singing witches.”

“We will take the Queen,” the Rabbit told him. “She will be easier to sail. I’ve observed this ship,” she said, referring to the Caveat Noir, “She’s fast, but difficult; not enough beam to be steady in a sea.”

“But the crew... certainly...”

“Do you see anyone on board here?”

He looked around, his body gaunt in the flickering lamp light. “No... I... no, there is no one here except you. How did you...”

“Again Captain Babacomb... shut up. Neither is there anyone aboard The Queen. Get your men to her and let us take flight. Do not doubt my abilities ever again. Caution your Dogs to silence; we must row her out under the muzzles of a very good battery. We’ve come this far, let us continue farther.” Stepping up onto the gang plank, she looked down at him, feeling almost pity at using the gullible fool again... but fate had placed him here exactly at this time for exactly this reason. In her paws he was no more than a tool. She smiled, thinking of the look on Captain Tabor’s face when the realization his ship was missing found him like an ill wind. That was, of course, if he was still alive.

Captain Babacomb, mistaking her smile for something else, smiled back at her. “Shall we scuttle this one then M’lady?” he asked, wishing now only to please.

“No... leave it be,” she told him. “Once we are safely at sea. The Dread Pirate Tabor will need a way to follow us if he lives.” Walking in a most lady like fashion down the rough plank, she stopped and kissed him on the cheek. “You shall have your reward Captain, as shall I. Imagine how the bastard will feel when he is done in by his own ship.”

“He shall swing from the yardarm then, my love.”

“No...” she replied, “If I get my paws on him, he will be sewn into a hammock alive with a shot placed at his feet. I will then send him to the bottom of the ocean.”

Daybreak found them coasting just a mile out under topsail and jib. The boom of their signal cannon caused a flight of seabirds to flow up from the water and over the fortress like a frothy wave.

Lady Taverness smiled and opened her parasol as over the distance, her large ears heard the bugler sound the alarm.

If Tabor was in a cage, he would soon be hoisted out of the water and given the task of catching her. The Governor was no sailor... but neither was he a fool. Tabor was the best.

Life could be so much fun.

Turning, the buck/doe gave a nod to the unsuspecting Captain Babacomb. “When the sails are up, and the watch is set, come to me my love.”

She then went to the Captain’s cabin... not to gloat, but to breath Tabor’s scent while it was still fresh.

Bugged

Captain Tabor's eyes opened and did not blink. What woke him struck him like an iceberg grinding a rotten hull in a dead man's fog. The cannon report was that of 'his' eighteen pounder carronade.

That wasn't possible.

He'd been sleeping on the hard stone of the fortress' rampart, not wishing to stay inside for the night. The Governor and the Captain of the Cat ship had begun matching glasses of rum and singing sea shanties. When they'd become uncivil with the fact that he was not drinking with them it was time to go. Rising from the table, he made a polite attempt to excuse himself, only to be told by the Governor that he was forbidden to leave the fortress. The huge Wolverine had then assigned him two heavily armed guards and made the announcement the three of them would inspect the two ships in the morning after breakfast... and that was that.

The night spent under the stars had been enjoyable; though lonely. His crew was locked up and nothing to be done about it; so he kept to his own company, though the two soldiers and their bayoneted muskets were always close by.

As the bugler began his staccato call to arms the pirate was up and scaling the long ladder to the harbor light's lens platform. Snatching the spyglass from the startled lookout, he trained it upon the sole ship making way about a mile off shore. As he watched in disbelief, the mainsail dropped down from furl and filled its belly with wind. His ship was sailing away without him and he was powerless to stop her.

Below him, powder was being brought to the largest of the fortress' guns, and preparations were being made to open fire. Though the Rabbit's heart was breaking, it was better to watch the Governor's troops sink The Queen than have her disappear over the horizon.

Remembering the doe bunny who'd sparked this entire debacle, he turned the glass to the harbor where he found the other ship still quietly tied alongside the quay. "I'm the son of a lesbian Cat," he muttered, "And you know she had something to do with this ya betcha." Turning back to seaward, he found The Queen beginning to pick up speed as evidenced by the white of her bow wave. His quick estimate put her over the horizon in no more than half a day. At that time it would be too late and she would be lost to him probably forever. On her poop, he saw the small dot of color that was a parasol opening.

"TEN GOLD COINS TO THE GUN THAT DISABLES THAT SHIP!" he howled.

"But what if we sink her?" called out the gun layer.

“THEN I’LL GIVE YOU TWENTY! BETTER KILLED THAN SAILED U’NER THE COLORS OF LADY TAVERNESS! PRAY TO YER GODS AND PULL THE LANYARD DAM YA!”

The cannon’s almost immediate report was deafening. The smoke from its muzzle completely obliterated his view for a brief moment and the smell of burned gunpowder was only the smallest bit comforting. As the first shot followed its curved path outwards, Governor Gulo came onto the ramparts; naked sword blade flashing in the morning sun. Uniform unkempt and eyes bloodshot, he squinted to seaward and saw the ball splash down a hundred yards short of its target.

“More height to the trajectory Gustav,” he called out good naturedly. “And why are we shooting at that ship?”

“BECAUSE IT’S THE QUEEN!” Tabor yelled at the Wolverine from his place upon the light, “AND IT’S YOUR DAM FAULT SHE’S GONE!”

Gulo placed a paw upon the wall and gazed upward at the pirate. “I will warn you to curb your tongue Captain” he called out, “The cages await such insubordination. My fault you say? I took everyone off both ships and posted a guard against this very thing. How could it be my fault?”

Tabor leaned over the brass railing, and for a moment it looked as if he might fall. “My ship’s out there, and not at your damned pier, ain’t she? They took her out right under yer nose. I’ll ask this but once... did you find a Rabbit doe among the Cat’s crew?”

The Wolverine hawked and spat over the wall and then looked to the harbor where there was indeed but one ship tied. Cursing, he turned back to the Rabbit. “No,” he called out, “I did not. I suppose I should have, shouldn’t I?”

There was a scraping of the gun’s carriage wheels as it was adjusted for the next shot, and then the muted commands leading up to another tremendous blast. Tabor and the Governor both watched the shot’s path. The ball fell short, but skipped, looking as though it would strike fairly amidships. At the last moment, it skipped again and leapt over the deck by a scant few yards.

“BALLS!” the Wolverine and the Rabbit roared in one voice.

Handing the glass back to the lookout, Tabor took to the ladder. Bracing his feet and paws on the railing, he neatly slid all the way to the bottom. Stalking to the Governor, he faced him nose to nose. “I need the Cat’s ship,” he demanded, “And I need it now. I’ll return it no worse for the wear when I’ve done what I must. You owe me a ship Gulo... make it right.”

“Mek wat right?” asked a whiny voice from behind them.

They both turned to the voice and found Captain Hiss standing near them. Her blue uniform jacket was partially open and one small breast was exposed. Her question was followed by a large yawn that took up half her face. The yawn was interrupted by another cannon blast and all three of them turned to watch the flight of the ball. This one splashed down in front of the ship.

The Cat sniffed, and then said, "Ef I 'new your gunner was that bad, I would 'av raided the port long ago."

The two males turned to her.

"Gustav is the best," Gulo told her gruffly, "And you have nice breasts... or at least, the one that is exposed looks rather fine."

"He hasn't hit m'ship because the luck of Lady Taverness is sailing aboard'er. You brought'er here! For that I will have your ship!"

The Cat's right paw reached out to his neck, claws extended. It was knocked aside by the Governor's gloved paw. Giving her a hard look, he sheathed his sword.

"That is quite enough!" he growled. "You make my decision too easy." Turning he yelled at the gun crew, "GUSTAV... MAKE THE NEXT ONE COUNT!"

"Yes sir!"

Looking back at the two pirates, he snarled, "Who is this Lady Taverness? I had a spy in my employ by that name. I am now curious."

"She ees she knew you," both captains told him. They then glared at each other for the synchronicity.

"She ees a real woman," Captain Hiss said with a large smile, "She knows 'ow to pleasee that one does. We had a most enjoyable treep coming here."

"I seem to recall she was good at that," the Governor agreed with a like smile. "So she plays both ends of the field, eh?"

"And did either of you get any tang?!" Tabor yelled, his face turning bright red as he thought about his ship.

"We are ready to fire Governor!" Gustav called out.

"Fire the cannon then!" all three of them yelled in chorus.

"What ees tang?" Captain Hiss asked in as sarcastic a voice as she could manage.

The cannon's blast made all three of them jump, as pieces of it flew past them through the air.

When they looked, they found the barrel of the gun spit apart like a bad banana. The soldiers were just picking themselves up off the ground. "GUSTAV!" The Governor yelled, "HOW MUCH POWDER DID YOU USE?!"

"Half again as much, sir! She's taken it before!"

"Tang is what's between a female's legs, ya stupid Cat," Tabor yelled, his temper finally getting the better of him. "Bog is what ya sit on, and your t'ain't is t'ween the two; called so cuz it t'ain't neither tang nor bog. I'll wager my ship ya didn't get any of her tang!"

"I..." she faltered...

"Coarse ya didn't ya stupid Mackerel eating Puss; cuz she's got a cod bigger than mine!"

Governor Gulo made a retching sound and spat loudly on the ground.

The lookout on the light called down in the Wolverine's native tongue. The gun's crew immediately began to cheer.

The Wolverine said softly, "The ship's foremast has carried away." To the Cat he said, "I told you Gustav was the best!" He stopped when he saw the expression on her face. When she saw him looking at her, she coughed lightly, righted her uniform jacket and began buttoning it.

"Why do you do that?" he asked, his good nature seeming to return, "I didn't mind so much."

"Becoz a capeetan must remain presentable even among the rabble. That eess what separates them from the crew and helps...."

"A naked breast is not presentable?" the Governor interrupted her.

"She didn't get any tang!" Tabor howled, and then did a little dance. Running over to the wall, he peered out to sea trying to see his ship. "That'll slow her right enough... we got us a chance." Taking a pouch off of his waist, he tossed it to the gunner. "I can use you if you ever so desire Gustav... ya might not be a bunny, but you've a damned good eye."

"He cannot av my ship!" the Cat said defiantly. "I will keel heem first."

The Governor reached out and grabbed the front of her blue jacket, lifting her easily from the ground. Walking to the rampart's rail, he moved her over the side and let her feet dangle in the air. "It's my ship," he told her calmly, though the claws of her paws dug

into his arms to the point of bleeding. "I will decide what to do with it. If you are nice, and shake your head in agreement, then perhaps I won't drop you like the bad kitten you are. That ship gets away, then the map I showed you becomes rather worthless, doesn't it?"

The Captain's feet thrashed around in the thin air under them. The multitude of expressions that flashed across her features surely spoke of all the terrible things she would have done to the Wolverine should the table have been turned. Finally, she stopped struggling, and nodded.

"Your word!" he told her harshly. "Say it! Swear by the ocean you hunt upon! You will obey me!"

"I so swear," she croaked.

Pulling her back over the rail, he placed her feet back on the rampart, and dusted her off. "You have made a very wise decision," he told her. Turning to the Rabbit, he asked, "Do I have to do the same to you, or will you swear your loyalty to me now so we can be about our business?"

"I so swears," Tabor growled, "Until I get The Queen back... and then we'll talk again."

"Agreed," Gulo said. "Now we shall proceed to the pier, but first a small matter must be attended to."

Turning on his heel, he called up to the lookout. "Make signal the guards in the town, they are to bring both crews to the ship, and hold them there at bayonet point."

Then to Gustav he yelled, "Bring your two best crews on the double, we haven't much time if we are to catch our runaway ship."

"We?" asked the Cat and the Rabbit in the same breath.

Gulo smiled at them. "Your new commander does not like repeating himself. You shall remember this in the future. I am fair... but I am very hard."

Turning again to the lookout, he called up to him, "Did you make the signal?"

"Yes sir."

"Did they respond?"

"Yes sir."

"Were you on watch this morning?"

“Yes sir.”

Taking his pistol out, the Governor calmly shot him dead. His body fell the distance to the rampart, glanced off of the rail and continued to the sea below.

Turning to the pirates, he said, “Judged, sentenced, and executed. We will go now.”

Leaning close to the pirate Cat, the pirate Rabbit whispered to her, “If I was you, I might just consider showing the Guv’ner my titties now and again. Keep him in a good mood; if you know what I’m say’n.”

The Chase

Both pirate crews stood apart in separate mobs. Without taking their eyes off of each other they all looked sidewise at the one ship in front of them. The Cat crew bunched together as if readying to board their ship by force of body and claw, while the Rabbits, no doubt not afraid to mix it up with the larger number, stayed in a looser group; acting as if they were actually repulsed by the idea of sailing on this particular ship.

“It’d take a week of hard work just to clear out all the hair balls,” one of them said loudly. “They prob’ly use ’em for cannon practice.”

“And you can bet thar’s not a bilge rat aboard their ship,” said another to the laughs of his mates.

For their part, the Cats called back similar insults, but in their own language, not wishing to lower themselves to Rabbit standards.

The Governor’s soldiers, bayonets fixed, stood in front of the gangway in two neat ranks, one kneeling, and the other standing. As yet, their muskets were not pointed at the arguing Pirates.

“YOU WILL ARRANGE YOURSELVES IN ORDERLY RANKS AND YOU WILL DO SO NOW!” The governor finally roared, losing his patience at last.

When the two crews made no move to do as ordered, he yelled to his soldiers, “TAKE AIM!”

Captain Tabor, scowling for all he was worth, walked forward to his crew from his place behind the Wolverine. “Do as he says, lads,” he called out. “I seen ‘im shoot one of his own for letting The Queen slip out... not that I wouldn’t a done it m’self, mind you. He’ll not hesitate to shoot the bunch of you if ya pisses him off. He’ll then sail with the Cats, and that won’t do us a bit of good, now will it? The main thing is that we’re gonna get our ship back and then we’ll see where we are.”

There was a good deal of grumbling, their anger over the lost ship only too evident.

“I don’t like it,” Smithe said loudly to the rest of his mates, “Don’t like it a’tall, no sur... but if the Captain says do it, that’s all I gots ta hear.” Winking at Tabor, he said in a softer voice, “We’ll get’er back sur... never fear. Where should I stand?”

A moment later the Rabbits were all standing in orderly ranks, five deep and ten across. Captain Tabor turned when he saw things were right, and yelled out, “The Rabbits are ready Gov’ner. I says we’re better than any Cat that’s ever sailed, and a hell of a lot stouter in a fight. Leave that lot behind and let’s be on with what we gotta do. Daylight is burning and The Queen’s leading us a merry chase.”

Captain Hiss strutted forward, and struck a pose, staring right at him. “We c’ain sail circulets ‘round Rabbit, Dog, or,” she glanced at Governor Gulo, “Anyone else... and we c’n out fight any who wants a fight.” She spat upon the ground and then snarled a command to her crew in their native tongue.

The Cats quickly and in a very orderly fashion, formed ranks in three separate squares of five by six, representative of their three watches. Each square, commanded by a Bosun, announced their readiness by that one blowing her whistle twice and the Cats in that square stomping their right foot twice. Her First Mate, Second Mate, Gunner, and Quartermaster stood in a line before them. All four of them knuckled their brow, and the First Mate announced loudly, “All paws prezent and accounted for Capitan!”

Hiss slowly walked to the front of her crew, turning to face the Governor. Placing her paws on her hips, she said boldly, “I wish my sword back.”

The Governor snorted in good humor, duly impressed by the Cat’s apparent discipline. “So you may gut me with it?” he asked her. “I think not. When the time comes, you will have your sword.”

Giving a soft command, to the lieutenant of the soldiers, he walked towards the two very different crews as behind him, the soldiers raised their weapons to their shoulders and quickly, by the last man first, crossed the gang plank and took up a firing position on the deck of the Caveat Noir.

“Forgive me for being blunt Captains but time is of the essence so I don’t have time for silly games. You will both choose five of your crew to go aboard at this time. I will then choose twenty from each of your crews, who will do the same. We will sail with exactly even numbers, twenty five Cats, twenty five Rabbits, and twenty five Wolverines. We will work as a unified crew; that means all mixed together. There will be no competitions to see who is best because we all need to be the best and quickly.”

Addressing both crews, he said in his best battlefield voice, “MAKE NO MISTAKE... I WILL HANG THE FIRST SAILOR WHO IS SO MUCH AS INSUBORDINATE! THOSE WHO ARE NOT CHOSEN TO GO WITH THE SHIP WILL WAIT HERE UNDER GUARD. VICE GOVERNOR HANDLY WILL BE IN CHARGE, AND HE HAS FULL AUTHORITY TO DO WHAT HE MUST TO PRESERVE THE LAW OF SAYLAVEE.”

To Captains Hiss and Tabor, he said in a softer voice, pick your five, and send them aboard.

“Begg’n your pardon Gov’ner,” Tabor replied, but being that this is a Cat ship, do you mind if we raid those bails of sweet clover? I don’t fancy eating fish, no pun intended mind ya, and I might suggest you lay in a good store of whatever it is you eat on a regular basis.”

“Good point,” Gulo conceded. “A Wolverine is trained from birth to eat anything available without fuss. That is why we are such capable soldiers... since an army travels on its belly... yes?” He chuckled, and then became serious. “Two bales per man?”

“Good fer a week. I’d take at least four. How’s yer water supply Hiss?”

“Bare’ells fee’led and stored upon arrival. Eet iz what Cats do w’en they come to port; along with buying a good supply of salt fish,” she told him with a sneer. “We shall see who does better with their rations, yes?”

“You gots poultry?”

“Naturalamant... in the folk’sel. Eggs and meat, yes?”

“Eggs yes, meat no,” he replied. “Grumpy, our cook, makes a mean biskit.”

“Pick your men now,” Gulo told them. “I want to be off in no more than fifteen minutes. My men are already on board. We will make do with the salt fish.”

“You will pay for your share?” Captain Hiss asked him with a sly smile.

“With my kisses,” he told her and then slapped her on the ass.

“You’re a peeg!” she hissed at him.

“And I am also your Captain,” he told her harshly, “Now move.”

In an hour the Caveat Noir was just nosing past the point off the harbor entrance. Her three masts were already full set, though the sails were still fairly limp.

As they came under the shadow of the fortress, Gulo had a signal cannon fired. Saylavee’s fortress replied in kind, as her remaining garrison lined the rampart and stood stiffly at attention.

As they moved into open water the wind freshened, catching the massive yardage of canvas. This caused the ship to heel a little more than slightly. Tabor frowned his disapproval, as he gripped the rail. Gulo braced his legs well, keeping one gloved paw on the hilt of his sword in case this was meant as possible treachery. Hiss simply grinned at them both like a kitten on catnip. Within a moment’s time more, the Caveat Noir had a frothing wake and was running the waves like a whippet.

The signals now seen from the fortress told them The Queen’s sails were still in sight, but fast shrinking on the horizon. She appeared to be running directly before the wind. This

was a good thing and would make the chase much easier than was expected. Kelly and Hiss's Quartermaster had the charts set up and were plotting their course. When questioned, both agreed they would catch their quarry by noon the following day.

"That remains to be seen," Tabor grumbled, though Hiss and Gulo were more optimistic.

For convenience sake, as soon as they'd cast off, Captain Hiss was given the helm. She now seemed twice the Cat she'd been on the pier. With her ship underfoot again, it was as if she'd become a different feline. The ship too felt happy; if that were possible. It was obvious they were made for each other. Tabor didn't miss this as he watched the deck. A ship was made complete with the addition of her captain; and he knew this pairing would be a deadly combination.

As a sailor he didn't like the Caveat Noir. She was the shadow of her master; too skinny and too much sail. In a sudden squall she'd tip over unless the crew was sharp and nothing to be done about it except swim. Her main armament was small bore, like the Captain's breasts. He counted ten six pounders to a side, though she had twin long eights on the bows, and a single long twelve jury rigged to fire from within the Captain's quarters in the stern. That made her tail heavier than he liked and the bow lighter than it should have been though the weight of the eights helped keep her head down. He noticed there was also an ample number of swivel gun mounts. These were kept below decks and greased against corrosion, brought up when a boarding was anticipated. Like a Cat's claws, those would only be shown in a very close fight.

He felt the deck pitch up and down as she cut through the light seas and frowned. She'd be a bitch in heavy weather... so different from The Queen, whose ample broad beamed fat ass had a gentler feel to it. Like a well groomed and comfortable lover; that one rode the sea and didn't attempt to cut through it.

He would learn the Caveat Noir though; inside and out. On the one paw he'd have to sail her, on the other he's have to fight her; both as ally and enemy. Given time, he would know her strengths and her weaknesses. With luck, he would take her... or sink her... or possibly die trying in either case.

Governor Gulo, dressed in his best blue uniform and gloves, watched everything as he paced the quarterdeck. It had been a long time since he'd commanded a ship but one did not forget such things. To his favor, he knew both captains would underestimate him. He truly hoped he would not have to kill one or the other just to prove himself.

He also hoped that at least one of the Cats liked the company of a male persuasion. That would at least pass the time.

Turning to Tabor, he said loudly, "In the past, I would play a game with my second in command whenever we left port. Would you like to play?"

"S'long as you don't bend me double and..."

“And what?” Gulo asked good naturedly, “Do to you what I would like to do to Captain Hiss?”

The two males smiled at each other. “This voyage could get mighty awkward,” the Rabbit finally told him softly. “What’s your game?”

“I am not worried about awkward,” Gulo replied. “Give us a day under sail to catch the bastards and we’ll have worked out our differences. The game is this; I will sing a line and you must match it. Captain Hiss,” he called, turning to her. “Would you like to play?”

“I emme working,” she replied without taking her eyes off the sails. “Tighten that foretop,” she yelled harshly, “Before it cannons and rips out ‘er belly!”

“Cannons?” Gulo asked.

The foretop heaved back in on itself, and then billowed out again with a resounding boom. Fortunately the stitching in the sail held.

Hiss moved forward never taking her eyes from the tops and all the while never ceasing her fluent cursing in Cat.

The Governor laughed and then belted out, “When I embarked from Saylavee...”

He looked to Tabor, who promptly responded, “On a Cat ship hard and skinny.”

“I watched the Captain hard at work.”

“But your mind was on her ninnies.”

Gulo laughed so hard he had tears in his eyes. When he could continue, he sang, “We all set sail to chase The Queen.”

“Kidnapped from where you screwed her.”

“Seventy five souls aboard the ship.”

“In a hull not fit for...”

“GEET YeR LAZY ASSES OFF TH’ RAIL AND MAN THE PUMPS!” Hiss yelled at a group of lounging soldiers.

Gulo looked at Tabor, astonishment clearly on his face. “Already?” he asked.

“It’s been a day without” the Rabbit replied. “She probably needs it. God knows she ain’t got much bottom.”

“What was your last line to be?” the Governor asked him, his expression suddenly sober.

“In a hull not fit for weather,” the pirate told him.

The Wolverine placed a paw on his shoulder. “You have put your thoughts and mind into the song then... you are more of a sailor than I suspected.”

“This ship ain’t got the guts to take the Queen in a full fight,” Tabor told him truthfully.

Gulo nodded. “All things in due time,” he said softly. “Truthfully we do not even know who is acting as her crew. First, let us catch her.”

He then walked aft to watch the wake, leaving the pirate to his own thoughts.

All That Glitters

Lady Taverness stood; her back to the stern windows of the Captain's cabin. She held a pistol loosely in her right paw. Facing her was the remaining crew, late of Her Labradorean Majesty's ship Lady Taverness; more rightly known as The Sea Sprite. Their former captain, trussed and gagged, was kneeling in front of them; a razor sharp cutlass held at his throat.

"I suppose you think I should beg for his life?" the pretend doe asked calmly.

Captain Babacomb looked up at her, his eyes pleading. In reply, she raised her pistol and pointed it at his head. "You've really been quite useless to me Henry. You steal a perfectly fine ship and desert your King... for me; and then you lose it. You take your remaining loyal Dogs and row across five hundred miles of open ocean... for me; and would have gone to the gallows for attacking a simple guard. You steal another ship... for me; and then end up having it disabled. I am very disappointed in you.

"MMUUMPPPHHHH..." he yelled at her through his gag. "MUMMPH MUMPH MUMPHMUMPH!"

"I believe he's saying it were yur idee'r to fire off the signal cannon Mum," the sailor with the cutlass told her. "And he be's right. I heard it so with my own ears. It is a fact we all have discussed since the ball struck home."

"Weren't fer that," said another calmly, "The fort never woulda opened fire, n' we woulda been well on our way to rescu'n our mates."

"Who are lazing with the Sirens, as I recall," she taunted; and then spat upon the floor. "By now they are all dead."

"Why's that?" asked one of the Dogs in the back.

"You are all such typical blind males," she replied softly. Her demeanor and beauty even under such terrible circumstances had already worked to calm this small mob of mutineers. She knew this without even questioning why. "You don't think the Sirens wreck ships as a hobby do you? They have to eat; and fish becomes such a bland diet after a time."

As a group they gasped. The ten of them, down by five since the foremast carried away, muttered among themselves but did not disagree with her explanation. There had been two other boats, but the rest had refused to follow.

"Captain Babacomb betrayed us," one of the Dogs finally piped up, "E' betrayed us, his crew, for a bleed'n trollup; and here we are lett'n her talk."

“He did not betray you,” she lied, “He was following my orders. The idea was to make you all rich by capturing The Dread Pirate Tabor. You would have too, if you’d thought with your heads and not your cocks. You would have been hailed as heroes. Your wonderful monarch would even have given you medals and paid a sizable bounty.” She looked down at her former lover. “Captain Babacomb would have been given a knighthood and a ship of the line.”

Looking back to the ten, she paused for effect; daring them to speak. “I believe the Dog you now wish to kill screamed his lungs out trying to keep you on course?” She raised an eyebrow in question. She had no idea if this was true or not, but chances were good that it was. Their mutual grumbling and glances at the floor assured her she was right.

Turning to the table next to her, she thumbed the pistol’s hammer to ‘half-cock’ and set it down. Disengaging the hook latch of a smallish chest, that had until now gone unnoticed, she flipped the lid back forcefully allowing it to bang on the table top. This drew the Dog’s eyes to it and the glitter in the lamp light did the rest.

Turning back to them, she said, “Gentlemen, I propose that your King will now treat you as mutineers should you ever try to return home. You failed him; and I know firsthand how hard hearted he can be when dealing with failure. You are all walking dead men with a very dark future.”

She watched them as this news sunk in; studying each of their faces.

“I also propose,” she continued, “That you are all very ‘rich’ dead men. This is a pirate ship and this small chest is a pirate’s wage... far superior to what your King pays is it not?”

She picked up a handful of the gold coins and let them trickle back into the box. The noise of it pleased the ears. Taking another handful, she tossed them lightly into the air; raining them down among the sailors.

“I further propose,” she told them, “That you can have ten times more than this should your hearts be in it.”

“What is it ya wants?” asked the sailor holding the cutlass at Babacomb’s neck.

“I want you to become pirates with me,” she told him. “I want you to elect me as your Captain.”

“What about him?” he asked.

Lady Taverness looked back to Babacomb. His eyes were pleading with her.

“Kill him if you want... but I would rather you didn't. He is a remarkable seaman in his own right; even you will agree with that. You've sailed under him for how many years now?”

“Ten,” the Dog said softly, “And up to this very year they was good ones.”

Lady Taverness nodded. “And more of those years to come,” she added. “I have need of his services ‘if’ we are all to live and prosper.”

“We're being chased,” growled one of the sailors from the floor where he sat holding his gold coins... his very first blood money. “Captain Ghost ‘as got the helm, it being tied in place. We stay steady afore the wind the way he'd have us and we'll all be dead by night tomorrow.”

“Not if you do as I tell you,” she responded. “I did not intend for them to disable us, but I did intend for them to follow. Our foremast being down complicates things just a bit, but not as much as you might think. What did you do with the bodies of your five friends?”

“They're fine in the folk's'l, sewn into hammocks and awaiting proper burial,” said the Dog with the cutlass. The Bunny marked this one as the leader of the group. “We was waiting to send old Babacomb off before'em.”

Do not bury them yet,” she told him. “They may well serve their ship one last time.”

The Rabbit looked at each of them in turn, letting her free paw play with the remaining gold in the chest. “So what's it to be?” she asked them softly. “Vote now, and one way or another we shall then be off on new lives.”

Tabor and Hiss stood in the smallish stern cabin of the Caveat Noir. Between them was a wooden barrel with a small hole in its side.

“What's this?” Gulo asked them, coming into the cabin. As Captain, he'd claimed it for himself. In the close confines the large Wolverine had to bend to keep from hitting his head on the low beams. Moving around the huge twelve pounder, braced and tied against the bulkhead, was just a little difficult. When he managed it, he sat heavily at the single small desk.

Pointing to the gun, he asked, “How do you live with that thing in here, Hiss?”

“Eet ‘as saved us many times mon commander. I thinnnk eet to be a beautiful accoutrement to my quarters.”

“As to yur first question,” the Rabbit chimed in patting the wooden barrel, “This here is a gift and a pass’n right. It ain’t filled with gold but it will contain something that’ll leave you smiling and fulfilled. It’s gonna be yur lov’r fer the night.”

The Governor laughed a deep throated laugh. “Surely you jest,” he finally managed. “A barrel with a hole in it is supposed to satisfy my passions? Be thankful I don’t throw you both overboard for thinking I’m so gullible.”

The Cat and the Rabbit looked at each other. Tabor nodded to his counterpart and she turned back to the Wolverine. “I thou’t you were of th’ sea’,” she told him sarcastically. “Oww could you be eef you know not of which we speek?”

“E weren’t no pirate,” Tabor whispered, but loud enough that their commander would hear. “Mayhaps that’s the reason. He don’t knows the rules.”

Gulo sighed, shook his head, and then leaned to his right where he opened a wooden cabinet and surveyed the wine bottles. “I’m a military man,” he said matter of factly without looking at them. “We had no such games aboard my vessels. Business is business... and discipline takes the day.”

“At a knotted rope’s end I’m sure,” the Rabbit grumbled.

“Exactly the case,” Gulo agreed as he uncorked a bottle and poured himself a large glass. Holding up what was left of the bottle he offered to do the same for the two captains but both declined his invitation.

“Getting your crew to do what they must under threat of pain, prepares them for the battles they must face,” he said as he sniffed at the wine.

“Eet is ‘ard to keep a lover that you beat,” Hiss replied softly.

“I take what I want,” he shot back with a hard look, “And that’s an end to it.”

“Fraid your mistaken there matey,” Tabor told him, “Your on a pirate ship now, governed by pirate rules. We don’t belongs to some kingdom that condones such things as rope’s ends and whippings. We’re all equals aboard this ship. You chose to sail with us and that’s all fine and good... but out here you’d better look around. There’s no garrison to back up your rules Gulo; you have just one third of the crew under your thumb.”

Gulo stood, his anger getting the better of him; and abruptly banged his head on the low ceiling. Collapsing back into the chair as quickly as he’d stood, he yelled, “GUARDS!” Placing a paw on his head, he made a very pained face. Checking his palm he found blood and cursed loudly before realizing no guard had come. Pulling his pistol from his waist band, he pointed it at them. Both pirates were now holding cutlasses. Until this moment the weapons had been concealed behind the barrel.

Hiss smiled at him. “We put you in mate and speak ‘check’,” she told him. “You ave but one shot Gulo... so who wee’ll you keel? The other will keel you in turn and become the capitain no? Check and mate... game over. Using your pistol ese not sech a wise decision I am thinking.”

“We are willing to sail under you,” Tabor told him levelly, “Provid’n you sails under pirate rules. It’s a reasonable request.”

The Governor, as arrogant and mean as anyone could be, was also astute enough to know when he’d been outflanked. Tossing his pistol to the desk, he looked at them. “How is the chase going?” he asked them.

“We have her sails in sight,” the Rabbit replied, “Though the sun’s going down. They got the wind behind ‘em and don’t seem to be too inclined to change their course. The lookout also says he sees navigational lights... that being the case, Lady Taverness is either really stupid or she wants us to follow. Knowing her the way I does, I would opt for the second thought.”

“What do I have to do... by pirate rules?” the Governor asked Hiss.

“We leave you alone and you make love to zee barrel. The crew drew lots for this. The only ones knowing who will be in the barrel are zee Rabbit ‘n myself. We tell no one, ‘n no one asks.”

“There’s another barrel in the forecastle and one below decks,” Tabor added, “The barrels are usually pretty busy for the night. We makes merry for it; but it’s all in fun.”

“My men agreed to this?” the Governor asked, a note of dismay in his voice.

“E’ver man Jack of’em.” Tabor said with a nod, “Though we had to promise a privacy curtain... rather girlish of’em if you ask’s me. Half the fun is in watch’n.”

“They were not gif’en a choice,” Hiss added, looking crossly at Tabor. “These are the pirate rules aboard this ship, and they are all now pirates.”

“I see,” Gulo told her, glancing over at the barrel. “And later, there might be one of my own men in that barrel?”

“Or a Rabbit,” Tabor told him.

“Or a Cat,” Hiss added. She then shivered at the distastefulness of the thought.

Gulo caught the reaction and smiled. “Tell me something, my lovely Captain Hiss. I see I have a single hole in my barrel and I rather understand the idea of how things work... but how would it go for you; being that you do not have what I have as a tool?”

She smiled and swished her hips slightly. "My barrel," she told him, h'ass a lid. You lift it and sit on the hole."

"Without looking?"

"There is no fun in the look," she told him. "Sum things are best left a mystery."

He looked out the stern windows for a moment, regarding the sunset. In a moment he chuckled. "It does have an air of adventure to it I suppose." Turning back to them, he said, "I accept your terms. I will now have dinner and some wine. I will then go forward to the chains and relieve my bladder. During that time you may load the barrel for me with whoever has drawn the short straw." Picking up his pistol, he stuffed it back into his waist band and then again looked at the pair. "Tell me, does the Captain ever have to take a turn?"

"No," they both responded.

Gulo nodded. "I shall get comfortable with my barrel then. You have my word that I will not look inside. We rise with the sun and prepare. I want the crew well drilled before we engage The Queen. We will only fire the guns if necessary since we need her in one piece. We shall sail along side, grapple and board."

"Aye, aye, Captain," they both said.

Looking back to the barrel, he said softly, "You're both dismissed."

Outside the cabin, the Rabbit looked at the Cat, and chuckled. "It'd take a lot o' wood and a good Stave Master to make a barrel large enough for the likes 'o' him."

"I thinnnk I geeet to like you maybe some," she replied as she handed him her cutlass. "Eet's a pity you are not female. I would definitely look forward to your turn in zee barrel."

Plague Ship

Hiss and Tabor were both on the quarterdeck an hour before sunrise. The pirate Bunny was leaning on the starboard rail staring off into the distance when the strong aroma of tea found his nose. Close onto this, a mug was pressed into his paws.

“Deed you eeven sleep?” Hiss asked him softly.

“No,” he replied. “My ship is out there and I’m missing her. No o’fense meant, but yor’s rides a mite hard.”

“But she ees fast, no?”

“She’d be faster if you balanced her better. Ya got too much bloody cannon in the aft cabin.”

“That would be imposeeble now,” the Cat chuckled, “Besides eet’s weight, eet too closely matches what’s between th’ legs uf the one now using the cabin. Eye checked th’ hole en ‘is barrel... he add to carve it out bigger.”

Tabor choked and almost spilled the tea he’d been sipping. When he managed to compose himself, he asked her, “And you confirmed this personally with a Cat quickie?”

“Eye can be nice, or eye can be mean,” she told him plainly. “Reemarks like that do not mek me th’friend you need. The barrel kitten spoke of it to me.”

“So it was a Cat then,” said a hushed voice behind them. “I feel much better for that information. The thought that one of my men might have been in the barrel disturbed my dreams all of last night... though I slept quite soundly for the satisfaction.”

The pirate Captains turned as one and regarded the person who’d broken into their private conversation. Neither of them was used to such rudeness aboard their ships, nor would anyone have dared to do so. A Captain on the quarterdeck was never to be disturbed unless it was very important, or the person was invited to do so.

“I say kitten as an expression,” Hiss snarled and then added something foul in her own language. “Eet eze said by my crew. Normally we are all Cats, no?”

Gulo frowned in obvious displeasure that someone would speak to him in such a tone. “Fine,” he told her huffily. “We shall leave it then. One hour until the sun comes up. Do we still have their lights in view?”

“Course never changed,” Tabor growled. “I don’t like it... they never even attempted to escape; first thing I woulda done is douse the damned lamps. It feels too much like a carrot in a box trap.”

“Trap or otherwise,” the Governor told him, “We will be up to them by noon. I propose putting my men in the tops with their muskets. The guns will be loaded with ball, and the swivels with grape. Have you any bombs on board Captain Hiss?”

“Barrels uf dem; but they must bee packed with powd’r and fused. We do that on the bow a little at a time in case of an explosion.”

“Good, see to it,” he told her. “Every border will have two and we shall pitch ten or twenty before we swing across. Do you have the boarding lines set up?”

“They are always rigged by those who will swing across,” she told him. “They make fast their own lines to be sure they are tied correctly. Do not be so impatient Ca’mander Wolverine... we have done this all bee’fore.”

Gulo harrumphed, not used to a subordinate speaking to him in such a manner. “Do me the kindness of removing the barrel from my cabin,” he told her flatly. “The quarters are a smidgeon tight between my loins and your twelve pounder. An empty barrel takes up needed space. Break it down for storage as they would on a proper man of war. After breakfast we will prepare ship.”

Not waiting for a reply, he turned and walked to the other side of the quarterdeck; pausing only briefly at the chart table to review the quartermaster’s notes.

“I’ll be glad when I get my own ship back,” Tabor whispered.

“Gulo goes with you,” Hiss whispered back, and then looked at him in order to speak eye to eye. “Eet ees the price you pay for my good assistance.”

Both of the Captains hoped the Governor would catch a cannon ball during the upcoming fight. They also hoped the other would give a little assistance to the thought.

By late morning the ships were a league apart, and closing at roughly three knots. In approximately an hour, they would be exactly abreast. At the distance of three nautical miles, however, the details of the kidnapped ship were still unfocused enough to get a good read on the enemy.

“Ahoy thee deck!” yelled the lookout; a scrawny Calico Cat and so chosen for her keen eyesight. “She’s flying the plague flag. I can also see a small boat towed and someone swinging from the yardarm.”

Tabor beat his fist on the rail. “DAMNED BASTARD!” Turning to Gulo he told him, “It’s a trap I tells ya! It’s the Lady Taverness behind this. I ain’t never seen anyone in my short life as wicked devious as her. You can bet whoever’s swinging from the yardarm is

the pirate what lead the cut'n out party that stole my Queen. She woulda gotten rid of any competition coming from the crew. If he had guts enough to steal a ship out from under your nose, then he was too much trouble for her to keep. The flag is a ruse!"

"Eye don't like the sickness," Hiss muttered as she surveyed her ship's tops. "Sickness breaks out and all one can do is burn the ship and anyone aboard. It's Marv's law to do so should she try to come to port."

"What in the name of..." Gulo waved a paw in the air, trying to think of a good word, and abruptly gave up. The translation from Wolverine to Rabbit sometimes did not work so well in his mind. "What is Marv's law?" he asked. "I've never heard of such a thing."

"Measles Marvin," Tabor growled through squinted eyes. He was not happy that Hiss had brought this up. It was an old sea story and not known to be factually true. "E sailed his ship to every port through out the old country. Wherever he went, the measles broke out; until they burned the ship with him and his crew on board. Thereafter; burning plague carriers became law."

"I see," the Wolverine replied flatly. It sounded as if he was not a believer of the story, which might have been partially true, but he was now apparently more vexed over the report he'd just had whispered into his ear by one of the solders.

"GUSTAV!" he yelled. Standing straight as a cannon's ram rod he looked forward. "WHAT OF THE GUNS?!"

Gustav looked back at him from the main deck, where he'd just broached one of the powder kegs brought up from the magazine. "The powder's old, sir!" he replied. "I tested it and it's not up to regulation strength. The best we'll get out of it is half strength."

"BOLLOCKS!" cursed Tabor angrily slamming a fist onto the rail next to him. Looking at Gulo, he yelled, "You won't even dent The Queen's side with a six pounder at half strength!"

"We'll load double powder then," the Governor offered evenly as a solution.

"And blow your gunnery crew to'ell if you get a good barrel," Hiss countered. "If they are your men I don't care so much a hoot; but a Cat will not load double powder."

"Neither will a Rabbit," Tabor added hotly.

It's your ship Hiss!" Gulo snarled at her, his anger finally boiling over. "Why do you have bad powder and why did you not inform me of this?"

The Cat shrugged her shoulders. "You take wh't you can get from those you rob," she replied in her whiny voice. "Eet 'as been a lean year of fishing boats... they carry almost none powder." She paused to hack a hairball and spat it upon the deck. She then told him

with emphasis, “Eye did not say because you did not ask... you make yourself the Capitan, no? A ship e’s a live thing, not some damned stone fortress that goes nowhere. In a fort you stockpile weapons and food and you stand on your ramparts and dare anyone to attack you, ‘oping they are stupeed enough to do so. A Cat finds ‘er prey and attacks... living off of the sea and not off of taxes levied on the poor! A Captain knows e’s ship and acts accordingly. In that you failed.”

The Wolverine, gloved paw poised on his sword hilt, was about to shout that he should have her whipped; but remembering the incident in the Captain’s cabin, caught himself in time.

“We will close and grapple then,” he offered. Facing forward, he yelled, “GUSTAV... LOAD ALL THE GUNS WITH GRAPE... NO BALLS!”

Hiss giggled, and leaning close to Tabor’s ear, whispered, “Eee wood make a good lesbian then with no balls, eh?”

The Rabbit was not amused with her humor. She was right... a Captain knew his ship. Wisdom and experience taught that you lived and died by the details of your existence. The pirate Rabbit had his powder kegs turned top to bottom once a month; as a responsible Captain would. This kept the mixture from settling. He also had it tested weakly.

The Queen might not be the fastest or the most heavily armed ship, but she was still alive thanks to his attention to detail. Old cordage was thrown overboard. Old sails were cut into pieces for clothing. Old powder was expended during gunnery drill; and he’d always paid the extra to ensure his crew was well drilled. New sailcloth, powder, and line were worth more than gold when needed. They were the life and breath of a ship.

He no longer feared the Caveat Noir should it come to a fight. She was fast, but it was all too obvious that she was almost toothless. Looking off into the distance at his ship, he now had serious doubts about getting her back.

“If we go up alongside,” he said aloud, “And they have the opportunity of a broadside; we’re gonna take a bad hurt’n. I’ve got a row of eight pounder’s on each side and a twelve pound carronade right in the middle that can cave the hull of this piece ‘o’ flotsam all by itself.” He looked right at Hiss and squinted his eyes maliciously. “And my powder is fresh,” he told her.

To Gulo he said, “I wouldn’t risk the crew, better to stay upwind and follow for a piece... see what they’re up too. That will give us the wind gage for a possible action and’ll also keep any foul airs away. If there’s truly a plague aboard’er you’ll see no crew through the course of the day and then we can discuss what to do.”

“You’re not the Captain,” Gulo told him flatly. “And your reputation is a wonder to me,” he added. Hawking, the huge Wolverine spat over the side. “It appears to me ‘The Dread

Pirate Tabor' has no stomach for a fight. As I recall, when Captain Hiss made to attack you in my harbor, you were giving commands to run. I was there and saw it with my own eyes."

"You might also recall we was run'n out the carronade a'fore you jumped out from hiding and yelled BOO!" Tabor said loudly. Taking a belaying pin from its place on the bulkhead, he pointed it at the Wolverine. "I am also so called 'Dread Pirate'," he yelled, his anger beginning to rise, "That's because those I want to suffer so suffers. I am also smart enough not to go up against a stronger ship than what I gots."

"Take the glass and go aloft," the Wolverine ordered him crossly. "Since you know your ship so well, take a close look at her and tell us what you see."

Tabor frowned, looking at Hiss. The odds of two to one apparently had just shifted against him.

Ramming the belaying pin back into its holder, he looked towards The Queen and squinted his eyes. "I can tell you this much right now and without a glass; she's running before the wind and whoever rigged her jibs from the stub of the fore is a damned fine sailor. See how he has them out on opposite sides to best catch the wind?" He paused for a moment, watching her wake. "Her ass is waddling too... that means Captain Ghost'as got the helm tied." He pointed to the area a hundred yards behind her. "That small boat is riding low and the bow's not lifting too much under the tow rope... she's heavy, and I'd pay close attention to that."

"Go aloft," Gulo hissed, marking the fact that he didn't care what the pirate might glean; he simply wanted him out of the way.

Tabor looked over to the helm, which was currently manned by Smithe. The Helmsbunny nodded to him and then up to the sails; telling him he would handle the quarterdeck when things got hot. He then grabbed his crotch with a free paw and grinned at his Captain.

Smiling slightly for the other Rabbit's antics, the pirate took the telescope that Hiss held out to him and climbed aloft as he'd been ordered.

"It's you and me now Hiss," Gulo said loudly. "We will take The Queen in a storm of bodies." In a lower voice, he told her, "I expect you will lead the charge, as I'd not trust the Rabbit once he gets aboard his ship. I agreed to renegotiate with him once that happens and I will keep my word; though he might be in chains as we chat."

The Cat's paw went inside her jacket and she fondled the hilt of her dagger. She had half a mind to step close and gut the Wolverine; but there was still the matter of his troops stationed in the tops. The soldiers, all clad in dress blue uniforms like the Governor, were armed with muskets; and their powder was from the fortress. Handpicked by Gulo for this excursion, they would all be crack shots.

Smiling, she whispered to him as a lover might, "Eye wood like to s'ee that very much. Perhaps eee could be dropped over the side so trussed in irons, eh?"

"Treat me right," The Governor laughed as he slapped her backside, "And I will see that it happens."

The Wolverine had no idea how very close he came to dieing at that exact moment; and not just from Captain Hiss' dagger. Several of her crew stood on the quarterdeck with them and had she not waved them off with a look, he would have had his head cleaved in two by a cutlass; now issued to every one of the crew.

Now was not the moment to take her ship back, and she understood this all too well.

"Take your place now with the borders on the foremast," he told her. "When we are abreast, I will rake her stem to stern with grape to clear your way. As soon as the first broadside is fired; swing across. The gun crews will reload, and the deck crew will grapple and secure. As soon as this is done they will join in the fight on the other ship.

Tabor climbed the rigging until he made the crow's nest on the main mast. The Cat who was keeping her eyes on The Queen moved over, but never took her eyes off the other ship.

"What do you see?" he asked her.

"Exactly not'ing," she replied. "I am tinking they are all dead. Best to burn'er... give a good funeral, no?"

"No," he replied snapping the telescope open.

Placing it to his eye, he took a long look, beginning with the small boat towed in the ship's wake. Three bodies in total disarray lay over top of some supply barrels. They had black fur and did not appear distressed. "No blood... no vomit," the Pirate muttered to himself. He then let his eye move up her transom where he saw broken glass in the stern windows. "Must've been a hell of a fight in my quarters," he muttered. "That'll cost me to 'ave replaced."

"Seek people grow desperate," the Cat told him, obviously paying close attention to his remarks. "They fight over something stupeed probably... maybe not eeven something you and I would consider."

Tabor let the glass move upwards until he found the body swinging slowly back and forth from the yardarm. It was a Rabbit in a dress... no doubt about it. His heart felt strangely heavy as he concentrated on her, letting the glass move back and forth as he matched both the Caveat Noir's movement and that of The Queen.

Her long ears and feet hung loosely. Her paws were bound behind her back.

“Ya finally bit off more carrot than you could chew, didn’t ya?” the pirate muttered. He felt uncomfortable with the idea she was actually gone and his eyes suddenly had water in them. His vision became blurred. Lowering the glass, he rubbed them for a moment.

“The Caveat Noir is a fast ship,” the Cat said to him. “Wee weel be abreast of’er very quickly. Be sure to hold on tight as the ships come together. Up ‘ere ete becomes a rough ride and you ‘ave to watch out for the tangle of the rigging.”

The Rabbit handed her the glass, and muttered, “Tell me what you see.”

After a moments look, she handed it back to him. “I see only death. All ave obviously perished.”

Taking the telescope back, he told her, “I hope yer right.”

Cleaning the lens with his shirttail, he placed the instrument back to his eye and focused it again upon the hanging Rabbit.

Governor Gulo, his sword now drawn, paced the quarterdeck as he watched the bulk of The Queen draw closer. They were now a hundred yards behind the towed small boat, and the dead sailors were clearly visible. It appeared they’d been trying to evacuate the ship and had simply fallen over dead from the mysterious plague. The mixed crew of the Caveat Noir was ominously quiet as they watched the boat pass down their side. Many of them muttered about being ordered to board a dead vessel.

Captain Hiss leaned out from her place in the tops of the foremast. She now had two bombs stored in her bulging pockets, six pistols hanging from hooks on her belt, and a heavy cutlass slung across her back. Like the rest of the crew, her eyes remained on the small boat until it was past; and then she turned her eyes towards the ship she was to board. There were no signs of life.

Tabor continued watching from the crow’s nest, never taking his eye off of the hanging Bunny. Without reasoning why, he vowed to cut her down personally and give her a proper burial. For all that she was, she was... what?

At this close distance he could see her face clearly through the magnifying lens of the glass. It brought him so close it felt as if he could reach out and touch her cheek. Her tongue hung grotesquely from her mouth and her eyes were open. Through a rip in her dress, he could see the heart tattoo he’d personally given her, inscribing his own name inside of it as a not to subtle reminder of the involuntary night she’d spent with him. It

had been a good night. She'd laid her trap that night and planned on killing him. He'd simply done his best to turn the tables on her. The sex had been wonderful.

"Ah my pretty..." he muttered, "What did you do to piss them off so badly?"

She was facing him now, her dead eyes seeming to stare right into his... and then she blinked.

Dropping the glass he turned to the quarterdeck and yelled, "FALL AWAY! FALL AWAY! FALL AWAY!"

Gulo, sword in hand and intent on boarding, ignored his warning with nothing more than a glance towards the crow's nest with a look of disgust. Thankfully, Smithe, who was still standing his station at the helm, spun the wheel to larboard as quickly as he could.

The towed small boat exploded and the entire crew looked aft. While they were misdirected the ten sailors of The Queen's new crew ran quickly to their stations. The subsequent and deadly explosions now came from The Queen's guns.

The Lady Taverness had planned this trap perfectly, having both sides of The Queen's armament loaded and positioned. She explained to the sailors that, in this manner, and with the wind to their backs, the Caveat Noir could approach them on either side and still be ham strung. The timing of the volley was simple, the loads of the individual guns her choice. Depending on which side of the ship the Caveat Noir came up on, the sailor at the gun simply had to wait for the target to pass before him and then press his glowing punk to the touchhole. The fact that she was now rapidly falling off of the wind was the only thing that saved the Caveat Noir from complete annihilation.

The first gun fired its double load of grape at the quarterdeck. Smithe and six of the soldiers manning the swivel guns died instantly. Three of the Cat sailors fell wounded.

Gulo, hit in the left shoulder, was slammed to the deck. To his credit, he immediately stood; and so witnessed the destruction done to his ship.

The quartermaster's chart table, a wonderful creation of fitted and polished wood was shredded. The Cat's chief navigator fell mortally wounded with a shard of wood from the table sticking out of her chest. Kelly, standing with a quill poised to make the boarding entry into the ship's log, was unscathed. Looking down, he found the quill to be nothing more than a nub left in his paw.

Lady Taverness, arms now held out from her sides like wings, descended to the deck as if she was flying; the rope that kept her in the air being paid out quickly but smoothly. Her skirts flowed puffily up, exposing her waist and the bulge hidden within her knickers.

The second gun fired. Chain shot caught the foremast ten feet above the desk tearing out enough wood that it immediately teetered to the press of the wind.

“GET DOWN GET DOWN GET DOWN!” Hiss yelled at her mates in the tops. Grabbing a line, she slid the distance to the deck, the rope burning deeply into her paws. All but three, two Wolverines and a Rabbit, managed to follow before the mast leaned too far over the side for a safe escape to the deck.

The third gun fired. It sprayed the rigging of the upper main mast with a burst of grape. This shredded the sails, the rigging, and five of the Governor’s blue uniformed soldiers. Their bodies fell to the deck like so much broken tackle.

The fourth gun went off. This time bar shot whizzed through the air sounding like a maddened swarm of bees until it connected with the main mast. It then changed to the sound of a second explosion as a two foot section completely disappeared. As if in slow motion, the entire mast came down, dragging the wounded foremast with it. Tabor grabbed onto the lookout’s arm with one paw and the rim of the crow’s nest with the other, telling her to hang on. She, in turn, cried out she couldn’t swim.

“WHEN WE HIT THE WATER,” the pirate shouted, “I WON’T LEAVE YOU! HANG ON TO MY ARM AND CLIMB THE RIGGING BACK TO THE SHIP!”

The fifth gun fired was the carronade; double balled and pointing downwards with the intention of placing a mortal wound below the Caveat Noir’s water line. With that ship now well healed over the aim was not good. Her ribs were struck a glancing blow that sprung but did not puncture the thick wood and copper plate.

By now, Gustav’s six pounders made an attempt to reply. As one they went off, but the blast was weak sounding. The grape shot they fired bounced off of The Queen’s thick sides like so much hail. As soon as the guns recoiled back, the loading process began, and Gustav immediately yelled, “DOUBLE POWDER... DOUBLE POWDER AND BALL!”

The sixth and seventh guns fired together. Ball shot burst through the Cat ship’s bulkhead, sending the number one gun careening across the deck. It took off one of Gustav’s legs at the knee and killed three of the Cats manning it as crew.

The eighth and final shot, mercifully fell into the area in front of the bows, where the ship would have been had she not fallen off the wind as quickly as she did.

The Queen continued on her way, gaping holes in her bulkheads where the closed gun ports used to be. The Caveat Noir listed terribly to the larboard side, her main and fore mast now hanging in the sea, and pulling her in that direction. Without command, every hand that was able, picked up a boarding axe and began cutting the lines. If they were to survive, they would have to cut free from the spider’s web.

(Respite) The Dance

O'le One Eye'd Joe swung today
As the Ladies and Gents all watched.
Jig'n thin air high above th' green.
Cuz e' was a sailor aboard The Queen.

I know'd O'le One Eye quite well
A good soul n' not the killer they said.
God bless'im fer a gentle fool buck.
E' was just a sailor down on his luck.

Done that dance, O'le Joe e'did,
The rope stretch'n 'is neck till it snapped.
'is feet swung pendulum as time be measured
N' e' pissed hisself t'the crowd's great pleasure.

I know'd One Eye for the person he was,
A stalwart gentile creature made hard by liv'n.
God bless'im n'all of that; I miss him dear,
I know'd him close as my mate 'n a peer.

T'wasn't a good end for such as 'im,
Death's jerky dance at the end of a rope.
E shouldn't 'av had that on 'is plate
Surrounded by those so full of hate.

I 'eard the 'angman call out harshly
Curs'n One Eye's soul fer a pirate.
Then he pushed th' big trap door lever
N' Joe danced like e' got's St. Vitus' fever

E coulda saved his'self if e' had a mind,

But e' wouldn't talk.

N' there I stood not t' make a sound
Our eyes met just before he went down.

Devil take th' executioner man
He's worse than we could ever be.
He took my Joe away's from me

Never again shall he sail the seas.

Riposte

As soon as her feet touched the deck, Lady Taverness threw off the fake hangman's noose and climbed the larboard ladder to The Queen's quarterdeck. The first gun exploded in its metal death as she was racing up the ladder. Henry Babacomb, who'd been her hidden line handler, climbed the starboard ladder as the second gun blasted out and came to stand behind her to the tune of the third. The forth gun blasted out, striking its killing shot to the Caveat Noir's main mast. As the shot struck, the demure Rabbit slammed her fist on the rail and whooped. Her eyes immediately went aloft to the crow's nest where she knew Tabor had been watching her.

Waving her paw gaily as the mast went over, she cried out, "Goodbye my love! I shall meet you in Hell one day!"

Babacomb, ignoring her strange display of emotion, looked forward and watched the last of the guns being fired off. As each recoiled across the deck, their tethers broken from the shot going through the closed gun ports, flaming wood and splinters flew into the air. He watched the sparks coasting upwards on the wind; threatening to fire the sails. He'd told Taverness this would happen, but she'd argued it was a reasonable risk. Judging by the destruction done to the other ship with each shot fired, she'd apparently been right.

This was an ironic conundrum to him. On the one paw he was happy to ecstatic over the destruction done to the other ship. Should they have actually boarded, he was sure death would have been the outcome. On the other paw, he felt guilt at having suckered his pursuers into the trap. This was totally against his core belief in honor. Had he truly become one of those he'd dedicated his career to hunting down and executing?

His professionalism now shifted his thoughts to the survival of his new 'stolen' ship.

With the Caveat Noir's masts going over, The Queen was beyond the threat of a boarding, but not beyond the threat of a fire; in which case all would be lost. With only ten crewmembers to sail her the prospects of reaching port were still not worth betting on in any case. One good storm and the ship would be lost; especially now with the gapping holes in her main deck bulkheads making her less than seaworthy.

After the last gun fired, his ten coal black Labradoreans raised a cheer. Base sailors all, they reveled in the destruction they'd wrought. Their new Captain's plan had worked beyond any of their wildest expectations and they leaned out from the sides to better see what they'd done.

The Caveat Noir now lost all headway and turned dangerously broadside to the following sea, her beautiful rigging decimated. Though the swells were no more than six feet, it caused her to roll badly. Her crew, now trying madly to clear the wreckage, was having a hard time just staying upright. Unsecured guns rolled back and forth with the ship's new

movement causing absolute mayhem, while the mizzen top's flapped noisily. Without the bracing of the fore and aft lines, they too were in danger of being lost.

"Get us turned around Henry," Lady Taverness called from behind him. "I want to finish him off." Her voice was hard and there was a true edge of hatred in the words.

Looking to her, he replied, "Tabor was up on the main mast M'Lady; you saw it go over with your own eyes. He is now in grips of the sea and they were not trailing a boat. If he escapes being dragged under by the rigging, he will still have to fight his way back to the ship before they cut it loose. If he does not, he will not last the night; the water is quite frigid."

"He's alive! I want him dead; not almost or possibly or going to be dead. I want him dead dead! So long as he breathes, I am unhappy. You of all people should know that my unhappiness carries dire consequences." Her expression hardened even further. "I saved your sorry ass this time Captain Babacomb; perhaps next time I won't be so giving."

He glanced at the other ship, now a good five hundred yards behind them and growing smaller by the minute. He then looked upwards at the sails and judged the wind. "With but ten crew, it will take a good 30 minutes to wear ship, and another hour to get the sails pulled in to where we can manage. That's without taking the time to secure the loose cannons, which is a danger all by itself. We can then beat back under jib and mizzen, which would be more easily handled..."

"HOW LONG?!" she demanded, taking a threatening step towards him.

The former captain looked at her coolly. He was no longer bound paw and foot, but he had no doubts about where he stood in his former lover's book. He was simply a tool for her to use and then throw away when no longer needed... no more, no less. Having lost everything, he now set his compass and his destination on the only thing left to him. In the meanwhile he would bide his time doing exactly as she demanded; like the good whipped dog that he was. Ironically, he recalled his former Sailing Master's adage about letting all of your sails gaily fly on a favorable wind; 'Too easily light hearted fine Sir... too late the rectification'.

He now vowed to have that same expression carved on his headstone.

"Four hours for a proper broadside," he told her coolly, "But you will only be able to use the starboard guns. The gun rigging on the larboard side is wasted along with the bulkhead structures. Three hours if we come about, position, and only use the long twelve on the bow. I would highly suggest this tactic, as they have nothing with that range. I saw only six pounders in the main and two eights on their bow. In either case, they are at your mercy since they cannot move." He sniffed the wind and blinked. "With a full compliment, it would be child's play; but we do not have that luxury." He looked at her, daring her to disagree. "My choice would be to stand off and pound them until they sink. Afterwards, we can set a leisurely course to where ever it is you wish us to go. In that

way the men can rest. There is much work to be done since we so self destructed to obtain our goals.”

“Could you have done better?” she asked harshly.

“No.”

She smiled, satisfied with his answer. “I think your idea is admirable. See to it. I will stay on the quarterdeck to keep an eye on our friend.”

“He’s not going anywhere,” Babacomb assured her. “Perhaps you might go to the galley and cook the men a stew or soup? They do need to eat.”

“Have you forgotten who we are dealing with?” she asked him.

There was a moment’s hesitation, and then the air seemed to go out of the former captain.

“No... you’re right of course. You are the Captain. I shall see to things and then place a helmsman at the wheel so we can beat back and finish the job. I’m sure we can find some hard tack to see us through.”

“That would be a very good idea,” she told him icily. Turning, the new Captain stalked back to the stern where she could watch the *Caveat Noir* in her death throws.

The water was icy cold. This sensation was the very first thing that struck the pirate when the mast went over the side and everything around him became topsy-turvy. It also appeared darker under the water than daylight should have allowed for. As soon as his head broke the surface, he understood why... the hull of the *Caveat Noir* was bearing down on him like some sort of malevolent sea demon bent upon eating any who’d fallen overboard.

Strewn about him was the remnant of lines and rigging. Some was still attached to the ship, some was tangled like an insane spider’s web, and all of it was moving as the ocean was moving... as the ship was moving... as he was moving. With a crash, the six pounder that had taken Gustav’s leg smashed its way through the main deck bulwark and fell into the sea.

“LOOKOUT!” Tabor yelled, spinning himself in the water as he searched for the Cat who’d been aloft with him. “LOOKOUT!”

“I seen it, sir,” shouted a blue uniformed Wolverine floating a bit further forward.

There was a second crash and another of the guns launched itself into the sea; this one landing squarely atop the unfortunate soldier.

With a curse, the pirate submerged, swimming down as far as he could; searching for the Cat. Going back to the surface, he heard screams of pain and curses. Hiss' voice was above them all and even louder if that was possible, as she shouted at those in the mizzen tops to get the sails down.

Taking a deep breath, he dove again and was rewarded with a glimpse of the lookout's tail. Its orangish hair was puffed out in the cold water as if it were a strange reef creature, trailing off and upwards as if trying to gain the surface on its own. Grabbing hold, the Rabbit pulled himself down to her. In a foggy glance, he saw her fingers were tangled in a line handhold of the crow's nest. Taking his knife out, he slashed at both paw and line. He had no choice; he was out of air and the mast was turning, taking them even deeper. In a cloud of red, what was left of her paw finally floated free.

Consigning his knife to Davie Jones, the Rabbit grabbed her by the ear and kicked as hard as he could. Darkness was narrowing his cone of vision when he broke the surface and in one long rasping breath, drew in fresh life.

Pulling the lookout's head above the water, he yelled at her, "BREATHE!" When she didn't respond he swung around and slapped her face as hard as he could. "BREATHE DAM YA!"

She appeared lifeless and would have drifted off had he not held on. Repositioning himself, he grabbed her head and pulled her to him. Holding her snout tightly closed, he muttered, "This ain't a kiss so don't be gett'n no ideas."

With that, he blew into her nostrils as hard as he could. An immediate eruption of seawater sprayed his face. Knowing this meant life, he repeated the process a good ten more times. Finally, and with a spasmodic jerk, she came back to life like a small and fragile toy reword. Instinctively she lashed out at him, splashing and flaying the water around her.

"Settle down!" he yelled, "Or you're gonna drown us both!"

Swimming around to the area behind her, he grabbed her ear again and held her out from himself with a stiff arm. Though she continued to flay and struggle, he was then able to look for a way to get them back aboard.

"AHOY THE SHIP!" he yelled. "RABBIT OVERBOARD! THROW DOWN A NET!"

The Caveat Noir now loomed over them like the giant Cat she was; threatening to plow them back under her bottom with every swell she rolled upon. Ironically, at this point the ship represented both death and life to them.

A boarding net was flung over the side. "IN THE WATER; LATCH ON AND CLIMB!" Though there was no face attached to the voice but it had a Wolverine accent.

Pulling the Cat to a close proximity of the net, Tabor moved her around so she could see it. Her struggles had weakened but he wasn't sure if this was from sheer exhaustion, shock, or the loss of blood. Reaching out, she attempted to grab it with her good paw as the ship rolled it down to them. Try as she might, however, when the ship rolled up again she could not climb and the net pulled out of her weak grip. Tabor was ready for this and supported her when she fell back into the sea.

"Eye am missing... missing..." she gasped, holding her bloody paw in front of her face.

"Rest," he told her, "Take a breath or two... then hold on to m' back and I'll climb for both of us."

Helping her to position, he waited for the ship to roll their way again. When it was over as far as it was going to go, he grabbed the net and hung on. The lookout, her good arm wrapped across his chest, did the same; now conscious enough not to place him in a choke hold, nor extend her claws. When the ship rolled back again, plucking them from the cold water, he began to climb.

Two soldiers, leaning as far over the side as they could, helped them climb over the bulwark. They then quickly went back to cutting lines and securing anything loose.

Dragging his charge to a place next to the quarterdeck ladder, the pirate lay her on the deck. Stripping off his shirt, he wrapped her damaged paw in it, tying it as tightly as he could.

"Rest here, till we get a handle on this raft of a ship. I'll be back for ya, and if not me, someone else will be here shortly."

She nodded and closed her eyes against the pain, though not a sound passed her lips for it.

Tabor headed forward, going directly to Hiss who was standing near the forecastle directing the crew. "How bad?" he asked her directly.

The clank of the pumps, now manned by six of Gulo's soldiers, colored her words with a desperation easily felt.

"Ewe 'av eyes," she told him, and then screamed out something in Cat, pointing a finger at a group of her crew about to roll one of the guns overboard. They quickly relented, and found some line to tie it down with. "Eye 'ad my paws burned, 'n my ship ees cripple. We take on water but the pumps so far 'old steady. We w'eel 'ave to careen eventually to patch the leeek."

Taking her paws, he looked at them. They were bad but they would mend. “Get some grease on ’em,” he told her, “Soon as ya can. You take care of the ship, I’ll see to our defenses. Where’s Gulo?”

“Ee was wounded, I don’t know where they took ’im... I ‘ope ee’s dead.” Bracing her legs against the roll, she watched her ship for a moment and then asked, “What defense? She is gone, no? We are cripple... why would she bother, eh?”

“Because she wants me dead,” the Rabbit near shouted at the Cat in frustration. He sighed and then said in a calmer voice, “She’s as determined as the Devil want’n to take back Heaven. I only saw maybe ten sailors on The Queen’s deck before I was overboard, so it’ll take her a while to come back... but back she’ll come, and I’m sure of it.”

“She did these with just ten?”

Ignoring the question, he told her, “Don’t cut the masts away; we’ll need to fish them back into place. Tie off the anchor hawser to the main and let the pair drift out in front. The foremast should float with it right enough and the rigging will keep them together. They’ll act as a sea anchor and keep our bow into the wind. Tighten the spanker so she’s straight fore ‘n aft and that’ll help keep us pointed into the wind as well.”

“Eye’ll do as ewe ask Rabbit... but to what good? Eef ewe’r right, she’ll come back and rake us good; broadside to stern, yes? We will do as good as we can, but we will loose, no?”

“No... we won’t,” he told her, and then looked around for what was left of his crew. “QUEEN’S!” he yelled. “TO YER CAPTAIN AND BE QUICK!”

“CAVEAT NOIR!” yelled Hiss in an equally loud but screechy voice. She then followed with a similar order, but in Cat.

“Soldiers!” Tabor called out, as the two crews assembled, “We need your strong backs at the pumps while we mend what we can to stay alive. Has anyone seen Gulo?”

“He is down in his cabin, sir,” called out one of the soldiers. “It is where we have been putting all of the wounded.”

“Is there anyone to tend them?” asked Hiss of the soldier.

“We have one who is good at the mending, but I am afraid he’s a bit overwhelmed, sir. He is green in experience.”

Tabor and the Cat captain had a quick discussion and both assigned one of their own to assist the soldier’s medical man. When this was done they did a quick nose count. Tabor felt a shaft of ice slice through his guts when he was given word that Smithe was dead. Even under the circumstances, it took the Rabbit a moment to compose himself before

briefing both crews on what he expected would happen. He then gave them his thoughts on what they should do about it.

All nodded in agreement to the plan and it was settled.

“There will be no more pussy footing around!” he told them with finality, smiling as he thought about what he’d just said. “Present company excepted!” he added with a wink to Hiss.

Both crews laughed and he was pleased.

“CATS!” the dread pirate shouted, and his crew did likewise. They then spit upon the deck.

“RABBITS!” shouted the Cats in a like fashion, and then they hawked up hairballs and spat them upon the deck.

The soldiers, never ceasing their efforts at the pump, watched, listened, cringed at the hairballs, and then chucked shaking their heads.

Governor Gulo sat on the deck of the Captain’s cabin with his back propped against the tethered and muzzled twelve pounder. Since the gun was not to be used during their attack, it had not been bothered with. Though his Medical Aide came to him first, the old Wolverine ordered the soldier to the other wounded. It was not so much of a point of honor as it was self-punishment for having failed so badly.

Gustav lay on the deck, a tourniquet fastened around the stump of his leg. He was pale and in much pain so the Aide gave him a pint of rum to drink. Before the old Wolverine could so much as take a swallow, two Cats were carried in and placed upon the deck next to them. Gulo, sliding over to sit next to his Chief Gunner, took the rum pot from the Aide and nodded to the Cats.

“Give them your best,” he told the youngster, “I think I can handle this much.”

“Thank you sir,” Gustav mumbled, a trickle of blood running from his mouth. The Governor felt certain there was more wrong with the Wolverine than his leg.

“You are more than welcome old friend,” he replied softly, “Though it is I who should be thanking you for being such a good soldier.”

“I... do... my duty...” Gustav managed. With his commander’s help, he took a very deep drink of the rum. No sooner was this swallowed than he choked and spit most of it out again along with a quantity of blood and bile.

Gulo quickly set the rum pot on the deck. Gritting his teeth against the pain in his shoulder, he pulled the Gunner onto his side so he would be able to vomit without choking to death. That the soldier would use his commander's lap as his sick basin made no difference.

At that moment, Gulo hated himself. It was he, who had ignored the pirate's advice out of sheer egotism. It was he who'd ordered them to load only grape shot. It was he...

Gustav muttered something to him.

Leaning close, the Governor told him, "I'm here, old friend. What did you wish to tell me?"

The soldier struggled to push himself up so he could look at his commanding officer. Wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his jacket, he told him clearly, "I am proud to have served you, sir."

The Governor looked him right in the eye, "It has been my pleasure to have had you under my command."

The old soldier placed a paw upon his superior's arm, and then muttered, "I meant in the barrel, sir."

Before he could say anything else, Gustav coughed harshly and a large amount of blood splattered upon Gulo's already soiled jacket. A pained expression came across his face and he slowly slipped to the floor where he took one last feeble breath, and then died.

"I need your powder!" a voice growled loudly in Gulo's ear.

The Wolverine didn't even acknowledge that he'd been addressed, but continued to stare at his dead comrade.

"GULO I NEED THE DAMNED POWDER YA BROUGHT FOR YOUR MUSKETS AND I NEED IT NOW!"

There was the sound of hammers as Tabor's crew began breaking down the bulkhead between the Captain's cabin and the rest of the ship.

The Wolverine blinked and looked up at the Rabbit as if seeing him for the first time. "Why are you doing that?" he asked calmly, nodding to the sailor's beating upon the wooden frames. "My friend has just died and you are disturbing us."

Tabor knelt next to him, and said levelly, "Lady Taverness is on her way back to finish the job. The Queen has shortened sail and turned. She's presently beating back towards us. You have at least three barrels of good powder squirreled away that you brought with ya from the fortress. I need it if we're to have any chance at all."

“Go away,” the Governor told him with finality. Turning back to Gustav, he leaned forward and closed his eyes with his good paw.

The punch to his wounded shoulder was sharp and vicious. The Wolverine jerked backwards, bounced off the secured gun carriage, and fell to the deck. His breath seemed to stick in his chest, while bright and sharp colors flashed through his head. From a hundred miles away, he heard a voice yelling at him. It was telling him it ‘needed his fuk’n gunpowder’.

Tabor directly knelt on the governor’s chest, yelling for all he was worth. “I LOST MY SMITHE CUZ ‘A YOU YA BASTARD! HE SAVED ALL OF US CUZ HE LISTENED TO ME WHEN YOU WOULDN’T!”

He punched the Governor on his wound again, causing him to groan loudly. “I TOLD YA I KNOW’D HOW TO MAK’EM SUFFER... NOW GIVE ME THE POWDER OR YOU’LL SUFFER ALL THE WAY TO WHEN SHE KILL’S US BOTH!”

“Captain,” called one of the sailors from the other side of the small room. Tabor looked up and the sailor pulled a covering sail off of three barrels. “It’s here, sur. All ‘e’s got I recon.”

“Pray God it’s enuf,” the Rabbit muttered as he stood from the Governor’s chest.

With a last sound of beating hammers, the bulkhead was broken down and pushed forward out of the way.

“Right then,” he told his crew. “Unleash the beast, but don’t run out. It’d be bad t’a show our cards before we throws down. Jacko,” he said, nodding to one of the Rabbits, “Scuttle down to the magazine and bring us some fresh punk for the touch hole.”

Looking around the room, he counted the balls in their racks. There were twenty-four in all... exactly twice the weight of the gun’s bore. It was more than enough, and he nodded in approval at the superstition attended to by Captain Hiss. The wounded had also been moved forward as soon their preparations had begun; away from any danger created by the gun action.

Pointing his finger at the Governor, Tabor told his crew, “Move ‘im up with the other wounded and tell the soldier to take care of ‘is shoulder before he wakes... it’ll be easier on ‘im that way since the ball is still lodged deep. Then take Mr. Gustav to the main deck gentle like. Show him respect and lay him next to Smithe... he was a good’n. I’m go’n on deck ta see Hiss and check on progress there; any problems, come get me.”

Mr. Flopears the gunner placed a paw on the cold steel of the cannon’s barrel. Bending down, he gave it a kiss. “You and me’re gonna become fast friends ‘Sonsou Goon’,” he whispered to it; using the Cat words for ‘Beautiful Gun’. “I hate the thought of the two of

us firing upon The Queen, but it's not like I have a choice. As scripture tells it, 'If yor paw offends yee, cut it off' ... in likes... if yor ship tries ta kill ya, sink'er. Now tell me my sweet... when was the last time you belched out fire and shot?"

Tabor found Hiss standing upon the bow watching the two masts floating three hundred feet in front of her ship. He could make out at least three bodies tangled in the wreckage. The anchor hawser, tethered to it, was holding fast, and the mast was now dragging the drifting ship as the wind pushed her. They had now turned one hundred and eighty degrees from where she'd been when chasing The Queen and the ship wasn't rolling near as bad. Because of this, her stern was facing their nemesis as she maliciously worked her way towards them.

"We 'ar taking on water," Hiss told him calmly, "But I think thee pumps will 'old for now. We will pull a sail 'round under 'er belly to staunch thee wound when we 'ar done with yor ship. Eet was a good idea to tether thee mast. For now we are safe, no?"

"Show me your paws," he told her softly.

She did so, holding them palm upwards and wincing as he gently spread her fingers out. The fur was burned off where the rope had slid and in one area this burn was very deep. She'd applied grease to the wound as he'd advised.

"You'll live, he told her.

Turning, he looked aft to where a group of her sailors were busy winching one of the six pounders to the poop where it would be fitted through the rail as a stern gun. He also saw the triangle spanker sail on the mizzen was pulled tight helping to keep them into the wind. The tops were also clear, the square top'sls having been taken in.

High up on the bare poled mizzen he saw a lone figure keeping vigil... watching the other ship. Squinting his eyes, he recognized the lookout who'd been on the main mast with him.

"What's she doing up there?" he asked. "I damn near cut all her fingers off get'n her to air."

"She eze doing 'er job," Hiss told him. "She is a true sailor and our best eyes. You've seen Gulo?"

"He's indisposed," he replied. "It's just you and me now."

"Did you k'eel 'im?"

"Much as I wanted to... no."

“What do you want me to do?” she asked.

“I want you to begin firing that six at The Queen when she gets a little closer.”

“It wee’ll not reach ‘er,” she replied.

“I know,” he told her with a wink. “I don’t want it to... Taverness has to be unbearably full of herself at the moment. She see’s us as helpless and I want her to stay in that frame of mind. She’ll see the splash of the ball and know exactly how close she can get before opening fire... and she’ll want to get as close as she can so she can play with Death. When I open fire, tell your crew to double up on the powder and join in... if they want to of course.”

“I will aim the thing myself,” she growled. “Directly at the one ‘oo comes for us.”

“It might blow up,” he told her seriously.

“N’d I should care?” she replied in equal seriousness.

“For the record,” Tabor included with a smile, “I’m no longer fussing over that twelve ya got squeezed into your cabin.”

Hiss smiled a Cat’s sly smile at him. “You mean Gulo’s cabin.” It was a statement; not a question.

“Let’s just say he’s been demoted.” He pointed to the Cat sitting on the highest mizzen crosstree. “What’s the lookout’s name?”

“Rosa... ‘n do not use a ‘z’ in pronunciation. She is particular of that.”

“I’ll remember,” the Rabbit told her with a nod. “I’m figuring we have maybe an hour. From what I see, m’ship’s making better time than I woulda thought.”

“W’ho do you think ‘ese the Captain?”

“The crew’s Labradorean... I saw that much. He’s a good sailor too, no doubt about that in my mind a’tall. Off paw... somehow, some way... I’m think’n it’s gotta be Babacomb.”

“And why should it not be heem?”

“The Sirens wrecked his ship,” he told her, pausing to spit over the side. The taste of salt was still strong in his mouth. “They should be fat after feasting by now; and him nothing but a pile of bones.”

“Never discount your enemy until you put a ball in ‘is ‘ead personal,” she told him.

He looked at her. “And you’ve done this?”

“Many times,” she replied coolly. Walking aft a few paces, she screamed something in Cat at the sailors moving the six to the stern rail. It was apparent to the Rabbit that she was telling them to hurry; obviously wishing to place another ball in a very bad way.

“They’re fuk’n firing at us!” yelled the lookout at the mast head, “And a fat lot of good it’s do’n,” he laughed.

Lady Taverness moved her parasol and looked aloft at the lone figure, smirking in approval at the Dog’s joviality. She felt it too... and it felt good. The prospect of sinking the Caveat Noir was delicious and all the scents around her became the meal’s aroma.

To the naked eye the other ship was still no more than a toothpick dancing on the ocean; perhaps a mile and a half distant from The Queen... and yet they were firing their little gun. The Rabbit pounded the rail and bit her lip to keep from laughing aloud. The game was about to end; and with victory would come satisfaction. She had enjoyed the match more than she thought she would. Tabor had been the only one to out play her paw... but the others had kept him in check until it was too late.

She saw the small sickly gray cloud of gun smoke quickly dissipate with the wind. “Ask him where the shot fell,” she instructed Babacomb calmly without turning.

Looking upwards, the former captain cupped his paws around his snout and called out, “Did you track the ball?”

“Fell less than half ways to us,” the lookout responded. Babacomb noticed there was no ‘sir’ attached to the end of the report; but then again, why should the sailor show a whipped Dog any respect?

Looking to the forecastle, he watched with interest as eight of his former sailors prepared the huge twelve pounder. Martin, the Dog who’d held the cutlass at his throat, was to be the gunner. It was obvious he wanted to impress his new Captain and she seemed delighted to allow for it. At the very least, this placed him in a spot easily watched. The Dog on lookout made nine and the one on helm was ten. All of them were now drunk to the point they could hardly stand. He’d made sure of it, having personally prepared their rations as The Queen beat against the wind in order to come back into a good firing position. Even their new Captain had partaken in the celebratory rum he’d poured out. As he served her, he saw she cautiously wore a brace of pistols whereas the rest of them were unarmed, save their deck knives.

“I would place us in a position to fire soon M’Lady,” the former captain told her levelly.

Walking to the helm he checked the compass, the ship's bearing against that of the wind, and the Dog at the wheel. His name was Scatterbrained Bob and possibly the only one of the group who would stay loyal to him when it came down to brass tacks and wooden mallets... not that he had before; but that was understandable.

"Perfect position in half an hour if the wind stays as it is," he added. "A little longer if it shifts slightly."

"Might it shift?" she asked, never taking her eyes from the other ship.

"I think not."

A small black ball rose on a line pulled up the Caveat Noir's yet intact mizzenmast. When it reached the top it broke open and a large black skull and crossed bones flag rippled out on the wind.

Turning to him, she smiled devilishly. "Isn't that cute? They want us to know who they are. Why don't we raise our colors too, Henry?"

"M'Lady?"

"Consider it as a returned pleasantry," she told him. "They're so bold as to run up their flag; we should do the same. Think of it... 'The Dread Pirate Tabor' done in by his own ship while flying his very own Skull and Crossed Bones. How much more delectable could it get? Find the flag and send it up immediately."

Turning back to watch the other ship, she saw a boat emerge from the far side where it had been masked from sight. Snapping her spyglass open, the faux sea Captain took a very close look and found it held what looked to be fifteen of the ship's crew. As she watched, the sails were raised and a swivel gun mounted in the bows. It was an act of desperation to attempt a boarding action against a fully armed ship in broad daylight; but desperation was certainly in abundance aboard the other ship. Obviously, they were aware of how short pawed The Queen was. She smiled a wicked smile when she recognized her favorite pirate sitting in the stern sheets of the cutter.

"So you're still alive," she muttered. Her heart twinged upon the recognition, but the feeling was coldly pushed aside. Turning towards the bow, she yelled out, "How good are you with the gun Martin?"

"Crack aim Captain!" he responded with a laughing sneer. "Jest tell me what you wants to hit and when."

The demure Bunny smiled calmly as she turned her glass back to the other ship. Another small black puff appeared and she knew a ball was again hurling in their direction. This must certainly be frustrating to those who wished her harm, and she smiled for it. A small

'boom' reached her ears just as the ball splashed down approximately where the other had. She had an enormous amount of room to play with.

There was a tickle in her mid-section and one eyebrow rose in sexual delight... perhaps a paw hidden within the folds of her skirt would not be noticed... and if it was; who would dare comment?

Above her there was a soft pop as Tabor's personal flag broke open and was taken by the wind. 'It just didn't get any better than this,' she thought to herself.

"When you're ready Mr. Martin," she yelled out, "Your target will be the small boat now heading in our direction."

With the grating sound of wooden wheels on a wooden deck, the black furred crew used their long bars to move their gun to its new firing position.

Captain Hiss stood at the rail watching The Queen approach. Her eyes were sharp as was her mind, which went repeatedly over what would have to be accomplished if her ship was to live.

Beside her, she could hear the sounds of the gun crew going about their business. None of them spoke a word as they worked, though each had a specific job in the reloading process.

First, the slack in the gun tackle, caused by the previous recoil, was taken out. Next, the barrel was sponged out to kill any errant sparks before another scoop of powder was poured down the gun's maw. This was done while the gunner held a padded thumb over the touch hole to keep any air from entering during the process. After the powder was poured wadding was added and nicely tamped with the ramrod to pack the powder. The 'rammer' would be sure not to hold her ram rod too tightly, just in case the powder decided to go off. After this, the ball was dropped in and plugged tight with an additional piece of wadding. Ball to bore fit was not an exact science and sometimes an inordinate amount of slop was demonstrated when what was meant to be shot simply fell out of the muzzle when the ship rolled.

Finally the gunner would clean out and fill the 'touch hole' with a finer grade of 'priming powder'. When this was done she would give the command to 'haul out' and the crew would pull the gun back into position, tight against the bulwark. From behind the piece, the gunner would coach the crew, instructing them in raising or lowering the barrel, or moving the piece slightly from side to side by the use of long pry bars.

For now, this much was a moot point, as all of them knew the gun would not reach its target.

Down in the Captain's cabin, while the poop deck six pounder banged away at nothing, Mr. Flopears put his experience to work. Having borrowed a pair of calipers from the ship's carpenter, he measured each of the balls in their racks and selected the five closest in size to the bore of his gun. He then carefully loaded it himself, all the time crooning to the gun as if it were a living thing.

Captain Hiss' eyes narrowed as she saw The Queen's flag unfurl. It was a surprise to her, but more of a surprise was a grouping of brightly colored signal flags underneath it. She cursed, because she did not know their meaning. Translating the flags had been her Quartermaster's job, and she was now dead.

On the preparatory signal of, 'ready', her paws came up to cover against the six pounder's frustration. The gun spoke and on its echo she called out in Cat for a translation; pointing her finger to the flags in emphasis.

"It says, 'Taverness for safe passage'," spoke a masculine voice behind her. "Or at least it is an approximation to that. The signal is military in origin."

Turning, she found Gulo standing behind her. His face was drawn, and his arm was now in a sling. His formerly spotless uniform was bloody and puked upon. "You should not be here," she told him acidly.

"So I was told rather forcefully by Captain Tabor at an earlier time today." Nodding to the signal flags, he told her, "But I think you are wrong not to accept my knowledge of such things as signal flags. You should dip your colors in acknowledgement and agreement."

"It's a trap like the plague flag," she countered.

"Perhaps... or perhaps not. What harm to dip your flag? We are all murderers, liars, and cheats are we not? If it will get you Taverness in paw, it is certainly worth something. If it is another ruse, they come on more confidently than before thinking you are once again fooled; and into the range of our one hope."

Turning, she yelled a command to one of the nearby sailors. Her flag was lowered half way, held for a second, and then pulled back up.

The sound of a distant boom found their ears just as the splash of a twelve pound ball was noticed. It landed some five hundred yards shy of the launch now making its way on a diagonal from the ship.

"What fool is mounting a boarding party?" Gulo asked, noticing the cutter for the first time.

“Ewe due you think? ‘E seeks to draw their fire. ‘Ee’s got dead men for a crew,” she paused to spit in superstition, “ ‘Is idea not mine. Eye think ‘e ‘ass brass balls and no soul. ‘E was right; Taverness hates him mightily.”

“What could he possibly have done to her to deserve such a thing?”

Hiss smiled devilishly. Motioning him over, she whispered into his ear. The Governor’s mouth opened and he glanced back to the other ship. “You don’t say?” he quipped.

“Actualamont,” the Cat said, “Eye think sh’ee ese in love with ‘im.”

There was another boom and they watched as the ball overshot its target, splashing down a hundred yards past the cutter this time.

“That kind of love I can do without,” the Governor assured her.

The Cat judged the wind and the sea against the last shot by The Queen. “It ese time,” she muttered. Turning to the gun crew, she told them, “Load double powder in thee gun and run eet out. I wish eet aimed to the quarterdeck. Only those who wish to stay... stay. I w’eel fire the gun myself.” Pointing to one of the sailors, she told her, “Go below and tell Mr. Flopears to geet off ‘is ass and take thee shot; eet is time.”

Tabor didn’t flinch as he heard the ball pass over the boat. The rest of his crew didn’t flinch either, though for a different reason; they consisted of the dead left from The Queen’s first attack. In his own method of honor, the pirate had thoughtfully positioned Gunner Gustav next to the swivel gun mounted in the bow. He’d also carried on a conversation with the bodies as if they were very much alive. Now, however, he watched the scrawny Cat sitting in the bow handling his jib.

“Rosa,” he called out, “Are ya doing well enough?”

“Eye ‘yam fine,” she responded, her voice reflecting the tenseness she felt. Pulling the jib line tighter with her good paw, she continued, “Though I think ewe are bat shit crazy. The dead... they do not care a hoot how you speak at them, but Eye do. Eye’m not a kitten; stop the worry over me and steer.”

The shirt he’d tied over her missing fingers was now soaked with red. Though she held it close to her chest, she did not show her pain.

“Fair enuf,” he replied, and then called out, “Ready about!” When she nodded to him, indicating she was prepared for the tack change, he called, “Hard a’lee,” at the same time pushing the tiller towards the main sail. As the boom swung, he ducked down letting it pass over his head. Rosa loosened the jib line and then tightened it again when they were on their new course and the jib had filled.

The pirate had initially refused to let the lookout come along. His intentions were to go alone, as he had no doubt of the possible outcome. Since he was the prime target of Lady Taverness, he was certain she would fire upon him first... especially if she thought he was leading a boarding party. Moving to the rail of the ship, the lookout placed one leg over and told him she would jump overboard if he didn't take her.

"You belong up the mast," he yelled, playing his only trump card. "Your ship needs you!"

"Y'our ship ese close enough to see plainly and her track 'as not changed... there is no doubt she ese coming back for you. Now let me help keep 'er from k'eeling you."

The pirate looked to Captain Hiss for support.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Eet wood seam ewe 'ave a jib'andler."

Sighing, he told the other captain, "You give Mr. Flopears whatever he wants. He'll get one shot... maybe two. He's good and will hit what he aims at."

"Eye wee'll... and eef he iss that good I may shanghai his ass. 'Ee ess much the female already, no?"

"Been to Shanghais," he told her, ignoring the sexual dig at his brethren, "So's Flopears. It's where I got 'im from; and how as well."

There was another soft boom as the cutter's canvas took the wind and ran. It brought the Rabbit back to the present.

"That one sounded hard on the money!" he called out. "This one's gonna be close! You lads and lassies all hang on now. Rosa... you're well tied off to the boat?"

"Yesss," she growled at him. He was acting worse than a mother Cat... and then the ball found them. The geyser from the shot hid them completely from view... to the cheers of the gun's crew.

Mr. Flopears kissed the breach of Captain Hiss' twelve pounder and gazed down the barrel, closing one eye. He felt the ship's deck cease its motion for one split second as she came to the top of the swell and then nodded to the sailor holding the slow match. When the glowing punk came down on the touch hole she spoke of Hell fire and brimstone. The recoil was immediate and she ran to the very end of the tether line, the pulleys singing as the line ran through them.

"LOAD'ER UP!" the Rabbit yelled without even looking to see where the ball struck. The first shot was for accuracy, and he was sure it would hit. Now they would begin

firing as rapidly as possible. Mr. Flopears'd hand picked this bunch. They could manage an unheard of four rounds in five minutes if pressing hard.

Lady Taverness was cheering with her crew when she saw the dark black smoke belch from the stern of the Caveat Noir. Before she could even so much as curse, the ball struck the forecastle upending her cannon and showering the crew with splinters from the ruptured bulkhead. Martin, who'd been standing directly behind the gun, was crushed underneath its two tons of weight. Glancing back to the cutter she'd thought to be sunk, the demure Bunny found it dancing over top of the crest of a swell. Pounding the rail with a fist, she let fly an oath any sailor would have blushed over.

“HENRY!” she commanded, turning to face him. “TURN US ABOUT... NOW!”

“Certainly, M’Lady,” he replied calmly. Looking directly at the helmsman, he told him, “Point us into the wind, if you please and hold us there.”

“Aye, Sir,” the Dog responded automatically and turned the wheel as he'd been instructed.

“What are you doing?!” The Rabbit demanded.

“What I should have done long ago,” he responded, “Though I regret my decision is far too late to save good Dogs wasted on folly.” Taking his knife out, he slashed the flag halyard and the pirate colors, drawn by the wind, floated off like a kite.

Glancing up, Lady Taverness saw the signal flags for the first time. “I misjudged you badly, Captain Babacomb,” she said calmly. Pulling the pistols out of her waistband, she cocked them both and leveled them at the helmsman. “Take us away, or die,” she told him.

Henry Babacomb, late Captain of His Labradorean Majesty's Navy, stepped in front of the Dog being threatened.

The Rabbit smiled a cold smile at him, lowered her aim, and pulled the trigger of the pistol in her right paw. At that exact moment, the six pound ball fired by Captain Hiss struck the bulwark behind her and she was thrown to the deck by the impact of a piece of wood the size of her head. Blood began to ooze through the material of her dress as a sizable number of splinters protruded like Porcupine quills. Babacomb and the helmsman ironically shielded by her proximity, were both unscathed by the blast.

Henry Babacomb smiled and then staggered; remaining erect only by sheer force of will. “She jerked the trigger,” he said calmly to Bob. “Pulled to the right and got my leg...” He drew in a breath and let it out slowly. “Left m’balls intact. Pity that... since they got us into this mess. Does seem they should have been punished as well.”

He bit back the sound of pain in his voice. “Keep her into the wind no matter what, old friend, and we might get out of this with our skins.”

“It’s all I ever wanted, sir,” the Helmsman responded.

“YOU THERE ON THE MAST HEAD!” Babacomb commanded, picking up the second of the pistols. “GET YOUR ASS DOWN HERE ON THE DOUBLE!”

There was the whizzing sound of a ball as it screamed directly over the main deck narrowly missing the mast; followed by a distant boom.

It was all too apparent that he needed to show them this was not a trick. They had dipped their colors in agreement to his offer... now he had to prove it’d been an honest proposal. Limping to the unconscious Rabbit, he grabbed her by the collar of her dress, dragging her to the quarterdeck ladder, and then none too gently to the main deck.

“Tell Mr. Flopears to cease firing,” Captain Hiss yelled, “She ‘as struck ‘er colors and turned into the wind. We’el watch her now with loaded guns, eh?”

The combined crew of the Caveat Noir were all cheering; both at The Queen’s flag floating off and also at the two incredible shots. Even the soldiers had ceased pumping to lean out over the side and watch.

With an explosive ‘crack’, the six pounder had broken from its lines and flipped completely over from the recoil; bad powder and all. Had Hiss been standing behind it when pressing the slow match to the touch hole, she would be quite dead. As it were, only the tether line, firmly affixed to the gun’s breach, kept it from sliding all the way forward and crashing to the main deck.

Not hearing the clank of the pumps, the Captain turned and saw the soldiers standing at the rail, pointing and cheering still. In Cat she cursed them soundly; coming to the quarterdeck rail and pointing to the pumps. The message was quite clear, and the Wolverines scurried back, redoubling their efforts in keeping the Caveat Noir afloat.

“You can’t blame them,” Gulo told her, after the outburst. He then caught his breath as his wound twinged badly. His paw was numb yet, and his aide man told him they might still have to amputate the arm at the shoulder. The Governor had loudly vowed to die first. “Both were shots to be proud of,” he finished, when he could speak again.

“Desp’eration gave us luck,” she told him.

Glancing at the other ship, she saw something rising on a line to the main mast yards. Snapping her glass open, she looked at what it could be. “Eet would seem thee Bunn’e

'as at last been done in," she told Gulo with a satisfied sound to her voice. "That one was truly more vicious than I. 'Nd to think; I slept with 'eer and never once guessed."

She hawked and spat overboard and then snapped her glass closed with finality. Putting it behind her, she scanned the sea, looking for the cutter containing Tabor and her daughter.

Splinters

The area was dark and smelled of tar with a hint of moldy vegetables. The whole of it moved with the groan of straining wood and the sound of water moving past. All through out the darkness came the ghostly bangs, scrapes and thumps of a ship being worked upon. It was like being held in the womb of a strange creature; the warmth and comfort off set by the physical pain of a damaged body.

When she could, though it took every ounce of her strength, Lady Taverness moved her arms and legs, stretching them in order to work out the knots. Always, when she did this, there was the sound of chains.

A dim light appeared as a hatch opened on the far end of the space she was in. Her ears followed the slow approach of whoever was coming to check on her... down a ladder one step at a time at a ten count and across the deck for an eight count.

“There ya are my darling,” crooned a voice in the darkness. It had moved forward bearing a small light, the light moving about in the air as if it were pixy borne; but the basso of the voice decried this phenomenon. “I brung ya some grub and I th’ught we’d take another peek at that back of yours.”

The light worked its way into her small hellish world... or at least the light came to her right eye; the left didn’t seem to be working. Oddly enough it didn’t hurt like the rest of her.

“Where am I?” Lady Taverness croaked, “And why am I naked?”

“Well now; ya woke up finally. And hear I th’ught I’d be a talk’n to myself again. You would be in the hold of The Queen; a ship properly stolen and stupidly given back... if ya was to ask me my O’pinion.”

There was the sound of something set upon the deck.

“That’s fine and all,” he continued, “Being that she’s a good ship and was under a certain eve-ile influence. We forgave her transgressions don’t cha know and each of us tak’n the time to kiss the figure head as we did so. She looks a tad like ya, don’t cha know, but she’s a Fox.” He paused to chuckle. ”N’ her’a hold’n a pen in her arms like it was a babe, so even that fits a bit, don’t it?” He giggled in joviality. “Oh wait... you ain’t ever held a babe have ya? Aye... you’re a lot like out beloved ship, ya are, but then you ain’t been forgave at all.” He hawked and spat upon the deck. “Ya ain’t rightly naked being that ya gots a blanket over ya... but when I take’s it off to bathe the wounds you will be; and I hopes it bothers ya bad like. I’d let ya rot if’n it was up to me, but it ain’t, so I got’s ta tend to your needs. Dinner is compliments of the Cap’n, and fit for a King... or a Queen

if you've the mind for it... which you do. I'll be spoon feeding ya, but you'll still be flat on yor belly."

"How long have I been unconscious?" she asked.

"Three days... no... that would be three and a half days. I shall have to report your condition o'course. It's good yor awake, cuz now we can hangs ya proper. Or maybe we'll do us a plank walk'n with you holding on to a cannon ball. Your choice then, ya see... hold on to it and drowns quick like, or let it go and drift with the sea for awhile; watching our stern as it sails away."

The sailor took out his deck knife and removed the blanket from the Rabbit chained before him. Holding the lantern up, he looked at her back and sighed. "I seen worse," he muttered, and then hung the light on its pintle, after which he began his work of digging out more of the splinters. He was none too gentle but he was experienced enough to be efficient. When he was done, he washed the wounds with rum... the whole time sorely disappointed that she hadn't made a sound.

When she could talk again, she asked, "Why can't I see out of my left eye?"

"Socket's empty," he told her. "My guess would be that ya fell on something when you were bowled over by th' Nasty Cat's six pounder. Incredible shot... just simply incredible. Never fear... we'll have a nice patch made up for ya, but for now it be's need'n ta air out a bit."

That said, he flopped down on an over turned bucket and fed her the cabbage soup he'd brought along... now cold, as he'd intended it to be.

When he was done, she told him, "I need to use the toilet."

"And glad I am that ya are too," the sailor told her. "I been get'n just a wee bit tired of clean'n ya up. I felt ya over a bit when I did... all in the name of fair trade mind ya. That's one thing about a body... it just keeps right on tick'n whether yor there to steer it along or not. Ya got a right nice boner ya did."

Turning his bucket upright, he flopped it down with an empty sounding echo.

"I will be undoing yor legs and you can sit up. You will then slide your ass off the cot there and squat on the bucket. Any funny stuff and I'll cut your throat... and that on the Captain's orders. E'says you're far too tricky ta trust."

Taking the lamp from its place, the sailor turned up the wick and did not try to hide his admiration of her privates as she moved to the makeshift toilet.

"You're a filthy leech," she managed, as she worked at filling the bucket.

“And you shore ain’t no lady,” he countered.

“I suppose you’d like something?” the wounded Bunny asked, striking a pose even in this awkward position that would best show off her very feminine bosoms.

“Those days are beyond me, Lass,” the old sailor said with a wink, “ And thus my ‘nom de plume’ of Balls. I got’s em shot off when we boarded the old Yackawhatsie. Swung across on a boarding line right into the muzzle of a swivel gun... and that’s all there was to it. Captain Tabor pulled me out of the water and saved m’ life, E’e did.”

Lady Taverness smiled, finished, and painfully slid back to the stretcher. “And thus your job attending to the likes of me, eh?”

“Something like that. I’m not so affected by the lust and all.”

“What is happening above decks?” she asked.

“Work... and that’s all I’m allowed to say.” He covered her with the blanket, and reattached the leg irons. Picking up the bucket and bowl, he told her, “I’ll be a’leave’n ya now Lass. You rest. I’ll be back in a few hours to dig out some more of th’ splinters. Yor back is look’n much better, bless yor nasty heart.”

When he was gone, and with him the small lantern, Lady Taverness reached under her cot and felt the spoon he’d used to feed her. She’d stolen it during the course of his ogling her ‘male parts’. It was wood, but perhaps there would be a use for it.

Henry Babacomb stood before the triad of Hiss, Gulo, and Tabor. They were in the slightly more spacious Captain’s cabin aboard The Queen; the three seated while Babacomb, dressed in the rags of his old uniform, stood rigidly at attention before them.

“I never thought I would see this day Babacomb,” the Rabbit pirate growled. “If I’d not been told of the agreement made by my peers, I would’a shot you dead on first sight.”

“ E’nd I wood ‘av pissed upon your d’ead body,” Hiss added, “In fr’nt of m’ eye entire crew.”

“I, for one,” Gulo told them without looking at the Dog, “Would speak for the character of the seafarer. He is a superb seaman, an able warrior, and the fact that he rowed all the way to Saylavee in a small boat with but fifteen crewmembers speaks volumes.”

“Thank you, sir...” Babacomb began, but was viciously cut off by the Wolverine, who stood so fast the chair under him was propelled backwards and clattered off the bulkhead.

“SHUT YOUR MOUTH AND SPEAK ONLY WHEN SPOKEN TO YOU
CONTEMPTIBLE MAGGOT! YOU COST ME MANY DEAD AND I SO WISH TO
CUT YOUR COD OFF AND STUFF IT BALLS AND ALL DOWN YOUR THROAT!”

As he yelled this, the Governor’s face flushed red from his sudden anger. Hiss, sitting next to him, placed a paw upon his elbow. “That ese your w’oonnd speaking Gulo... as much yur fault as ‘is, no?” She then said something in Cat that calmed him slightly. He begrudgingly picked the chair up from the deck and retook his seat.

Turning back to the former Labradorean captain, Hiss said, “We are ‘ere today to decide your fate. Eet was eye whoo agreed to yur terms. You deed give us thee Taverness and so wee will give you thee zafe pas’sage. In what form yur zafe passage comes ese thee question. Eye weel suggest that a long boat and your surviving crew...” she looked at Tabor, and asked softly, “Ow many?”

“Two able bodies, and three wounded,” he growled, “And they all had my gold in their pockets.”

“They are pirates, no?” she chuckled, being that it had not been her gold. Turning back to Babacomb, she continued, “Two able bodies and three to be cared for. Ewe will ‘ave a sail this time, a good compass, and provisions to see yur way ‘ome.”

“May I speak?” the Labrador asked tentatively.

“Do so,” Gulo told him gruffly while shifting his arm around and making a pained expression.

“I thank you for your generosity, Captain Hiss, but a small boat will be out of the question as there is going to be a gale in about three days time. The seas will start building in two. My nose tells me I would even question the survival of your own ship in the condition it is in. I would also suggest a possible abandonment and the shift of crew and provisions to The Queen.”

“No thanks to you,” the Governor grumbled, his eyes flickering. Hiss and Tabor exchanged glances. This information now shifted their repair work to urgent business. It also shifted their thoughts on Babacomb’s fate; one who could predict the weather was a God send no matter from where they hailed.

“I would also add, Governor,” he continued in a softer tone, “That your shoulder is infected and needs to be cauterized.”

“I will be fine,” the Wolverine hissed in reply. His eyes opened, and he pounded his good paw on the table for emphasis.

“No sir, you will not,” Babacomb countered boldly. Pulling his jacket down from his own shoulder, he displayed a gapping scar. “I know what I am talking about. First will come

the amputation while you are mindlessly subdued by pain and the rum you will drink to quell it. After will come death; and not a very pretty one.”

“KELLY!” Tabor yelled at the top of his lungs. “GET YOUR ARSE DOWN HERE!”

“I got this wound,” Babacomb said plainly, looking directly at Tabor, “When I was just a lad. I was on my father’s ship when it was boarded by pirates. We showed more wherewithal than they expected, however, and ended beating them at their own game, driving them off. My father, however, was killed.” Looking right at Tabor, he said, “These pirates were Rabbits and the attacking ship was this very one.”

“Before my time,” Tabor grumbled, suddenly feeling on the defense.

“But not before your predecessor’s.”

“He’s long dead... voted down and marooned for his stupidities.”

“As is my father long dead,” the Dog added. “Lady Taverness came to me, saying she had news of this ship and the pirate who was her Captain. I desired to kill the ship more so than its present owner, and so we fell into an agreement of sorts.”

Gulo, his face drawn in pain, pushed back in his chair. It made a loud scraping sound that broke into the dead zone forming between the two old adversaries. “For one who wishes safe passage,” he grumbled, “You make it very difficult...” he gasped, took a deep breath, and then fell sidewise from his chair; falling to the deck with a thump. Hiss and Tabor ignored him for the moment, both staring at the Dog in front of them.

Kelly burst into the cabin, looking over Babacomb’s shoulder from behind. His eyes grew large as he saw the Wolverine laying on the floor. “Does he need my assistance?” he asked.

“He’s tired and decided to take a nap,” his Captain told him gruffly. “What’s yur nose tell you about the weather?”

Kelly shrugged. “Actually, I’ve been a bit preoccupied trying to get things ship shape Captain.” He sniffed the air and then his face became blank as he seemed to range out with all of his senses. Just as quickly his expression came back again, but with a worried look. He cursed and then saw the three people in front of him. All were staring.

“I do hope we’re not buggered raw and bleeding,” he told them softly. “I need to attend to some things and then I will have a more definitive answer for you, sur.”

“Be definitive,” his captain growled, “And be so in three strokes of a Cat’s tail... present company excepted of course; no offence meant.”

“Nun taken,” Hiss told him, never taking her eyes off of Babacomb. “Eye ‘ave a need of a Navigator,” she told the Dog after Kelly left them. “Wood ewe swear an oath of loyalty... not on God’s name, but on Death’s?”

“Aye.”

“Wood you vouch f’or thee other Dogs?”

“Once I would... now I would not.”

Looking at the Rabbit, she told him, “Eye’ll take this one. You can ‘ave the other five.”

“You’re very generous,” he grumbled.

“ ‘Is leg is injured,” she responded with a smile. “ ‘Ee was almost a female so ‘Ee should fit in well enough. That leaves Gulo and ‘is soldiers. You agreed to take ‘im with you, but we will split ‘is men for crewing’s sake.”

“We should take care of his shoulder,” Babacomb ventured, and then added ‘Captains’ as a nicety and a mark of his acceptance of her offer.

“And your leg,” Hiss added, nodding to it.

“My leg is fine,” he told her.

“So ewe say, and so s’aid Gulo a’bout ‘is shoulder. Wee left thee Badger unconscious for a reason,” she informed him, enjoying the insult even though the Governor was solidly unconscious and not able to counter with his anger. “Thee blacksmith already ‘as the irons heated. Do you weesh rum?”

Swallowing hard, the Dog nodded.

The Caveat Noir’s foremast was the first to be fished back into position. At the very least, they would need this for survival during the expected storm. It’s positioning meant they could again carry jib sails, and in a bad storm they would be bare poled for the rest but for the spanker. Any other work of rebuilding was stopped and the main mast secured on deck with its spars. By day two the fore mast’s spars and temporary rigging were completed and a sail pulled under the hull in an attempt to slow the water coming in. Until now, the Caveat Noir’s pump had been slowly losing ground and there had been talk among the crew that they might have to abandon ship.

The Queen’s damaged bulwarks were patched with whatever spare lumber that could be nailed into place. Her guns, whose tackle was fairly destroyed, were sealed and hog tied to rings pounded into the main deck. A ‘loose cannon’ in a storm tossed sea could easily

sink a ship. With a storm known to be coming, if this tonnage on wheels could not be tightly secured, they would have been regretfully dumped into the sea. Mr. Flopears, personally in charge of this, patiently went from one gun to the next talking to each in turn and purportedly hearing their confessions. He then issued his forgiveness and a blessing to each. To the twelve pounder on the bow, now righted, scrubbed clean of blood, and hog tied like the rest, he gave an additional kiss on the breach for having killed her black hearted gunner.

By this day, as Babacomb had predicted, the seas began picking up. A last long boat was dispatched to the Cat's vessel, and then was hauled aboard, being too rough to come back. Her crew was now required to stay put. It was time for both ships to part company in order to gain sea room between them.

"Haul the lights up the mizzen!" Tabor called out to the crew.

Three lanterns mounted on a triangle framework were promptly hauled aloft. As he watched the other ship, paws gripping the rail and legs braced wide apart, Captain Hiss did the same.

"She's gone Captain," a voice decried at his elbow. The howl of the wind made it seem small.

"She's not gone," the pirate said, "She'll be but a league to our lee. That way, if they send up a distress signal, we'll be able to come down upon them."

"I meant Lady Taverness, sur," the pirate yelled. "I don't know how she done it, but she done it... got out of her chains and made off."

Tabor turned and looked at the sailor. For a moment, that Rabbit thought he was dead. After a moment, his captain slammed his paw on the rail cursing for all he was worth. Snatching up his speaking trumpet, he attempted to hail the Caveat Noir, but it was too late. In the distance, he could see her crew already taking in a reef on the spanker and the solders, soaked to the bone, never ceasing in their toils at the pump.

Captain Hiss only waved to him, mistaking his yelling for a good luck wish.

Rounding on the sailor, he pulled back his paw and balled his fist, readying to strike a blow. At the last moment he controlled his anger. "Ain't yor fault Balls," he said loudly against the wind, lowering his fist. "I shoulda just thrown her overboard when I had the chance. Round up whoever's available and break open the arms locker. Give each man a brace of pistols. Search the ship and do a last check for anything not tied down while you're at it. When you're done batten down the hold. If she's hiding down there, it'll at least keep her from getting into mischief. I'm go'n down to check on Gulo. Let me know when the search is done."

The Storm

Th' skies was gray.

Th' seas was gray.

All the sunlit colors of gayety was gray.

As the wind shrieked thru th' rig'n,
Huge waves crashed over the bows.

The water spoke to The Queen;
Curse'n, n'yet bless'n.

First as she staggered,
N'second as she rose up a'gain.

What we sailed through in the storm
Spoke of life 'n death.

It took some...

It left some...

N' still others fell
Somewhere's in between.

Captain Tabor Rabbit

Aftermath

Tabor stood upon The Queen's quarterdeck hearing the wind whip around his body... feeling it howl through the rigging. His eyes were closed as he fought the effects of the banshee wail, the sensation of which vibrated through the wood of his ship.

Two of his mates were lost overboard during the gale and another two were hard aground with injuries. One of the injured had a stove in rib cage and the other a broken leg. At sea a sailor suckled his nurture from the ocean he sailed; though every sailor doing so never looked to the eventual payback of his liquid mistress. She could be beautiful in her demeanor, and yet again, terribly brutal in her demands.

The Queen shuddered as she hit the bottom of a deep swell. Her motion solidly stopped as her buoyancy fought with the clinging paw of the water. It was for less than a second; but Tabor felt it and fought as his ship fought, willing her to rise again. During a gale like this the pirate moved with the ship as if she were his body. She, in turn, grasped onto his soul and they became one being. It was how the pair survived. Though she was only wood, canvas, and rope; the moving sea brought her to life and she spoke to him as a lover.

There was a hail from the masthead. The sailor clinging to the crow's nest was the same Labradorean who'd called out when the Caveat Noir had opened fire. Not surprisingly he was born to the masthead, managing to stay in place through shear physical exertion and a stout rope. As bad as the weather was, however, he was lucky to even see the horizon let alone the signal light for which he searched.

The Caveat Noir's light had not been sighted for three solid days and nights. In truth, it was a beacon Tabor never thought to see again. Yet that was what the lookout reported, his voice barely heard on the quarterdeck.

The Captain's eyes opened, and he briefly looked aloft to see the direction his lookout was pointing in. "KELLY," he yelled to be heard, "FIRE OFF A SIGNAL FLARE AND HOIST SOME FRESH LANTERNS; I DON'T SEE ANY LIGHT COM'N FROM THE ONES THAT'S HUNG!"

"AYE, SUR!" the other Rabbit responded, yelling equally as loud against the wind.

The crew, badly short handed, was exhausted. Just hanging on while trying to ride out the storm was bad enough, but survival dictated more than that. There was the constant need of the sails; trimming some and changing those that the storm exploded to rags. The rigging too had to be watched lest the things coming loose aloft did more damage to that which hadn't. One of the carronades had broken free and threatened to run the deck. Mr. Flopears jumped on its back and rode it like Neptune riding a waterspout; alternately tossing and catching lines until it was once again secured. There was also the never-

ending and backbreaking work of the pump as they tried to keep the bilge from overflowing. Within a ship at sea there is always leakage. Within a ship within a storm, that leakage triples as the joints and seams stretch and twist beyond all practical reason. This was but a matter of life for a sailor.

Gulo had groggily protested when he was sewn into his hammock. 'I can man the pumps as well as any,' he tried to argue.

Dismissing the sailor who'd done the sewing, Tabor thanked the Wolverine for his well meaning gesture and then cocked a pistol and told him it would go off of its own accord if he was seen up and about.

"I'll be needing you whole after we get through this," the Rabbit added; and then, to the tune of the sea crashing up against the shuddered stern windows, he told the Governor about Lady Taverness' disappearing act.

The Governor's first muttered response was a simple, "Shit".

"She is a worthy adversary," he finally replied closing his eyes in pain, "The Devil himself could not do better. I so find myself wishing her aim had been more to the mark."

"She's a true boil on the arse," the pirate agreed. "Pot Belly the cook will be down shortly with an elixir for ya. It taste's terrible even mixed with rum, but yur to drink it all down. He'll bring you something to eat as well and I expect you will eat all of it cuz I'm not going to be hauling you around the seven seas on my back. You'll sleep a good long time then and better for it, cuz she's gonna be a bad blow."

The Wolverine reached out with his good paw and squeezed Tabor's elbow. "I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused."

The Rabbit glowered back at him. "We all had a paw in that soup."

He began counting things off on his fingers.

"If I hadn't stolen what belonged to Lady Taverness... If she hadn't so tried to kill me in such a foul manner that first time... If I hadn't beaten her at her own game and had my way with her... perhaps my little tattoo pushed her over the edge... If The Queen wasn't the ship to kill Babacomb's Da... If Hiss hadn't been so desperate to take on the job of blowing me to Hell... If you hadn't intervened in that... not to mention YOU MADE ME KISS HER!" He spat upon the deck. "And yes," he continued just loud enough to be heard, "If you hadn't ignored my warnings when we was overreaching," he held the hammock and looked closely into Gulo's eyes, "Smithe would be alive now, wouldn't he?" He poked a finger into the Wolverine's ribs. "Smithe died like he was supposed ta die... like all of us will eventually. We're pirates by Neptune and expect no less." He released the hammock and then continued. "Think about this ya stuf'n old solder; if none

of us had ever been born in the first place... what then? We'd'a missed all the fun wouldn't we?" Nodding to the Governor, he said with finality, "Duty calls."

With that, he turned and left the cabin; walking a course dictated by the now severe motion of the sea. Finding Pot Belly braced against the bulkhead in the companionway, he motioned he should go in. "You mixed it strong?" he asked.

The cook smiled. "He'd sleep through a hurricane, sur."

"Good... one less thing for me to worry about."

Rosa wrapped herself around the mizzen pole so tightly she felt it was a part of her. On top of this, she was physically lashed to the wood with a stout line. With every shipped wave and deep swell she was whipped back and forth like a 'turd on a stick'. Tabor's expression describing the fate of all lookouts made her smile in spite of her circumstances. They were desperate and this was the only reason Hiss had sent her up the mast.

"LOOK FOR THE BALL SACK BASTARD!" the captain had yelled in Cat. "THE WATER HAS RISEN AND THREATENS... THE PUMPS CANNOT KEEP UP! WE NEED HIM TO AT LEAST BE HERE IF WE HAVE TO ABANDON SHIP!"

She then kissed her on the forehead and tied a very long line around her middle for the climb up the rigging in case she was swept overboard.

Though the foremast held, a small miracle by itself, there was little in the way of sail up. The spanker had been secured during the storm and a single triple reefed jib was left to hold their head on a course so they would ride the huge swells. It was required to hold their approach on to the ship's larboard forequarter; otherwise, her head would bury in the green colored water and never again come up.

Even with that, the waves continually battered them. Enough water had shipped over the forecastle that the pump crew almost drowned on several occasions. There'd been five of the crew lost overboard, three guns lost, and several injuries. Fortunately, the injuries were minor in nature.

Rosa couldn't remember when the crew had been this scant. As it was, her eyes were red with a combination of too little sleep and too much salt spray. It was all she could do not to rub them.

There was a momentary burst of light in the sky to the north, rapidly drowned by the gray sky. Her heart leapt.

“DECK!” she yelled, looking to the quarterdeck below her. “FLARE TO THE NORTH... FLARE TO THE NORTH!”

In the cacophony of the storm, the few occupants of the quarterdeck failed to hear her. She saw Hiss speaking with the new navigator, her face almost touching his as they spoke in shouted voice. The doubled helm watch had all they could handle just trying to hold the huge wheel and never took their eyes off of the sea and the compass.

Taking the line still tied around her middle in her left paw, she moved it around until attention was drawn aloft. She yelled again, but Hiss signaled she couldn't hear. Picking up her speaking trumpet, she reversed it, placing the mouthpiece to her ear. She then aimed it at the lookout, whereupon Rosa yelled her report again.

Within moments, her mother had a fuse to a rocket lit and sent it soaring towards the sky. It burst into orange sparks which were quickly swept away by the wind. The Cat captain again put her head next to the Dog's and they agreed to alter course as much as was possible.

Picking up the speaking trumpet Hiss called up to her, “CAN YOU SEE THEM CLEARLY?”

Cupping her paws around her mouth, she yelled back, “NO!” Then, looking off into the distance, she saw the faint glimmer of a signal light not there previously. It seemed to rise very high and then disappeared once again. There were no sparks of an exploding flare, so she knew it was the signal she'd been looking for. “AYE!” she yelled. “THEIR LIGHT IS UP! THREE LEAGUES TO WINDWARD!”

Her mother waved and then motioned her to come down. She'd been up braving the wind and the rain for a good six hours, far longer than any of the other crew, but Rosa knew how important it was they find The Queen. That they were so close after such a storm was a true miracle.

Trying to untie the line that bound her to the mast was next to impossible with her bad paw, so she took out the small deck knife she carried and attacked the line, now concentrating to the exclusion of all else. When this was done and she was free of her restraint, she hugged the mast. Its wet slickness kissed her cheek. At that moment, in the gray light of the storm soaked day, she spied the rogue wave, three times again larger than the normal swell.

“WAVE! WAVE! WAVE!” She yelled, but the wind swallowed her voice and all she could do was hold on.

The Caveat Noir, already positioned to ride the swell, met the huge wall of water on a perfect angle to ride up and over... but the climb was steep. Rising towards the sky, her masts were pitched to starboard towards the sea; moving down a good sixty feet. The ship listed heavily and for a moment threatened to turn turtle. At the last moment the bows

broached the crest, hanging out forty feet into thin air before her weight shifted and she crashed down on the backside of the mountainous wave. Her stern now violently rose into the air in a maddening teeter totter movement, pointing toward the sky before the ship slid maddeningly towards the trough like a runaway toboggan. The masts, acting like catapults, now flung themselves towards the larboard and onwards as the ship heeled to the opposite side. When they reached their apogee, Rosa, like the glandes shot from a catapult sling, was thrown far out over the killing waters. Her thin lifeline trailed behind her and when she reached its end, she was jerked backwards like a yoyo and dropped into the ocean.

From the forecastle, a one eyed Rabbit, untied his own lifeline and abandoned his place at the pump to make his way to the side where the lookout went over. Grabbing the end of her lifeline he began hauling on it. Within seconds, Captain Hiss was next to him, lending her muscle.

Glancing sidewise at the Rabbit, she spoke loudly against the roar of the ocean. "Eye thought it was ewe!"

"If you did, then why didn't you throw me overboard when I came on board?" he asked in a voice raw from breathing the salt laden air. Neither stopped pulling as they spoke.

"Eye was short 'anded. Eye wait to see eef ewe survive thee storm."

"I think that is not all," he responded.

"All things aside, ewe 'elp save Rosa so is not all bad. Eye can kill you when I wish in any case."

"And I could have sunk you as well."

"To wh't purpose? Ewe wish to die you wood 'ave jumped overboard. Talk later... now we pull."

Cold Island

The lack of motion was what Rosa sensed first. Opening her eyes, there was only the soft light of the Captain's quarters and none of the screaming wind that should have been. Her vision focused slowly. The blurred face above her turned into that of a rabbit wearing a look of concern.

"Captain Tabor," she managed. "Wh't are ewe doing 'ere?"

"I ain't the Captain," the Rabbit told her in a gruffly soft voice, "But thankee kindly for the mistake. My name is Balls. You had me a'feared I was gonna attend another damned funeral. Quite glad I am that you decided to join us again." He adjusted her blanket. "I think maybe you should be a farmer... the sea apparently wants ya, and that's all there is to it. You stay and she'll get you one day. Captain Hiss told yur story to Captain Tabor, and I was there ta listern. He said ya almost drowned the day of the battle too." He hawked and walking to the stern windows, spat through the glassless framework. Walking back to her, he said, "That fuk'n huge assed wave about did us in as well. Slapped the Queen's face good it did, but we rolled with the slap and came out on t'other side."

She looked around, shifting in her hammock. "Eye am naked," she told him, "And the ship; eet is not moving."

"You is naked cuz ya been out of your mind for some three days. The body don't stop just cuz the brain pan is on leave. Stripped ya, scrubbed ya, put ya into the hammock. You had to be cleaned up, and that's what I was brung here to do... that and attend any of the other sick and wounded. Yor paw is healing nicely," he told her, nodding to it. "Them searing irons does the trick, though they's bad painful. Even Governor Gulo is up and about, though ee won't stop grouching about 'is ruined uniform."

The Rabbit lifted a bowl of something that smelled very good. Dipping in a spoon, he allowed her to sip at the first sustenance she'd had in days. When she struggled, trying to sit up, he told her, "Easy on there missy. You take in this here soup gentle like and I'll help's ya up after. No need to be modest with me... I'm the medicine bunny and ain't got no balls in any case. I be's the sexless mother of The Queen for that reason, ya see's."

"Why aren't wee moving?" she asked.

"Ah yes... that... your ship is fast aground on a sandy beach. She's careened right proper 'n we got the shoring out so's she won't tip. The tide's well past its ebb and when it goes all the way out the carpenter and his mates are gonna take a look at the hull. If we has to, we'll put block 'n tackle out to the trees and attach it to the yards so's we can tip her to one side or t'other. The Queen's anchored just off shore standing guard, and a sight she is too. Her rigging's as snarled up as old Medusa's snaky hair... almost as bad as your'n."

He helped her sip some more of the soup.

“We’re all lucky we ain’t with Davy Jones,” he told her. “Yes sur... damned lucky.”

“Where’s my moth... er... Captain Hiss?” she asked.

“Off on The Queen, she is. The high mucky mucks got a parlee going on while the rest of the crew is over here helping with the careening. Not so totally sure how it all works, but I get the feeling what happens next will be decided there. Too much death to make a wasted trip.” He shifted around to better feed her the soup. “I do hope something comes out of it all... some gold maybe, or jewels. Me... I’d settle for One ‘o’ Potbelly’s meals, and maybe a shag up the... oh...” He stopped and winked at her. “Pardon that, you’ve no need to hear the wants of some old balless pirate. Eat your soup, and I’ll get you washed down so’s you can go up on deck and take the air. It’s sweet ‘n fresh n’ not a cloud in the sky.”

“Wh’t island are we upon Meester Balls?”

“I he’erd that black bastard Babacomb call it Cold Island. I ne’er heard of it afore ‘n I been to a lot of little places like this. It ain’t all that cold; but it’s got a good careening cove beach; thank your lucky stars. Ain’t a man jack able to pump no more. Most of the crew is dead asleep... or just dead. I ain’t checked them all that close yet, but none of’em stinks too bad and I ain’t seen no flies buzzing round.”

Captain Tabor chaired the meeting as was his right since it was being conducted upon his vessel. Such things were formally controlled during a ‘parley’ and well respected; more so than the average non-pirate might believe. He was seated at the table in his cabin in the ship’s log, open before him, he penned;

Location: Cold Island. Longitude and latitude presently unconfirmed.

Ships: Caveat Noir and The Queen.

Parley Chairperson: Captain Tabor Rabbit.

Attending members with equal sayso: Captain Hiss Cat, Governor Gulo Wolverine (arm in a sling), Navigator Babacomb Dog (Labradorean), Navigator Kelly Rabbit, Gunner Flopears Rabbit.

For the record, Captain Hiss’ and Governor Gulo’s Gunners are both deceased.

Putting his quill down, he looked up at those in his cabin and thought for a moment before speaking. Standing, careful not to bump his head on the overhead, he positioned

his head within the skylight and said to them, "I don't think I've ever been in such a state of flux in all of my born days. In just the past week we've lost many a friend and comrade. With them in mind, we shall have a moment's silence, lest what gods we might believe in would think us a callous lot."

At the end of this moment, where the only sound was the moans and creaking of The Queen, Captain Tabor intoned, "May their souls rest in peace, and their faces not be forgot."

All in the room said, 'Aye.'

I shall sum up where we are, after which, if any of you has something to add, you will do so as I point you out. To save a lot of writing, I shall summarize all we discuss and vote upon in the ship's log. In the end, what we decides to do will be upheld by all as law. We each have one equal vote in whatever decision is voted upon, and the vote will be open." He looked at the Labradorean. "Navigator Babacomb, you've been taken on by Captain Hiss. I am obliged to honor this and not put a ball into your head; as much as I might wish too. Those are the rules and I am honor bound to uphold them. You have sworn allegiance to Captain Hiss and her ship. What passed before no longer is. You have become one of the brethren and your past sins are forgiven. In return, you must forgive the past as well and begin anew. Do we agree to this?"

Babacomb rose, his head bent to keep from touching the overhead. "Aye."

"Very well, be seated then, and welcome."

Tabor retook his seat and banged the table with the butt end of his pistol. "First order of business," he told them, "I regret to inform all of you that the Lady Taverness escaped just as the storm fell upon us. We searched the ship stem to stern, but could not find her. It is my belief she went by the boards, and God rot her soul for eternity." There was a mumbled agreement. "Next," he told them, "The repair of the ships has become tantamount to survival. I propose to do this one at a time. In fact, as you all know, the Caveat Noir has already been careened. Her Carpenter's mate and ours will be inspecting the hull even as we speak. The Queen will stand guard while Captain Hiss, and all the crew able to muster out, will repair..."

And so went the meeting, discussing and reporting, planning and agreeing to plans.

A shore party would scout the area looking for proper trees to fell for lumber and food to gather. Ships finding secret islands such as this were known to sew vegetable gardens against the times they might return. Chickens would also be found, released to the wild for the same reason, and there might be oyster beds. More important even than food, was the supply of fresh water needed by the ships that plied the salt oceans. The cooper would now be kept busy assembling the barrels previously broken down for storage.

“Very well,” Tabor said finally, glad the meeting was about over. He had much to attend to, and he was getting hungry. “Is there any final business?”

“Eye ‘ave a ferther suggesteon,” Hiss said as she stood; seeking to be formally recognized. Because of her smallish stature, she did not need to stoop.

All eyes went to her.

“Chair recognizes Captain Hiss,” the Rabbit replied, his hackles rising for some unknown reason, “And don’t you dare bugger me,” he muttered.

“Eye do not ‘ave thee equipment to do that,” she responded with a sly smile.

Everyone laughed and the sudden tension broke.

“W’en wee are done ‘ere, I say we make to Blueportdoggie for thee re-supply and find more crew since we were made to leave so short ‘anded, eh?”

There was a strong murmur of disagreement among those present. Tabor tapped on the table with the butt end of his pistol until everyone was silent again.

“If’n I was to show up in Blueportdoggie,” he told her, “I wouldn’t make it past the seawall before taking fire. They don’t like The Queen there all that much. I don’t suppose there’s a ship calling the place home that hasn’t paid their dues to my cannon.”

“Sunk more than a few,” Mister Flopears agreed, “Not that they didn’t ask for it. If they’da heaved to like we toll’em to... and me very careful to place a single shot across their bows all real polite like, there’da been no problems. But noooooo.... they had to make a fight of it.”

“Begg’n my Captain’s pardon,” Babacomb said next, looking to Hiss first and then to Tabor for recognition before continuing. “Blueportdoggie is run by the basest Pug bastard I ever met. His name is Lord Pugwash the Pug, but we always just referred to him as Snort ‘n Sniff for obvious reasons. He’s no respect for the crown... not that that matters much to us, but he is no person’s friend. He’ll gouge us for gold and sell us rotten provisions besides. Further; the only crew you’ll dig up there you’ll pour from the bottom of a bottle, no matter what the breed. The ship’ll no sooner clear the harbor, and they’ll mutiny. They’ll...”

His Captain’s look silenced him, even with the immunity of equality. She next looked to Gulo. “Where ees it wee go to, eh? You ne’re did disclose our destination. Wee shud see your map and then maybe decide, eh?”

“Look at it all you wish,” the Wolverine countered. “Without knowing what the cipher means it will make no difference. Nor will I explain it to you until the time is right. You will just have to trust me when I say the endeavor will take two ships.”

“There be’s that much gold?” Kelly muttered.

“More than gold,” Gulo told him, “Much more... but you’ll have to earn it.”

“Blueportdoggie,” pressed Captain Hiss. “I need food and pow’ dair... I need line and canvas... I need replacement guns and Cats.”

“Not too many Cats at that place... especially lesbian types,” Tabor told her. “If it will make you happy, though, we’ll vote upon it.”

“Wait,” she told him. “What if eye tell ewe eye ‘ave a way to make nice in Blueportdoggie, eh? What if I tell you, Governor Gulo, there are Wolverine soljers to be ‘ad... and Rabbits, Capitan Tabor... Rabbits that do not like thee females? Wood ewe be interested then? What if I tell you they ‘ave all we need... in and out... no fuss and on to Gulo’s big X on thee map?”

All eyes were on her now, but not a word was spoken.

“How could you possibly promise that?” Tabor finally asked her for all of them.

“Because I told her it was so,” answered a voice from out in the companionway... a voice that did make the pirate’s hackles rise. “Lord Pugwash also has a substantial treasury to be raided.”

Lady Taverness walked in to the room as she spoke these words.

She was dressed in a demure yellow sun dress and carried a folded parasol tucked under her arm. She also wore a matching yellow eye patch over her left eye and a smile that would melt the coldest heart.

Tabor revered the pistol he’s been using as his gavel, cocked the hammer back and pointed it at her. “I’ll see you in Hell first,” he muttered and then pulled the trigger.

There was a metallic snap and a shower of sparks as the flint struck the face of the frizzen, followed by a small pop as the priming powder flashed in the pan; but nothing further.

Lady Taverness held up an unloading rod, the lead ball from the pirate’s weapon fixed upon its screw. “You should be careful where you leave your things Captain Tabor,” she told him. “That was your move; now this is mine. Under the rules of ‘Parley’, we are all equals and no violence or untoward actions may occur to those involved. I am a part of the parley, invited here by Captain Hiss. The dear sweet Cat was at least willing to listen.”

“You stole my ship,” Tabor growled at her.

“You stole my information and made me look a traitor. I was condemned to the rope as a spy... except that I escaped.” Pulling the dress down at the shoulder, she exposed the heart shaped tattoo with his name in the middle. “And you gave me this after raping me.”

“You killed my men, and those of my comrades,” Governor Gulo snarled, gripping the table with his good paw to keep from leaping across its top and pummeling the Rabbit.

“You attacked me, not I you. My ship was fairly stolen. Check the log, I kept it honestly up to date and documented the facts. I merely defended myself with a well played trap. What you got you brought down upon your own shoulders. I believe you were wisely counseled against the attack?” She looked at Tabor and raised her eyebrows.

“You played me,” Babacomb hissed from close by her. He looked about to attack and Hiss positioned herself to interfere if need be. “You pulled my heart out and ate it,” he yelled at her, “And then I lost everything.”

“Was I there when you made such an ugly blunder causing your ship to be lost? If I had been, I would have used the Siren’s for target practice. I never promised you anything other than ‘The Dread Pirate Tabor’. I lived up to my end of the bargain no less than three times; and now I see you have joined with the Devil himself.”

“She ‘as a point,” Hiss told her Navigator softly, “And now you will be still and listen to me...” Turning to the room in general, she said, “All of you will now listen to me!”

When they were settled, she continued. “We ‘ave all been stupeed... even thee Lady Taverness ‘as been stupeed. Wee all ‘ave our strengths ‘nd our weakness no? Apart we are only so so... but toge’ther we would be unbeatable. I propose we do eggzatctly this joining, beginning with Blueportdoggie. Wee go there... wee take what wee need... and wee move on to what Governor Gulo’s map points to. I think after that, eef eye am still alive, eye retire. One last great adventure no?”

“Who is in charge?” Gulo asked her.

Hiss nodded to Tabor. “ ‘Ee is fleet commander. We are both Capitain’s of our ships, and you are C’mander en charge of any ground actions.”

“She takes the oath here in font of all of us,” Tabor snarled. “And if she breaks it, there will be no forgiveness... ever again.”

“Ever again,” the rest grumbled in agreement.

Hiss turned to her. “Do you swear loyalty to your pirate brethren, not on God’s name, but on Death’s?”

“I do,” she said demurely and then curtsied to the Cat.

“Done,” Hiss told her. “You will sail with me then.”

“Begging the Captain’s pardon,” the Rabbit said, tossing the lead ball and screw stick to the table in front of Tabor, “But I think I would rather stay on The Queen. Captain Tabor and I have much catching up to do.”

“Go fuk yourself,” Tabor growled at her.

“She smiled sweetly at him. “I might... but we can talk about that later.” To the room in general she said, “At the moment, I would like to discuss Blueportdoggie. It is a place that has long been ripe for the picking... and trust me, I have the ability to pluck that tomato without disturbing so much as one leaf of the plant.”

Everyone but Tabor intently leaned forward to listen.

Rosa stood on the shore watching the carpenters at work. The tide was full out and the Caveat Noir was leaned far over onto her larboard side for access to the battered planking. Careful measurements were taken and fresh planks cut to size before this part of the operation was attempted. With the tide out the two Carpenters Mates had perhaps three solid working hours to get the planks in place and the seams calked. The final adjustments would then be made during subsequent low tides, but the bulk of the work was being done at this moment.

At the same time the rest of her hull was being scraped by twenty others of the crew. Speed was the criteria for successful raiding; this was tremendously reduced by the drag of such attached sea life. So too, three more worm eaten planks had been discovered and would be replaced on both sides. Had The Queen’s carronade found one of the rotten planks, their situation would have been much different. Perhaps now they would not have to pump quite so much.

The young Cat looked down at her right paw and sighed. Though the wound was healing nicely, the loss of her three fingers was devastating. She would adjust. Her mother had simply said, ‘Learn to shoot with your left paw.’ She’d then presented her daughter with a favorite pistol to keep tucked in her belt. It was an emotional gesture... or as emotional as her mother could make it to be.

For now, the lookout was restricted to the lighter duties of food gathering. There were sixty mouths to feed yet so this task was actually quite important. Looking back to her ship, the young Cat thought about how woefully short their number was for sailing. Both ships normally carried a crew larger than seventy-five souls. Normal cruising, for reasons such as smuggling, would take a minimum of sixty to seventy. If they were making a quick raid on a seaport they might even carry as many as a hundred and fifty.

Looking out over the tidal flats she saw what was left of Gulo's soldiers digging for clams and oysters. Their uniforms, formerly bright blue with crisp white cross belts, looked horribly ragged. She smiled, thinking this was a fine introduction to a pirate's life for them; which was totally about functionality. If something didn't work, such as a fancy uniform, it was not bothered with.

With the oyster beds and the fish in the bay, they were lucky; there was a plentitude of fresh food, but they needed vegetables and not just for the Rabbits. Without the right diet there would be scurvy. With the scurvy came a helplessness and death; known by sailors as far back as when creatures like themselves first plied the waves.

Looking further to the small bay, she saw The Queen gently riding at anchor. Far up on the main mast she marked the black dot of a lookout. It was good they were vigilant. If her ship was caught out like this, helpless and belly exposed, even a small gunboat would wreak havoc. The Labradorean navy patrolled these waters. If Babacomb knew about the island, then others with the same background would too.

Sniffing, she hoisted her basket and continued along the shore, looking for an easy place to head inland. If other ships had planted gardens on this island, then they would have done so close to the ocean.

Tabor stood on his quarterdeck silently looking towards the shore. There was an eerie peace about The Queen this morning. Perhaps this was due to most of his crew being ashore attending to the schedule of work that was agreed upon. Certainly there was enough to keep them here for a month or more; time he truly didn't wish to spend laid up. Besides the thought of his crew languishing back in Saylavee, there were the simple odds against discovery. The longer they took, the more likely they would be found out. It was just a matter of time before some ship ventured here to take on fresh water.

To counter this, should the need arise; they'd devised a pincer movement for defense. Governor Gulo and his remaining troops had removed the twelve pounder from the Caveat Noir prior to her being careened. They then set up a shore battery overlooking the mouth of the harbor. This coupled with the bow chaser on The Queen, lovingly restored to her previous state of duty by Mr. Flopears, would beat off all but the most determined attack. If the opposing ship struck her colors the crew would be treated fairly and pressed to help with the repairs. If she didn't then it was battle rules and very little quarter given.

Turning, he surveyed his ship again with a knowing eye. The bulkheads were patched but it was still only a temporary repair leaving his guns on the larboard side unusable. The foremast was still in need of replacement. Spars they had in plenty, but an entire mast was something too large to carry as a spare. For this trees had already been selected on shore. Once cut and shaped they would be fished into place. After this was done the rigging would be repaired and The Queen would again be made shipshape. Much of what needed to be done after that would be done while underway. His crew were all seasoned sailors and he had no doubts concerning their work.

First priority; they would take care of the Caveat Noir as she was truly close to sinking. That she had made this landfall was truly a miracle. His Carpenter's Mate confided in him that he had no idea how the ship had survived the storm. Apparently, the carronade's ball had struck right on the framework of a rib, cracking the hull planks on either side and crushing a section of the rib. The planks would be replaced but she would always have that one broken rib. To counter this, he and Captain Hiss' carpenter had fashioned splints, and the blacksmith through bolts. When the planks were totally removed, they would clamp them in place. Obviously they could not complete the task in one turning of the tide, so they had to prepare everything beforehand and work as quickly as possible. Should the tide beat them in the race, and it certainly would, they would cover the hole with the stoutest canvas they had coupled with a good amount of pitch to ensure it's resistance to the ocean water.

Once she was watertight and refloated, work would begin on her rigging. The new masts were already shaped and waiting, and as much of the rigging would be salvaged as possible. Lines would be spliced and sails mended. Nothing was ever discarded.

More important, however, was the simple time schedule to get everything accomplished. Experience taught; a well thought out schedule was needed for any endeavor; especially one such as pirating. All of this was rule of thumb to the sea Captain.

Tabor, seeing motion on the beach, frowned and took his spyglass out. Opening it, he trained it on the shore. There was a Cat walking along the shore carrying a single basket... odd that it did not carry two. Pulling and then alternately pushing on the telescoping body for a better focus, he saw the reason for this and smiled. "Rosa," he muttered, "You're much more resilient than most I seen. Good for you."

He noted she'd stopped to examine something in the sand.

"Whatcha got there, youngster?" he queried out loud; mentally marking the spot, "Some chicken tracks perhaps? That would certainly be a good thing, especially for your mother's dinner."

As he watched, she walked to the tree line and disappeared.

"Could we perhaps talk?" asked a pretty voice from next to him.

"Take a good step back, or I'll bash you with m'glass and not think twice for it." The pirate responded without turning.

"I can understand your feelings, Captain, but regardless of our past differences, I would like to personally make amends." The voice was now obviously a good two paces further distant; though the offer in its inflection was still all too obvious.

“You have no idea of my feelings,” he told her softly. There was an underlying edge to his voice, expressing the violence that could still happen. “I have to put up with you because it was voted upon and mine was the only dissenting vote. Being civil was never part of the bargain. Give me any good reason and I’ll blow your fuk’n balls off.”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw her place one gloved paw on the rail. Her parasol was held daintily over her shoulder as she looked in the direction of the Caveat Noir. “The thought of that in another respect is rather enticing,” she responded coyly. “How are the repairs going?”

“Just fine; no thanks to you. As I see’s it, you should be tak’n a turn in the saw pit. At the very least you could be gathering vegetables.”

“If I did that, I’d be in fine fettle for Blueportdoggie. Imagine meeting little Lord Snort and Scratch looking like some old fisherman’s wife. I need to be at my best... speaking of which, where has Balls gotten off too? I’m thinking I have some more splinters surfacing on my back. I need him to dig them out and apply some more of that salve he makes.”

“You’re lucky I caught his wrist the last time you had him work on you; he was mak’n to cut your throat, and I can’t say I blame ‘im none.”

She turned to him. “You do love me!”

“Keep that up and I’ll turn a blind eye to what I see the next time,” he growled. Looking up to the mast head, he yelled, “YA SEE ANYTHING TOBY?”

“NARY A TING CAP’N! THE SKY IS BLUE AND NO CLOUDS... NOT A SAIL IN SIGHT! SINCE SHE’S ALL CLEAR, IF YOU’VE A MIND FOR A NOONER, I COULD DO WITH A MUG OF RUM AND A GOOD POKE, SUR!”

“NEITHER WILL YA GET RIGHT NOW...” he yelled back. “LATER MAYBE!”

“AYE, SUR... LATER THEN.”

Looking back to Lady Taverness, the Captain allowed himself a small smile. “Tell me about Blueportdoggie. I want to know all about Lord Scratch and Sniff and this treasury he’s supposed ta have. It’s been a while since I’ve had a successful raid. I will add that I only got back a portion of what was in that chest you pillaged.”

“I didn’t touch what was in the hold,” she told him, returning the smile coyly, “Nor did I tell anyone about it.”

“My crew knows what’s there. It belongs to them as well as me, though I take the Lion’s share.”

“You are an honorable Rabbit,” she said, twirling her parasol.

“I can be,” he replied, turning back towards the Caveat Noir. He could see she was being winched back upright so she would ride the incoming tide properly. “I can also be a right bastard when it suits me.”

“Yes... I heard how you asked Governor Gulo for his powder.”

“Someone has a big mouth,” he mumbled, opening his glass again. “I shall have to remedy that.”

“I heard it from a Cat when I was on Hiss’ ship during the storm,” she told him. “Your tactics, I will add, well rivaled my own.”

“Flattery ain’t gonna get ya to Blueportdoggie. You used treachery... I used cunning. There’s a difference.”

“Is there now?”

“Indeed there is... now if you’ll excuse me, I has a need to go ashore. We can talk about Blueportdoggie later.” Looking forward, he roared, “BALLS!”

“That’s what the Queen cried out,” responded a voice from the shadows of the forecastle. “She then added; if she had a pair she’d be the King.”

The ship groaned as if commenting on the old joke.

“Put your pistol up... I need to be rowed ashore,” Tabor told him.

The old pirate stepped out and into the sunlight. Keeping his pistol aimed at the deck, he held the hammer with he left paw and let it gently fall to half cock. “My pleasure to be of assistance to the likes of yorself, sur,” he told his Captain. Never taking his eyes off of Lady Taverness, he followed Tabor to the side and climbed down into the dory.

Following the trail she’d found, Rosa pushed through the thickets and came upon row after neat row of cabbages. There were also other patches of vegetables in various clearings around her in abundance. This was not a ‘sail away’ garden, but one that was carefully tended to.

“Alloooo...” she called out. “Ees anyone ‘ere?!”

There was a soft snort from within the underbrush. The Cat’s eyes narrowed and ever so slowly she drew out the pistol her mother had given her. With a metallic click, she cocked the hammer back.

“Eye am from Caveat Noir,” she called out. “We ‘ave need of food. Eye c’n barter in good faith, or Eye can just t’ke what we need. Thee choice ese yours. Show yourself.”

When there was no response, she pushed forward warily exploring this garden hidden among the trees. Though vegetables were not among her most favorite thing in the world, what she’d found was a fabulous wealth that even the young Cat could appreciate. She’d seen ‘want’ upon the waters of the ocean... want that no amount of fish could satisfy... want that craved the exact things growing in this place; melons, cabbage, carrots and squash. She smiled when she also found peas, green beans, corn and turnips; a veritable treasure trove of culinary... a breeze rustled the underbrush and her nose twitched. There was the smell of a particular herb floating on the wind. It warmed her nose. Something smelled so very good... so very... it tickled the very core of her stomach and she suddenly felt giddy with happiness. She recognized the smell as the herb her mother had smuggled at great profit and risk; the risk being its ability to totally incapacitate an entire crew of Cats with just its smell alone.

A period of time passed seemingly in the blink of an eye. The shadows among the garden were growing longer, and yet Rosa didn’t care. She was lying on her back in the middle of a green patch of plants, alternately sniffing at them and chewing the leaves... batting at them in a kitten like way when they refused to uproot themselves and march into her basket.

“Anahaloponata nug hungggg,” said a gruff voice from somewhere within the shadows.

Rosa laughed, and tried to repeat the words, which made her laugh even harder. “E’nd what sort of sailor would use language like that?” she finally managed, rolling onto her side in order to regard the creature who’d spoken to her.

His appearance made her laugh even harder, as she found herself looking at a very large swine. He wore only a loin cloth, which his large belly hung over. His bare skin was adorned with all manner of tattooed designs, none of which made any sense to her... and of course, this made her laugh even more. The fact that he held a spear in a threatening manner didn’t bother her in the least. She did have a pistol somewhere; if she might bother to look for it.

“Eye am Duroc,” he told her, puffing out his chest. “Eye am...” he searched for a word, and finally settled on, “Harpoon thrower. Eye am very good thrower.”

She tried to keep a serious face. “Ewe aer from a whaling ship then... but I do not see sech a ship in the harbor.”

His puffed out chest deflated slightly and he let his spear tip fall to the dirt. “They maroon me here. Duroc make crew very angry.”

“Reeely?” she giggled. “What could you possib’ley ‘av dun to peess them off bad enuf to maroon ewe ‘ere, eh?”

The swine plopped to the ground and sighed. “Duroc eat Captain.”

This caused Rosa extreme hilarity. When she could speak, she asked him, “Did ‘e taste good?”

The pig shook his head. “Too dam stringy... he stick in my tusks. Was all fur in any case... not much meat.” He looked at her. “What sort of creature are you? Eye never see before.”

“Eye am a Cat,” Rosa told him seriously, “From the north seas, where it is very cold.”

“Eye am Kanaka,” he replied in kind, “From islands long long way from here, where it is always warm. They catch me with net and take me with them... served litt’le bastard right. Eye say to him, ‘Take Duroc home or Duroc eat your heart.’” The large swine shrugged his shoulders. “He just laugh... so eye eat him. Rest of crew afraid then... try to kill Duroc. Eye stay in little bastard’s cabin; lock door and keep harpoon ready. They come here and I swim ashore at night. Next day they gone.”

Rosa sat up, and placed her paw on his arm. “That is sooooo sad,” she managed and then burst out laughing again. When she could speak again, she said, “Ewe can sail with us then. We ‘ave two ships. One is Cat and the other Rabbit.”

The swine smiled at her. “I like Rabbit,” he told her. “With onions.”

This caused Rosa no end to her hilarity.

Afloat

One day out from Blueportdoggie, Lady Taverness had her small armada run through a complete dress rehearsal of their triumphant entrance into the harbor. Each ship now flew a huge white flag with the crimson letters 'LT' proudly sewn into its middle. She also had the fore lower topsail of both sewn with an 'X' of the same color; making the ships identity easily recognized at a distance; marking the fact they were sisters.

With The Queen leading the way, she had Mr. Flopears fire off each of the ship's cannon as they would in their salute to the fortress guarding the entrance to the port. This was followed by the Caveat Noir doing the exact same thing and then both ships dipped their colors in unison. Watching everything with a discerning eye, the demure Rabbit was finally satisfied with what she saw.

The ruse was simple in and of itself. The former spy, now turned Privateer, had a Letter of Marque signed by the Labradorean King granting her permission to hunt down 'The Dread Pirate Tabor'. It instructed that she capture or sink his ship, and consigned the pirate to chains should he be taken alive. The forged document promised a very sizable bounty for both the ship and the pirate when she returned them to Labrador; where upon she would also be granted a Dukedom and sizable properties.

Since both ships had actually been in a battle, both now wore the scars of fresh repairs; proof positive she'd accomplished her mission. That, sprinkled with a few dirty looking Rabbits standing around in chains, and they would be welcomed with open arms by the populace of the port; especially since Tabor was a well known hazard in their waters.

The last stop for her little two ship armada, she would explain to Lord Pugwash, was Blueportdoggie so they might do what they truly had to do... re-supply.

During the planning stages of this enterprise, however, Mr. Flopears appeared less than happy to waste the little good powder they had left. This was especially painful to him since it had been cut again in half in its sharing with the Cats; theirs being totally lost to flooding during the storm. To a spy the likes of Lady Taverness, a small detail such as the Gunner's frown did not go un-noticed. Singling him out, she explained her reasoning in detail; speaking in a measured tone as if to a half wit.

"When a ship's cannon are discharged in salute, it proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that the ship is disarmed, does it not, Mr. Flopears? The salute has effectively pulled her teeth, no?" Reaching out, she gently fingered one of his hang down ears. "Trust me, my dear Mr. Flopears; the soldiers of the fortress will be watching to see if we reload." She raised an eyebrow at him until he nodded in understanding. "Very good... it is very important that you understand this so we might obtain the harbor without getting our asses blown to hell. With only powder loaded there will be no recoil to propel your guns backwards, no? You will instruct your crews to leave the guns tightly pulled forward on the tackle; run out and poking through their nice little gun ports where their empty

mouths can be seen.” Looking to the rest of those assembled, she added, “It is so very important that we show no hostile intent. If we do this, the fort will return the salute, discharging all of Lord Pugwash’s cannon. It is tradition to do so.”

Looking to Tabor, she said markedly, “I want an exact count recorded of the guns returning our salute.”

The pirate Captain nodded to her, but when the others gathered in the cabin looked questioning at this request, she sighed. It was all too obvious none of them, with the exception perhaps of Tabor, would have lived long had they tried their paw at being a spy.

“Governor Gulo,” she said sharply, “What part will your troops play prior to our departure?”

“We are to quietly gain access to the fortress and spike the cannon, thus eliminating their ability to fire upon us as we depart.”

“Very good,” she replied sarcastically as if speaking to a green soldier. Gulo bridled, but remained still; silenced by her following question. “And exactly how many guns does the fort have?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

She smiled, and looked back to Tabor. “You will, after the salute. We are required to fire all of our guns; and then they will do the same. This is more than a courtesy... it is a mark of mutual trust and good practice for their crews. It also depletes the old powder.”

“I understand now m’um,” Mr. Flopears muttered humbly.

“I’m glad that you do,” she replied. To those assembled, she said, “Gathering information is what a spy does. Knowing what information is valuable, and how to get it, is a matter of practice. You must trust me in this if we are to succeed. If I say it is so... then it is so. I will entertain no arguments.”

She then checked off the other things to be done. “Governor Gulo, you are now Colonel Gulo, adventurer and mercenary. We shall outfit you in a garishly lavish uniform. Captain Hiss will be introduced as my co-commander. We shall need an equally lavish uniform for you my dear.”

Captain Hiss smiled. “Eye ‘ave such for important times.”

“Good,” she replied. “Mr. Babacomb.”

“Ma’am?”

“Since Captain Tabor has been killed in our extraordinary sea battle, I will need you to captain The Queen for me as pilot. Your job will be to see to her readiness. You and Captain Hiss’ appointed officer in charge while she is with me attending to business, will make the ships ready for our eminent departure. I want the guns discretely loaded and made ready in case we have to make a fight of it. Load grape on the shore side and ball to the seaward.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Mr. Kelly,” she said next, “You will take charge of provisioning just as soon as it is made available... and trust me, the ship chandlers will be all over us as soon as we toss the first line to the wharf. Powder and shot will be first priority. Take whatever bribes you wish, but make damned sure we get what we pay for.”

“Yes m’um,” Kelly said, nodding and then looked puzzled, “But I should take bribes? Those offering such will be wanting to sell us inferior goods.”

She looked at him, and her look was hard. Apparently she would have to spell out every last detail for their understanding.

“OK... everyone please pay close attention as I will explain this just one time.” She looked to each of them, one at a time, making sure she had their rapt attention. “This is not a raid!” she said sharply. “Now... I want everyone to repeat that.”

Like a schoolmarm leading her class, she got them all to mumble what she wanted to hear.

“Raids,” she told them, “Are loud and messy, with abundant death on all sides. If you are lucky enough to live through it, you might just make off with what you can carry. A few months later what are you left with; empty pockets and one hell of a hang over? Then what? Oh yes... how stupid of me... another raid. Let me put it in terms you will understand... why steal a single coin when you can cut and run with the whole pouch?”

She looked at each of them, and then holding up a finger for each point, said softly, “We are going to empty Little Lord Piss Pot’s entire treasury right from under his nose. We’re going to do this with absolutely no loss of life. We are also going to re-supply and re-crew. Finally; we are going to take the best they have to offer, and they’re going offer it to us with open arms; not realizing they will be paying us to take it.”

She smiled as she saw a growing appreciation for what she was telling them. “Mr. Kelly,” she explained, “If you do not take a bribe or two or three, the chandlers will become suspicious. That suspicion will grow and then spread like a disease... so you damned well better play the part and work the system. The wharf has ears, the bales of clover have ears, the kegs of powder and cannon balls have ears... so while we are tied up, we must live the lie or be caught out by the truth.”

Next she looked at Gulo. "If it's possible there is another ship we can make off with, we will take that too. This will off set our diminished cargo capacity. My intentions, sir, are to be fat with gold when we leave here. We will then go to wherever it is your map directs us to go and we can finish that business... but..." She looked at the room in general. "I cannot accomplish this with a scurvy looking band of pirates. You will all have be properly uniformed, properly mannered, and properly who you are pretending to be."

There was a stillness within the cabin disturbed only by the gurgle of sea water passing the miles behind and heard through the open stern windows. Lady Taverness smiled at them, the blue of her dress perfectly matching her eyes. "I'm glad you all understand," she told them. "One more thing before you're dismissed. In case there's any misunderstanding; know that I will cut the throat of anyone who even comes close to bugging this up. Such is the life of a spy... and that is exactly what all of you now are. The falsehood you spin into your web of truth exactly equals the survival of your ship. Step away from that web and you will be found out."

When Tabor climbed back to the main deck after relieving himself at the chains, he found Rosa waiting for him. Since her mother banished her to his ship, she'd become his shadow.

"Eye feel stupeed not 'aving anything to do," she told him. "Eye am not even allowed to climb thee mast."

"Yor mother and the Lady Bitch are pretty thick these days," he agreed with her. "Think how I feel lass... Captain of my own vessel and now cast aside being that I'm supposed to be dead. Fat lot a good I'll do us in Blueportdoggie hiding below decks like some sort'a bilge rat. At least you have your big fuk'n heathen to watch after. That has to be entertaining at the very least."

The little Cat nodded to the quarterdeck where Duroc now stood next to Lady Taverness. Besides his loin cloth, he was now dressed in a cape and helmet which he said was something close to what the King from his island home wore. His chest was fittingly puffed out and he held a huge whaler's harpoon.

"Eye don't truly 'ave much to do," she told him. "Thee Lady says Duroc will make thee big splash at thee party Lord Pugwash weel throw for her. I am wondering where she finds all these fancy things to wear." She giggled. "Big Duroc looks so silly. 'E looks so fearsome, and yet he is as gentle as a lamb."

"I ain't ne'er seen a lamb eat his Capt'n," Tabor teased. "That cape actually ain't no more than painted burlap and the helmet is a wooden bowl with a bunch of chicken feathers glued to it. Balls fixed it up for him. Seems he has an eye for sech things. You should see the get up the bitch got for the old goat to wear as her 'man servant'." He actually

laughed out loud at the thought of The Queen's castrated steward as Lady Taverness' 'man servant'. "He hates her mightily, he does. He's still upset she got away from him. I had to strongly threaten his future to get him to agree to it."

"Threaten 'im? What could be so terrible that 'e would behave so willingly?" she asked, showing her innocence.

"Beach'n him," he replied, and then spat over the side as if he'd cursed. "He ain't known no other home or family for a long long time, so it would probably kill the old fool." He paused to spit over the side again and then asked her, "You're sure your heathen won't decide to make a meal of Pugwash? I'm think'n the little bastard might look good to 'im on a roasting spit."

She laughed. "That wood serr'tan'lee make things exciting. Thank you for accepting us on The Queen, Captain Tabor."

Leaning on the rail, the old Rabbit looked out over the ocean. "Mention it again, and I'll be putting you on the beach with Balls. It's your mother's loss and so long as the Pig don't try to eat me, he's welcome on my crew."

When Rosa had brought the huge Swine back to her ship, all work was momentarily forgotten. In actuality, he brought her; and that made things seem even stranger. Being severely drugged out of her mind on the catnip, she wasn't able to even rise from the ground. Out of necessity, he'd hoisted her up to his shoulders and she'd ridden him while waving her hat around in the air and whooping for all she was worth. The huge tattooed Pig, being enormously happy that he was to leave the island, stopped on several occasions to dance around in the sand, adding his own voice to the Cat's. When they came close to the bulk of the ship's work party, there was absolute silence until Duroc began beating a rhythm on his chest as he danced, pausing at points to make a terrible face and a grunting sound. Rosa, laughing herself hoarse, flopped around on his massive shoulders while making like faces and grunting along with him. This broke through the uncertainty and caution that surfaced upon seeing such an odd creature up close, and the work party was soon clapping out a solid dance rhythm.

In short order, Captain Hiss, accompanied by Captain Tabor arrived by means of The Queen's dory. The Cat lost no time in screaming her lungs out at the work party and driving them back to work. When they'd gone, she approached the huge Pig and his Cat rider.

"Eye am Duroc!" he told her, standing as straight as possible and puffing out his large chest. This pushed his big belly out even further. His tattooed appearance was fearsome, and yet he seemed to have no effect on the lithe feline.

"'Nd Eye am a lesbian!" she yelled at him. "Eye care not a fish for ewe and yur gut. Wh't 'ave you done tew my daughter?!"

“She ate from my garden,” he told her with a wink and a smile, totally misunderstanding the Cat’s concern.

“ ‘Nd who are ewe that you wood ‘ave a garden like that... the Devil?”

Rosa gave one last smile to her mother and passed completely out, limply leaning forward on the Swine’s shoulders. If Duroc had not held her fast by the legs, she would have fallen head first into the sand. Coming closer, her mother sniffed and then spat.

“Catnip!” she cursed. “ ‘Nd why would a Peeg grow catnip?”

Duroc smiled. “For cooking the... the...” He looked at her, and decided it might be best not to say exactly what he ate.

“So as Eye sus’pected... you are the Devil!” Pulling out her pistol, she cocked it and pointed it at his head. “Sit and do not move!”

When the monstrous Pig did as she’d commanded, the captain turned to her counterpart, still standing next to his man Balls, trying not too successfully to hide his mirth. “Eef all ewe do ees stand there and chortle,” she yelled at him, “Go back to y’ur sheep... otherwise ‘elp me.”

“Ewe evar poke a sheep Cap’n?” Balls chortled.

Tabor looked at him and said softly, “I’m beginning to think you got a death wish ya old dope... she is holding a loaded pistol don’t cha know?”

“Sorry sur,” he responded, “I jest couldn’t help myself.”

That night, an exhausted crew feasted upon fresh fruits and vegetables while a very happy Pig was offered transport on The Queen; as was his new keeper.

The banishment hurt her deeply.

Entrance

Lady Taverness shrewdly made Blueportdoggie at six bells of the forenoon watch. Their arrival so close to the noon day meal would ensure the entire town would come out to greet them. With luck, Lord Pugwash might muster out the town's band, which would add to the festiveness of their arrival. When they were half a league out she came on deck dressed in her very best dress. Balls had spent the entire previous day preparing it, even sewing on some additional lace in the bare spots.

With a flourish, she ordered the signal flags hoisted; the first asking permission to approach and the second announcing a captured ship. That flag would raise an eyebrow or two and kindle the fire as the locals tried to figure out the identity of the approaching ships.

The fortress responded, raising the 'proceed' signal, and all along the parapets appeared black dots as the soldiers came out to watch their approach. Big assed Toby, sitting straddle legged around the main fore top, reported several glints of light indicating individual telescopes. There was also one huge refraction of sunlight that marked the fortress commander's pride and joy; a telescope so large it had to be mounted in a swivel gun carriage.

"I've heard it said there are two telescopes mounted side by side... one for each eye," Gulo whispered to Lady Taverness. His left paw rested on the hilt of his dress sword, and upon his head was a hat any Fleet Commodore would be proud to wear. "It's supposed to give superior depth to the magnification," he explained, "And its extremely powerful lenses were hand polished by Zarweinian Fox glaziers. They're well regarded as the best in the world. What I wouldn't give to possess such an instrument. I would mount it on the light platform at Saylavee and my lookouts would be able to see for miles and miles."

Smiling, the demure Bunny turned to him and whispered back, "Add it to your list Colonel. We are here, after all, to steal things; why not a fancy glass for your fortress?"

Taking her paw, he bowed slightly and kissed it. "By the sweet salt waters we sail upon M'Lady; that thought had never occurred to me."

"You are such a liar," she chastised.

"In the final analysis, are we not all liars?" he asked her, looking back to the fortress on the blue colored cliff face.

She made to punch him lightly in the arm, but hesitated. "How is your shoulder?"

"Perfectly fine and begging to be used, though I will admit to favoring it just slightly," he replied. He then added, "Begging your pardon, but I believe we are in range for the salute."

“Mr. Flopears,” Lady Taverness called out, “When you are ready, you may begin.”

The Gunner knuckled his brow to her, and then gave the order and each gun was heaved out and fired in sequence with the stern cannon being the last. A red signal flag was then waved over the aft rail at the Caveat Noir and she followed suit.

The ships then simultaneously dipped their embroidered flags half ways. The fortress dipped its flag a third of the way down as the representative of the local magistrate and then began its reply to their salute. Kelly was counting and marked twenty shots fired, dutifully fixing each gun’s location on a drawing he’d made of the fortress. He also added the suspected size determined by the basso of each blast. Everyone was transfixed, watching the smoke and flames belching forth when a final blast emanated from the hillside opposite the fortress. All eyes quickly turned to this, and there, nestled among the trees of the steep embankment, they found a single large howitzer, fortified within a thick stone buttress. The buttress, carved into the cliff face and built up from the native rock, perfectly blended with its surroundings. Its crew of soldiers stood upon the ramparts waving and cheering over the capture of The Queen.

“Now that’s something I would not have expected,” Gulo said aloud to himself. “Truly, Tabor must have been very hated here for them to give away such a well concealed position. That one will pose to be a special problem since there can be but one well guarded approach.” In a softer voice, he called to the navigator, “Did you mark that one on the chart Mr. Kelly?”

“Aye, sir... marked and counted. She’s a big’n too... maybe a thirty two pound ball and probably a forge to heat them in.” To the helm he said, “One more point to larboard Smithe...” He caught himself turning, expecting to see his old friend; realizing in the same motion he would not be there. “One more point to larboard,” he called softly to the Rabbit at the wheel. “We’re coming up to the harbor chain, and I want our bottom exactly in the middle.”

“Aye, sur,” responded the Helmsbunny, nodding in understanding. They all missed Smithe, and their partnership with his murderer was a very hard shore to land upon.

“Shorten sail,” Lady Taverness told Babacomb. Let’s bring her in under jib, spanker and a single top’sl. I think she’ll look magnificent in that configuration.”

“Standby to shorten sail!” the black Dog called out. Like the rest of the crew, he was dressed in a uniform freshly made from their lightest grade sailcloth and then dyed blue. On his head was a flat straw hat. A wooden crate of these had been found squirreled away in the hold and apparently forgotten about.

On command, the sails were smartly taken in. The configuration Lady T requested, however, still gave them more headway than Babacomb wished. To counter this, he had

five tethered barrels partially filled with seawater thrown over the aft rail. With their line secured to the deck, the drag they caused dropped the ship's speed by a good two knots.

They were well past the harbor chain and about five hundred yards from the wharf when the town's band began to play. Also plainly seen through her telescope was Lord Pugwash's carriage sitting on the shore side. One of the magnificently uniformed Horses who'd been pulling it, stepped around to the side and opened the door, bowing low as he did so. Lady Taverness snapped her glass closed and smiled an evil smile.

"Duroc," she called out softly.

The huge Swine turned to her from his place at the larboard side. He was dressed for his part and looked extremely fierce in his costume. In his right paw he firmly held the huge harpoon, the shank of which had been festooned with chicken feathers to match his helmet. He thumped himself on the chest one time to indicate he'd heard her.

"Take your place on the bows please. Remember our lessons, yes? Look as fearsome as possible and do not speak anything but your native tongue. If someone wishes to speak to you, I will translate."

Nodding, he moved forward.

"I've been meaning to ask you about that," Gulo mentioned softly. "Do you think it wise to incapacitate the barbarian in this manner? What if I need to shout a warning or some such thing to him? It will be seen right away that he understands."

The demure bunny placed a paw upon his and winked. "Pray that does not happen my dear Wolverine. The barbarian, as you called him, will accompany me to the festivities thrown in our honor. I need him to be my ears. Once everyone is used to the fact that he does not understand them, he will be totally ignored and they will speak as freely as if he was not there at all.

With a bang of the companionway door, Balls thumped on deck. Like the rest of the crew, he was now dressed in a blue uniform and straw hat. Turning to the quarterdeck, he knuckled his brow and called out, "I gots something for ya m'um... or at least I got's sump'n for The Queen's fig'er head." He held a black eye patch up. "I always thought she favored yur likeness a bit... so I thoughts to m'self..."

"Oh yes!" the demure Rabbit cried out in absolute delight. "Do it! That's absolutely perfect Balls you're brilliant... and thank you. I also have that fancy brace of pistols Tabor had hidden away laid out for you. I want you to wear them whenever we are off the ship."

The old pirate gasped. "Not the 'dueling pistols'... no... not that... he'd eat my liver if I touched those."

“CAPTAIN TABOR IS DEAD!” she yelled loudly. On the small ship, everyone well heard her words. “HE CAN ROT IN HELL AND PROBABLY IS... NOW PUT THE EYE PATCH ON THE DAMNED FIGURE HEAD AND GO FETCH THE PISTOLS!”

Looking exasperated, the old Rabbit knuckled his brow again and moved towards the bows, easily swinging over the bulwarks and balancing next to the ship’s figurine which now looked like a Rabbit wearing a yellow dress and holding a cannon like it was her babe. “Forgives me darling,” he told it and then gave it a kiss on the cheek, “But it’s all about the pirating. Captain Tabor told me to do this ‘imself so don’t swing no bad luck in my direction fer follow’n ‘is orders.”

As he was tying the eye patch in place, someone hissed at him from above. Looking up, he found himself with a clear view under Duroc’s loincloth. “Giant Cod fins and fish feathers if that ain’t the largest tickler I ever did see!” he blurted out.

The Swine leaned forward, his tusked moon face looking like something from a nightmare as it peeked over his ample belly. “Tabor eats liver?” he asked with a smile.

“No, no, no,” Balls hissed at him. “It’s only an expression. Now, as the Lady told you and not a word do you speak except that ugabugga shit.”

Duroc frowned. “How you know ugabugga?”

Balls finished tying the eye patch on the figurehead, and looked up at the tattooed mountain above him. “I made it up ya dink wad... it’s what you sound like when ya’s talk’n that stuffs ya talk... ugabugga ugabugga.”

“DUROC NO UGABUGGA!” the native screamed at the top of his lungs.

“I didn’t say you was...”

“NO UGABUGGA!” he screamed again, the fat of his belly bouncing up and down like an impending volcanic eruption. Taking his harpoon, he thrust it down at the Rabbit with a war cry that defied description. Acting on apparent impulse and rage, he narrowly missed Balls’ head, but snagged the straw hat. Pulling this back up, he ripped it off the barbed end of the harpoon and threw it on the deck, where he danced upon it as if it were the offending party. During this dance, he continuously screamed, “NO UGABUGGA NO UGABUGGA!”

By now, the band had stopped playing and those town’s people who’d gathered were pointing, their mouths dropping open. Even Lord Pugwash stood transfixed standing on the top step of his carriage. Holding out a paw, one of the Horses immediately handed him a small telescope so he could better view the disturbance.

Balls peeked his head up above the bulkhead, and immediately ducked again as Duroc reversed the harpoon and slammed it down like a club with a resounding ‘whack’.

“DUROC NO UGABUGGA! He yelled with the strike.

“CHIEF DUROC!” Lady Taverness yelled at him.

Balls swung over to the starboard side and poked his head up again, only to duck down again as Duroc again hammered the harpoon haft on the bulwark again.

“TOPS’L IN,” cried out Babacomb, never taking his eye off the job of handling the ship. When the crewmembers in the yards were tardy in obeying the command, since they were as transfixed by the big Pig’s actions as anyone, the Dog picked up his speaking trumpet and cursed them soundly out of their stupor.

As they were pulling in the sail, He yelled out, “JIBS DOWN... SPANKER DOWN... SWEEPS OUT... STAND READY!”

With the sweeps out and held in the air above the water, the sight was magnificent, as it was meant to be. Except for the crazed Swine stalking back and forth around the bows yelling about ‘ugabugga’, the docking of The Queen in Blueportdoggie was perfectly executed.

“MY GOOD CHIEF DUROC!” Lady Taverness finally called out.

When he looked back at her, she pointed a finger at him and declared loudly, “CAPTAIN TABOR RABBIT IS DEAD! NO UGABUGGA EVER AGAIN!”

“BRAKE SHIP! Babacomb commanded, and in full unison, the sweeps splashed down into the water and were held in place. This slowed The Queen’s forward motion until her bow was no more than three feet off of the wharf, gently moving up and down in the slight swell.

Balls jumped for his life, and then ran up the pier shaking his fist and cursing at the heathen who’d tried to kill him. Everyone standing on the pier burst out laughing. With that the band began to play a brisk polka.

The lines were then smartly tossed over, and The Queen was hauled into her berth by many willing hands. Not long after, the Caveat Noir was tied up behind her, though she received hardly a look. The Queen had been Blueportdoggie’s terror for many a year, and there was no end to the curiosity about her and the beautiful Lady Taverness; who had actually done in ‘The Dread Pirate Tabor’.

Introductions

Lord Pugwash sat in the Captain's cabin of The Queen sipping an extremely good vintage wine. In preparation of his arrival, the ship's carpenter had been instructed to build an especially tall chair guaranteed to make the little ego filled Burgomaster feel properly elevated among those in his presence. To accomplish this to an even greater degree, and on the discerning orders of Lady Taverness, he further shortened the legs of the other chairs and the table by three inches.

"I like this room," the long tongued Pug told her with a smile, "but I can't really put my finger on why. So much action and planning must surely have happened in this very place. Death... destruction... pirate doings and sex abounding."

Lady Taverness simply smiled back while sipping at her own glass. Life to her was a game of chess and she felt most alive when playing at it.

For this formal introduction all of the stern windows were full open to the gawking crowds on the wharf. Balls, now dressed in his 'man servant' clothing, stood to one side of the table slowly waving a huge feathered fan in their direction. Duroc, his many tattoos standing out on a freshly oiled body, stood directly behind Lady Taverness but more towards the far side of the cabin.

Earlier, in prelude to the formalities, and to the great delight of the children, the Bunny spy had thrown fistfuls of copper coins into the water off of the fantail, letting them dive for them. She then called for her huge Swine in the gobbledygook pretend language she was so good at putting together. Gesturing to the mizzen mast, she had him climb to the very top, where he leaned out in a death defying gesture. Producing a huge gold necklace, and holding it out for the crowd to see and fawn over, the demure Rabbit flung it far out into the waters of the bay. There was a collective gasp as she did this. At the same moment, the tattooed native dove straight out. His body entered the water with hardly a ripple, which defied his very size. When he came back to the surface, the gold necklace was around his neck.

His head was now slightly bent to keep from hitting it on the overhead. He was also holding his harpoon and made sure to give Balls a dirty look when he thought no one was looking. This time, however, Balls had the dueling pistols tucked into a wide canvas belt tightened around his middle. They were just under his jacket but in plain view. Captain Tabor had made the belt exactly for this purpose and it fit the old pirate as if he'd been the model for its fitting. Both pistols were loaded, easily drawn, and the hammers set on half-cock. This meant the priming pans were full and both weapons were very much ready for use.

Lord Pugwash looked from the servant to the Swine and gave them both a very distasteful look. He then placed his glass delicately upon the table. Nodding to the Harbor Master sitting next to him, he announced, "On to business then. We would be grateful to

you for your recompense of the Port Tax, Wharf Fee, and the Watering Fee. Normally this would be double because of your second ship, but since you brought us such good news about the death of Captain Tabor; I will wave all fees for that one.”

“Thank you M’Lord, that is very generous of you,” Taverness replied, “I will have the required coins handed over to the Harbor Master at the gangway when he departs.”

“You do not keep such funds here in the cabin with you?”

She held the glass up, swirling the red liquid and examining it closely. Rising, she tossed the entire contents out of the open window. “Balls...” she said, continuing to stare after the wine she’d thrown away, “You got cork in my glass again.”

“I’m sor’ee m’um. Won’t ‘appen again, m’um.”

“See that it doesn’t,” she replied acidly. Turning to Lord Pugwash, she told him, “I do not like spoiled goods. They make me rather agitated and I do have my temper to control.”

The smallish Dog nodded in understanding. “I will have the word passed to the chandlers that such things will not be tolerated. How shall I tell them you will be paying your receipts?”

“Labradorean gold Cronin,” she told him without smiling, “on the barrel head of the last cask they deliver. As to my monies... the chests are too large to keep in the cabin and it is more secure to leave them under guard in the hold.”

“Apparently Captain Tabor did quite well for himself,” the Dog told her, pointedly nodding to the necklace still around Duroc’s neck. The little Pug would be sure to pass this information around too. If there was a profit to be made, there were also taxes to collect. Gold was gold; and then too, there was always the possibility to steal it in a more outright fashion.

“Now then,” he continued, “For legality’s sake, and to ensure you are not just another pirate, I take it you have a ‘Letter of Marque’?”

She nodded, placing her empty glass on the table. “But of course.” Crossing to the wardrobe behind him, she opened it slightly and pulled out a waxed packet. Unseen by anyone else in the room, the dresses within the wardrobe moved ever so slightly as she did this.

Sitting at the table across from the Pug, she daintily opened the packet and produced her forged document; placing it before him and smoothing out the deliberately made creases with her fingers. “You’ll pardon if the paper is a little soiled. I can assure you that the blood splattered here and there is not mine.” She winked at him. “The wording too is a little ubiquitous as far as its reference as to whom the document was issued to. The number of the document is fourteen of twenty. I happened to be the fourteenth petitioner

to the King of the Black Dogs of Labrador.” Again she smiled and winked. “He was rather amused to think that a mere doe Bunny might be the one to bring down such a famous pirate and actually refused to issue this to me out rightly. Fortunately he was rather tired of losing ships and the issuance to the captain waiting after me was rather hurried. Since I am but a dear sweet little thing, that Dog found no danger in my presence when I asked if I might accompany him to the harbor. Fortunately, you will also notice that, in the King’s haste he issued the letter with no assigned name. Should I be asked, I paid for this letter, M’Lord, with every last copper coin in my possession.” Her smile and the spray of blood across the page loudly decried this story... as it was intended. “I then hired the second most notorious pirate I could find and we were off on the next outbound tide.”

When he looked up at her, she winked at him. “Captain Hiss is a remarkable sailor, and under my leadership and tactics, we succeeded in our mission with less loss of life than one might have believed possible. When I return to Labrador, I will make the King write my name at the top of this sheet in his own paw. Everyone will then know of this helpless little Bunnies prowess.”

Pugwash taking out his reading spectacles placed them on his pushed in looking face and carefully examined the paper. “This is a very generous bounty indeed, M’Lady,” he told her after reading the terms and agreements. “If I were you,” he warned, looking across at her with his watery eyes, “I would be very careful with this document. Since it is unnamed any person possessing it, and this ship, would be wealthy beyond their wildest dreams.” His warning appeared heart felt and earnest.

“It never leaves my person,” she assured him, “And I have two full ships and crews who would fight to the death for their share of the prize. If someone believes themselves capable of taking it from me; they are certainly free to try.”

The Burgomaster motioned her closer and then lowered his voice to a mere whisper. “Might we talk privately?”

Lady Taverness nodded, and then said, “Balls, wait out in the companionway please.”

Without comment the old pirate stopped his fanning and left the cabin.

Lord Pugwash nodded to the Harbor Master and he too left. The Pug then looked at Duroc and frowned. “What about Chief Uga...”

The Bunny clasped her paw over his mouth before he could complete the sentence. “For the love of the sea,” she hissed, “Do not ever say that word in his presence if you wish to live. His name is Chief Duroc. That other word you heard earlier today means something so vile... well... when we boarded this ship and ‘you know who’ was killed, I found this poor savage ‘hog tied’ in the hold. Apparently ‘you know who’ had kept him there as some sort of a sexual slave... a play toy for...” She whispered the word ‘ugabugga’ in the Dog’s ear.

“Noooooooo....” He hiss whispered, his eyes growing larger.

“Yesssss...” she hiss whispered back and then pressing past his drool, gave him a quick peck to the cheek. “I took the time to learn his language as it helped pass the days on our voyage. He, however, cannot speak a lick of our language. He has almost physically attached himself to me and acts as my body guard. I feel that if he had not done so, I would not be in Blueportdoggie this day.”

“Your crew?”

“Would have mutinied early on just for what was in the chests,” she finished for him. “There was this one fellow,” she glanced over at Duroc and then back to Lord Pugwash, “Welllll... let’s just say his body was found at sun up one morning shortly after the battle, missing its heart and liver. The Chief skipped breakfast that morning... and then I found him tattooing a little mark over his right breast. I asked him what it signified and he told me he had added the strength of another to his soul.”

Lord Pugwash suddenly felt very uncomfortable under the Chief’s staring face, but he pressed on with his business. “Perhaps... that is... I realize you have adequate protection and all... but perhaps during your stay here, you would like to leave your ‘Letter of Marque’ and your chests in the treasury vault?”

“I shall consider it, but since I have no reason to leave the ship, that probably won’t be necessasary. We will stay but three days and then be off again. I am rather in a hurry to collect my bounty.”

“But... I have an entire festival planned in your honor,” he lied quickly. “Please... stay at least a week.”

“I shall consider your request,” she told him with a kiss to his forehead. “Have you a decent dress shop in this place?”

“Yes!” he exclaimed, pushing back in his chair and dropping to the deck. Even in its shortened state, the table came up to his chin. “And your dress shall be my gift to you!”

Lady Taverness smiled, but for a different reason than Lord Pugwash might have guessed.

“Balls!” she called out.

The old Rabbit stuck his head around the door, preceded by a cocked pistol. “Yes m’um?”

She sighed when she saw him. “Will you put that thing away, I’m in no danger!”

“I ain’t so’s worried about you as I am me,” he responded nodding towards Duroc.

Taking out her writing instruments, she quickly scribbled a coinage number on a scrap of paper, and took it to him. “Go below,” she told him, “And withdraw this amount from one of the chests. Place the note in the chest and the coins in a pouch. You will wait by the gangway for His Lordship and the Harbor Master. They will be along shortly, but do ask the Harbor Master to wait in the companionway for His Lordship. It would be rather unseemly if he were to appear on deck without his master.”

“What about the Chief?” the old Rabbit asked, accepting the paper.

Turning to Duroc, she spoke some gibberish to him, and nodded to the door. Turning back to Balls, she told him, “The Chief will wait at the gangway with you. Lord Pugwash and I have some personal business to attend to and then he will be along forthwith.”

Moving back into the room, she motioned to Duroc with her eyes. As he left, he closed the door behind himself. With a swish of her skirts, Lady Taverness then moved around the cabin closing and latching the shutters to the stern windows. “Perhap’s M’Lord,” she said softly, “You would care for another glass of wine?” Glancing at the peephole in the wardrobe, she added, “I found that The Dread Pirate Tabor had an extraordinary taste for the better things of life.” She pushed her left sleeve down, exposing her heart shaped tattoo with the initials in the middle.

“What did you expect?” the little Dog laughed, as he climbed back up onto his chair, “He was a pirate. They haven’t the brains to take something by cunning, so they simply use force. If you have it... they want it.”

Turning as he plopped his backside down, he meeped once and was suddenly still as she leaned over him and pulled his fluffy pants down around his knees. Pushing his chair back with a scraping of its legs on the deck, she turned it sideways to the table and knelt in front of him. Reaching out, she gently took hold of his cod. “I want it,” she said softly, “So I will take it, yes?”

His long tongue soon unrolled from his mouth and within moments he was panting.

The entire time she performed for little Lord Scratch and Sniff, the demure Bunny never took her eyes from the wardrobe. The smile her lips formed around the Dog’s smallish member was certainly not meant for His Lordship in any way.

She was rather pleased when her long ears detected a muffled noise coming from behind the veneer wooden doors.

A Rose Between Two Thorns

Upon the departure of the Burgomaster, Lady Taverness, having walked him to the gangway, hurried back to the Captain's cabin. Finding the door closed, she paused and pressed her ear to the wood.

"You shouldn't ought'a have done that," hissed Tabor's voice.

"Ewe liked it... admit it," mewed a voice she knew was the scrawny Cat lookout.

"Like'n it has noth'n to do with right and wrong. Right is right and wrong is wrong. What would your mother have to say if she were to find out, eh?"

"Eye am not so concerned with what my mother thinks, and neither did ewe before she told ewe our secret. Ees she 'ere? No. 'Nd who will tell 'er... ewe? Eye think not."

"And what if we'd been caught out? Did'ja think of that lass?"

"We were not... s'ew what?" She giggled as a thought apparently struck her. "Ewe were rock 'ard and rock steady for thee girl, eh? This ees a first?"

"And what were you then?" the Rabbit countered. "Sure in hell it warn't no lesbian in that closet with me. Dam but your tongue is harsh... it's like fuk'n sandpaper."

"'Nd what difference the wardrobe or the barrel, no? I didn't 'ear you say no to what I do, nor when there was thee big gush did I 'ere you complain about my tongue."

"I COULDN'T EXACTLY SAY SUMP'N WITHOUT BEING HEARD; NOW COULD I?!"

Tabor's voice was building in exasperation and was now loud enough that Lady Taverness knew it was time to interject the need for silence. Though she found the conversation extremely amusing; to have a dead pirate come back to life at this point in time would be quite disastrous.

Opening the door, she quickly stepped in, pushed it back closed and then leaned upon it. She first looked at Rosa and then at the pirate. In a soft voice she asked them both, "Have you ever heard the expression, 'the walls have ears?' Yes? Well I heard everything you two children were squabbling about and if I did, quite possibly someone else did as well."

When neither of them did more than give her a dirty look, she took the Bull by the horns and asked quietly, "Could you tell me what is it you were supposed to say 'no' to Captain Tabor?"

“ ‘E grows thee big ‘ard on watching ewe so I give him pleasure,” Rosa snipped. She was sitting on the deck right where she’d tumbled from the wardrobe. She did not look happy at the interruption.

Lady Taverness smiled a knowing smile. It was all too obvious the kitten was in love. For some reason this bothered her but she pushed it to the back of her mind; one problem to be solved at a time.

“Keep your voice to a dull roar please,” she instructed in a hushed voice. “There is a time and place for everything my fine kitten. Now, certainly was not the time nor the place. Captain Tabor is simply trying to tell you that in his self-indulgent manner that he is not interested in you. Listen and understand... this is not some sort of a game. If Lord Pufucker even so much as suspected Captain Tabor was alive, I would have been forced to cut his throat... and then what?”

When the Cat didn’t respond, she continued, “I’ll tell you what so you’ll know; we would have had one really huge bloodbath. Your mother, your ship... Captain Tabor, The Queen... even me... all dead and gone for the love of a single kitty lick blow job.”

“It warn’t ‘er fault,” Tabor said, pressing to Rosa’s defense. “Ya never shoulda done what ya did to Pufucker, ya harlot. You knew I was in the closet and you knew I was watching your meeting as we agreed I should. You turned ‘is chair and made sure I had a clear view of your Dog and Rabbit show. How can you fault me get’n hard with you do’n such a thing?” He snorted angrily. “I’m of a mind that it was done on purpose.”

The doe smiled at him innocently. Her expression left nothing to the imagination. To Rosa she said in a crooning voice, “My only interest here is that we succeed and live to talk about it. Anything I might do, however misconstrued, is only meant in that vein.”

“Eye don’t know wh’t ewe mean,” the Cat replied, glaring at her in open defiance.

“I mean,” Lady Taverness told her point blank, “This rat bastard is all yours if you can land him. Just be careful,” she furthered tugging her left sleeve down, “Because he’s rather fond of marking his property.” Pulling the sleeve back up, she turned back to the pirate and added, “Though I’m not sure what you’d do with him if you hauled his ass aboard the good ship pussy... he’s a lousy fuck.”

Before either of them could make a further comment, she nodded to the hatch leading down to the lower steerage compartment and said sweetly. “Out of sight now children... both of you need to hide so I can re-open the cabin shutters before someone thinks things are stranger than they are. You can come back out after dark; but only if you promise mother you’re going to behave and that you’ll stay to the seaward side of the ship.”

When Taverness came back out to the main deck she found the area near the gangplank noisy with the sound of voices. Moving to the rail, she looked to see what the commotion was and found Kelly surrounded by the various chandlers. All were shouting at him; vying for his attention.

Balls, coming up behind her, said in a hushed voice, "It's been that way since word got out about our treasure. Seems they all want a piece 'o' the gold prize without the effort of fight'n fer it. Off paw I'd say it was a good idea of Gulo to station two of 'is pretty boy soldiers at the ladder with their bayonets fixed."

"Mr. Kelly," she called down to the Navagator. When he showed no sign of hearing her, she sent Balls to fetch him.

Looking around while she waited, she took in the view of the rest of her domain. As she'd instructed, no one was allowed on board and the sailors, under the watchful eye of Babacomb, were still in the process of making what was already shipshape even more so. Appearance, she'd assured each and every one of them, was a prerequisite to the fulfillment of the mission. 'Look the part... be the part', she'd admonished, only hoping the band of cutthroats could hold it together for as long as it took.

Gazing up at the quarterdeck, she found Governor Gulo speaking with a lean looking Ferret in an equally lavish dress uniform. Hopefully this was the fortress commander. Though he was much smaller than the Wolverine, there was no doubt in her mind he'd risen through the ranks by pure guts and determination. To her keen eyes, taking in his crisp uniform and saber scar across his cheek, she had no doubt he was sharp. Gulo would have his work cut out for him.

Hearing feet behind her, she turned to find The Queen's navigator standing looking at her. His expression was one of exasperation. Knuckling his brow to her, he said shakily, "I don't know how Captain... er... how he did it all these years. They're like a pack of seagulls smelling fish guts."

"Treat them like errant children," she told him simply.

"Sure and easy for you to say," he replied with no politeness to his voice, "But you're not the one having to deal with the bastards."

Closing her parasol, she handed it to Balls and then pulled the dueling pistols smoothly from his belt. "Follow me and learn," she told Kelly without smiling.

Stalking half ways down the rough wooden gangplank, she stopped and stood there looking at the mob of ship's suppliers. When they realized she was not going to come down to them, they began to swarm the entrance to the ship, where upon the demure Rabbit held one of the pistols in the air and pulled the trigger. The loud bang got their attention. Aiming the second pistol at the fist of them to step foot on the wooden plank, she cried out, "One more step, and you will be shot!"

Behind her, the two soldiers at the gangway un-shouldered their muskets and also took aim out of the simple experience of being soldiers. There was an instant quiet among the rabble on the pier.

“These are the rules,” she told the group in a loud voice. “You will be dealt with - one by one. You will form a line and be called up to the main deck - one by one. When you are called you will come, state your business, and then answer the questions of my yeoman. You will tell him what you can supply and in what amount of time. Are we clear so far?”

There was a general murmur of agreement among the twenty or so merchants pressing around the lower step of the plank.

“Further,” she told them. “You each will personally arrive with what we have purchased, and a random cask of what you are selling will be opened and tested. If it is found lacking, for the amusement of your town’s fine populace, you will be hoisted from the main yard by your ankles and they will be invited to pelt you with whatever was in the cask. The rest of what you brought will then be dumped overboard with absolutely no recompense. If we are pleased with your merchandise, we will pay cash gold on the barrel head of the last barrel delivered.”

Using the second pistol as a pointer, she wagged it at them in general. “Which of you deals in powder and shot?” she asked.

Three of the merchants raised their paws.

“You,” she said pointing the pistol at the one in the very back, “Will be first. Then you,” she said pointing it at the one in the middle, “And then you,” she finished, pointing the pistol at the one closest to her. “The rest of you form a line. If you cannot, then go away and I shall deal solely with Lord Pugwash; which was already suggested as a good choice. You may then pay him a commission from the profits you earn.”

Without waiting for them to respond, she turned and strode back up the gangplank, handing the pistols back to Balls butt first. Pausing, she looked at Kelly and smiled sweetly. “That, my fine navigator, is how you handle merchants.”

Turning back to Balls, she took him aside and whispered harshly, “I want you to take a message to Captain Hiss. You tell her in no uncertain terms that she needs to get her daughter off of this ship now. I don’t care if she has to clap her in irons; that six fingered kitten is not to leave the Caveat Noir so long as we’re in Blueportdoggie.”

“Yes m’um,” Balls replied softly. “Just let me get these monsters reloaded and I’m off.”

“Do it now!” she hissed at him, her hackles rising in sudden fury. Catching herself, she took a calming breath, and then told him, “If she stays aboard any longer, I’m just afraid

someone will notice the single Cat in our crew and begin asking questions. She simply needs to go back to her own kind.”

Knuckling his brow, Balls tucked the pistols into their holsters and then tottered down the gang plank heading towards the other ship.

Fortress

From where he was, 'Colonel' Gulo looked back towards the harbor and the two ships he'd come to know so well. The day was moving towards the evening meal and he could see smoke coming from the galley stove pipes on both ships. His stomach rumbled but he ignored it. Being a soldier meant dealing with hunger when required. It was a constant companion during campaigns. He also took a moment to check his sentries. So far, no one was allowed to board the main deck except under the tightest of security.

"The view from here is astounding," he said almost breathlessly, "But through this... this..."

"Binoculars," the Fortress Commander said helpfully. "Lord Pugwash presented them to me personally after we beat off a Labradorean attack."

Gulo looked at him, his expression one of disbelief. "You're sure it was the Labradoreans? I've always known them to be a peaceful people."

The Commander smiled as he adjusted the binoculars' carriage to match his size, and then stepped up to look through the device. "The people are perhaps peaceful, but their King not so demeanored. He has aspirations of greatness and seeks to rule these waters." He swung the heavy binoculars around, scanning the seas as he spoke. "I am afraid we, being independently minded, are a thorn in his side. The pirate you killed would have been very welcome here if he had simply stayed to annoying the Labradorean King... but like most pirates he was greedy."

They were standing upon the highest tower of the fortress. The stocky Wolverine leaned back against the rail enjoying the feel of the wind. He gazed off into the distance for a moment as if lost in thought. It was strange how he'd become fond of the feel of a rolling deck under his feet. Stranger still was the company he'd come to keep. In the past, pirates were his sworn enemies. Now... the stationary brick and stone work of the tower felt so very foreign to him. Perhaps Tabor had been correct in his assessment of him; that he'd sat within his stationary fortress for too long.

A ship was a living thing.

The breeze ruffled the feathers upon his cockade and the sun, now beginning to cast longer shadows, felt good on his face. Soon it would be night and he would have to return to the ship. He needed to continue his 'scouting' mission before that time.

This night there would be no shore leave for anyone. Lady Taverness insisted this would be so as they had to give the appearance of guarding a great treasure. To this effect, he'd stationed armed soldiers at the four points of the ship accompanied by an equal number of sailors.

“How many ships were in the Labradorean blockade?” he finally asked.

The Ferret stood, looking over the top of his instrument, guiding it around to a new position. “There was no blockade,” he replied. “That by itself was truly surprising. They simply sailed up and attempted to breach the harbor as if they owned it. Certainly they must have been acting upon misinformation; thinking we had no teeth. We sunk a triple-decker and three frigates before they even knew what hit them. The rest quickly beat a retreat and eventually disappeared over the horizon.”

“If I might make an assessment?” Gulo asked, crossing his arms and squinting out over the ocean.

“Please do,” the Commander told him as he indicated his counterpart should look through the binoculars once again.

Gulo bent low and peered through the double glass and found the burned sticks of three masts sticking out of the water. “As I suspected,” he said. “So... my assessment is this: the frigates charged in and engaged the fortress. You returned fire with surprising accuracy since they were in the harbor right of ways and you had the guns previously sighted for a specific placement of shot. The triple saw her escorts in trouble and came in close to assist, where upon your hidden howitzer placed a heated ball right smack into her guts.”

“Exactly the truth with but one exception,” the ferret told him; waiting for Gulo to stand so he was sure to have his full attention.

The Wolverine did stand, and blinked. “And that exception was?”

“The frigates were not attacking us... they were chasing a transport ship full of soldiers like yourself.”

“Wolverines?”

The Commander nodded. “When we placed a shot between them and the wounded ship, they failed to pay attention. They sunk the transport, but at the expense of being sunk themselves.”

Gulo felt his knees weaken slightly. “Were there survivors?”

“Of the Wolverines, perhaps fifty or sixty... of the Labradoreans, perhaps a hundred. We interred the latter until an exchange could be arranged. The Wolverines, however, pulled together and marched off. I have to admire their grit. You will find them camped on the outskirts of the town. They’re organized and offer their services as work parties and such. They’ve been there for about a year now. So far as I know, no outsider has breached their ranks, though they are very civil to my troops when they have relations.”

“Relations?”

“We play soccer every Seventh Day and the wives of my soldiers prepare a dinner for everyone.”

“That is very kind of them.”

“My men and I have fought side by side with Wolverines on many occasions,” the Commander told him. “I have never been disappointed. Honor runs deep in your brethren. I remember Osma Falls as clearly as it was yesterday. We were fifty with our backs against the high part of the falls and nowhere to run. We were faced by two hundred of the Carnogian Rebel’s best. With the sound of a bugler who would not stop, ten Wolverines charged in from the right flank bearing nothing more than pike and bayonet. We rallied and charged forward with them and the rebel’s ranks broke. It was a bloodbath of a route, but the blood was not ours.”

“That was you?” Gulo asked, his mouth dropping open. “I was one of the ten. Captain Widepaw Gulo led us... by all that is holy we would have followed him into Hell.”

With a cry of ‘Comrade!’ the pair fell into each other’s arms and hugged.

When they released each other, the Commander told him, “I thought you looked familiar, but I did not want to say anything... that was so long ago; faces change and memory fades over time.”

But what happened truly happened; and it will never go away,” the Wolverine replied softly. Gulo suddenly felt icy fingers massaging his guts. This was an honest soldier before him... and more... someone he had fought side by side with. What he planned now ran totally against the grain of who he was. Turning, he placed his paw on the rail and looked out over the harbor. With the other paw, he wiped his eyes. “Did the soldiers ever say why the Labradoreans were chasing them?” he asked carefully.

“They never did,” replied his new old friend. “Come now... I will show you my children, the smallest of which is an eighteen pounder, and the largest a twenty four pound rifle.”

“A rifle?” Gulo asked, his interest aroused. “Please... do tell. Is it any more accurate?”

“At lease twice again in accuracy and a third better in range than any other gun I have. On top of that, we have exploding shells. It’s a pity they are so hard to make, or I would have more.”

“That’s not possible,” the Wolverine said, his mouth open in astonishment, “Exploding shells?”

“Come, I’ll show them to you and then we will share dinner.”

Rosa sat rigidly upon the bathing room's divan watching her mother being pampered as if she were royalty and not a sea captain. The bottom of the huge bronze tub reposed on cast metal Cat's paws which kept it off of the floor. It was deep enough that the only part visible above the bubbles was her mother's head. The Captain's eyes were partially closed, and one leg hung out over the side as a smallish Rabbit worked at polishing her claws; which had been painted a garish color of red.

"You should try this," she said in their Feline language. Her words flowed smoothly now that she was not so encumbered with the need to speak the more common language of Rabbit. "It is an especially nice treat after so many days upon the salt ocean. It also makes the 'love' taste better as the water has sugar in it. It is your aunt's idea of irony... soaking me in sugar after I've become so salty."

Through the window, Hiss could see the sun slowly moving towards the horizon, casting long shadows over the town from the Fortress. She smiled and sighed; enjoying the respite.

Effectively she'd snuck away from her own ship against the direct orders of Lady Taverness. Blueportdoggie, though she'd never mentioned the fact, was quite familiar to her... as was the bathing room in 'Ilene's Tavern'.

In the way of all sea ports, drinking establishments were numerous as sailors the world over were always thirsty. This particular establishment was run by a Cat, whose likeness was portrayed upon the sign above the swinging doors. In effect, the sign was quite brazen and left nothing to the imagination. On it was the picture of a one legged Cat leaning against the tavern's wall. Her breasts were bare and she appeared to leer at the passer by. Under her foot and wooden leg, were the words 'Females Only – Cats preferred - Males at your own risk – you might die'.

Ilene had been a part of Hiss' crew until she'd lost a leg in a boarding gone bad. They'd been serious lovers and with her Captain's parting gift she'd set up this tavern and done quite well with it. In fact, they were still lovers... married with the sea as their only witness. The two floors above the Tavern were their shared home.

Rosa pulled her knees up to her chin in the way adolescents will. Looking at her mother she sighed. "It was a rough trip this time out," she said in a near whisper. I am so tired.

"You lived through it," Hiss replied, shifting her eyes from the window to her daughter. She pulled her now finished foot back into the tub and said to the servant, "Eye need more 'ot water. See to it."

The servant stood, curtsied, and immediately left the room; closing the door behind herself.

“Lock the door,” she told her daughter as she leaned forward in the tub.

The small Cat did as she was told, fumbling a bit with the lock because of her missing fingers. When she was done, she turned back to her mother and found she was no longer in the tub, but standing beside it toweling herself off. Her body was lean and her breasts petite; the wetness making both appear even smaller. Nakedness was not something she was embarrassed about.

“I thought you wished more water for bathing?” Rosa told her.

“It is for you. I want you clean. Ilene’s daughter is back from the boarding school for a special visit and you need to be presentable. She has always been your intended partner, and we do not wish to disappoint, no?”

Rosa gave her a defiant look, but said nothing.

Hiss stopped toweling herself, and stared back at her daughter. Being the captain that she was, the Cat was not used to insubordination in any form. Her anger boiled to the surface. “Even when we submitted to the filthy...” she began, and then caught herself. Continuing to towel herself off, she lowered her voice. “You should know,” she said softly, “Of your beginning. You are old enough now, and it is time I spoke of it.”

Placing the towel around her shoulders, she took a large perfume bottle from the dressing table next to her and sprayed herself all over. Putting it back again, she looked in the mirror and said, “Our ship was once male, with an all male crew. They did not just up and give us the Caveat Noir. They are all dead and the Devil take them.”

Rosa shrugged her shoulders. The idea of a violent beginning did not affect her; she had seen much death in her short life. “I never much thought about it,” she replied honestly, “She has been as much a part of my life as my mother. You two are my first memory.”

Her mother smiled. “And so it should be. I am pleased in that.” Taking out a brush, she began to smooth out the fur on her head. Still looking in the mirror, she continued. “Our ship was once male; sailed by a Cat named Tommy Nine Lives. He was fat and complacent, earning his coin leaching off of the flesh of others. The ship’s name was ‘The Flying Tom’.” She paused and spat upon the floor. “I always hated that name,” she hissed. Under her breath, she cursed males in general.

Placing the brush back on the dressing table, she turned and regarded her daughter. “Ilene and I were whores in this very tavern,” she said honestly. “In all of the pain and indignant suffering handed to us, we found each other... and we began to plan. Secretly, we gathered the other abused female Cats right here in Blueportdoggie... we would trust no others. We who were indentured; kept in bondage and little better than slaves... sex toys for the likes of anyone who wished to pay for us... we planned an escape. This was how Tommy Nine Lives supported his ship, you see. He was a slaver. Lord Pugwash, may the

little bastard rot, took his money and turned a blind eye to his trade; though it was against the law.”

“And this is why you are eager to steal his gold,” Rosa added.

Her mother smiled a sly Cat smile. “You are not so slow. We have been welcome here in Blueportdoggie only because I was paying him double what Tommy Nine Lives was paying, and we also worked as his unofficial navy. I would cut his throat if I could, but taking his treasure will hurt him far worse.”

Continuing to dry herself, she said, “We arranged a huge party for Tommy and his crew. They had just come back with a fresh load of slaves and were flush with money. He was anchored out in the bay so we stole two long boats and made our way to him bearing casks of rum and our naked breasts. Once we were aboard, the rest was easy. Ilene and I both had sex with the Tom, and then while he slept, we smothered him with a pillow. By then the other ‘girls’ had done much the same to his crew.”

She paused to pour a glass of wine, and then drank half of it in a swallow. “Getting out of the harbor was a challenge,” she said, offering the rest of the glass to her daughter. “It was a challenge because none of us knew anything of the sea.” Rosa shook her head in the negative, and she placed the glass back on the dresser. “But when I was brought over on that ship, I had watched how it was done... and I remembered.” She made a gesture with a paw. “Thee r’est is ‘istory,” she said in Rabbit.

“But you and Ilene were in season then when this happened?”

Her mother nodded. “The males like you better when you are. We made an agreement that our daughters would marry and continue on with what we do.”

Rosa looked as if she were about to speak, but remained silent.

Hiss saw this, and asked her, “Is there something you wish to discuss with me?”

“No,” she said at first, and then blurted out, “I mean... I don’t wish to be thrown at your lover’s daughter. I... well... what if I decided I didn’t want to be lesbian?”

Captain Hiss closed one eye and squinted the other, looking at her in suspicion. “Why is it the bitch Rabbit wanted you off of The Queen so quickly?”

“I don’t know,” Rosa lied.

“Did she do something to you?” the Captain asked; anger clearly in her features. “Did she force herself upon you... and you refused? Or did you like it?!”

The floor outside the door creaked. They exchanged quick glances. Standing, the captain dropped her towel and went to her clothing; pulling out two pistols. Quickly checking the

priming pans, she found the powder missing. Cursing softly, she quickly refilled them and then cocked the hammers back. Standing unabashedly in her nakedness, she spread her legs apart for a better stance and aimed both pistols at the door.

Rosa, taking out her knife, had positioned herself to the side of the door jamb, staying perfectly still.

There was a soft knock. Rosa looked to her mother, who nodded at her. Reaching out, she flipped the latch up and slowly opened the door. The little servant Bunny entered the doorway. She had a wooden yoke over her shoulders and had to turn slightly sideways as she entered to keep from spilling the steaming hot water buckets hanging on either side.

“I am sorry I was delayed, madam,” she said, never looking up from the floor. “But there was a fuss in the kitchen.”

Not hearing a reply, she looked up and into the barrels of Captain Hiss’ pistols. With a small gasp, she stood stock still.

“Ewe were not deelayed,” the captain told her softly, “E’en fact, ewe were a leettle too fast.”

“He made me do it,” the Bunny whispered, “He said he’s kill me.”

There was a soft thump out in the hallway and the body of a male Cat fell forward into the room. The servant girl jumped, splashing hot water on her legs. With a shriek, she dropped the wooden yoke with its buckets and ran to the corner of the room, trying to make herself as small as possible. She’d been in the middle of such things before and knew enough to get out of the line of fire.

Captain Hiss held her sights on the empty door frame which was now partially blocked by the body.

“I would ask that you maybe hold yur fire,” said a silky sounding falsetto voice in the hallway.

“Show your paws first,” the Captain instructed in Cat, and then thought to add the same in Rabbit.

A pair of yellow gloved paws appeared from around the corner. In one was a belaying pin, which was tossed to the floor.

“N’ow thee rest of ewe,” the Captain said softly, nodding to her daughter to be ready should they be rushed.

A yellow sundress appeared as the Rabbit slowly moved around and into the doorway, carefully stepping over the body. Hiss found herself looking at Tabor.

“I kinda borrowed this from Taverness’ wardrobe,” he told her with a wink. “Fit’s pretty good too, ‘cept I had to stuff the top with some rags.”

“Why ‘re ewe ‘ere?” the Cat asked suspiciously.

“I saw ya come ashore,” he explained good naturedly. “Ya didn’t think I’d let you have all the fun now did ya?”

He pointed to the Cat lying on the floor. “He said something to the effect that this was gonna be for old Tommy. I haven’t got a clue, but thought I should play along... especially since he was a right good kisser.”

With a strangled angry sound, Rosa came out from her place behind the door. Pushing past him, she ran down the stairs to the tavern below.

“Yer welcome!” he shouted at her back.

Turning back to Hiss, he asked her, “And what was that all about?”

Her mother shook her head, as she placed the pistols back on half cock. “Eye ‘ave no idea,” she lied. “She ees a ‘ead strong leetle girl. Wood you like a bath as long as yer ‘ere?”

The Rabbit smiled at her. “I’d be delighted. This here outfit is pretty but it’s all kinds of scratchy. Do you think it makes me look fat?”

Treasure

Dawn the following morning found both ships with no less than ten chests sitting on the wharf between them. Each chest was securely bound in chains to the point that opening them was impossible. Though not tremendously large, they were heavy enough that each took four porters, for the most part supplied by Lord Pugwash, for transport. Around this strange parade were gathered the crew of both ships, armed to the teeth and looking very formidable. With all but a few of them hovering over the chests, a small contingent of Ferrets from the fortress was called in at Lady Taverness' request, to secure her small armada. With bayonets fixed, these stalwart soldiers stood in place at each gangway.

Captain Hiss, apparently caught out by this sudden turn of events, calmly walked down the pier with her daughter in tow. Her eyes flashed dangerously; her strides long and unwavering. Spotting the flamboyant doe Bunny took no effort, as she was positioned at the head of the column with Lord Pugwash; dressed in a white frock that matched her fur. Under the frock were black pantaloons that were far less restrictive than her usual dress. She was supervising the crews in her strong manner, yelling and cajoling at both Horse porters and pirates.

Balls, the butts of the dueling pistols sticking out of his coat jacket, hurried to intercept them, while Duroc remained placidly standing next to his ward, harpoon in paw. The Swine wore a deep scowl as he watched the Cat approach. It was plain he did not like her.

“Where in Hock Hollie’s name ‘ave you been?” the pirate turned manservant rumbled lowly at the captain. “The fuk’n Lady is furious... damned if’n she didn’t kick me right where my ball sack useta be. I had ta fake the pain jest ta get her to stop. Damned near pulled out one ‘o’ these popguns and whacked ‘er upside the head with it. Would’a too if’n I hadn’t promised Tabor.”

“Nun uf yor busybody-ness now wo’mann,” Hiss countered loudly as the old pirate came close, “Eye am seek to death of thee Lady Taverness.” She spat on the wooden boards and then reaching out with Cat like speed, snatched one of the pistols from his belt and cocked it. Holding it up in the air, she pulled the trigger. The resultant explosion made everyone jump. Weapons everywhere were immediately cocked and displayed. All eyes immediately went to the trio.

“SORRIEEEE...” Captain Hiss called out. She smiled wickedly at Balls and then pushed him back a pace. “EET WAS AN AC’IDENTAL DEESCHARGE.”

The old Rabbit, his brown fur suddenly much paler, reached out and snatched the pistol back from her. “That weren’t funny a’tall ya dingy Lesbian!” he hollered at her. “I wuz try’n ta be discreet...” Lowering his voice, he asked, “Where the fuk is the Cap’n? I ain’t seen ‘im since yesterday.”

“ ‘Nd why wood eye know?” she countered in a near whisper. She had, in fact, watched the quite naked and sea weed covered Rabbit climb over the seaward rail of The Queen immediately after she’d discharged the pistol. “Most lik’ly E’e’s being eaten by crabs by now... dead and tossed ov’r board, no?”

She winked at the pirate and for a moment he looked confused. Then, smiling, he winked back. “Gottcha,” his old voice rumbled. “We ain’t seen Gullo either,” he added, “And the Lady is a bit shook about that. I’m a think’n she don’t like it much when people don’t dance to ‘er music.” He paused to hawk and spit. “Now no more fuss Cap’n Hiss; and the Lady says ta tell ya move yer arse. We’re ready to take the treasure to the vault.”

“I GIVE NO SECH ORDE’ER!” she yelled. Snatching the Rabbit’s other pistol; she cocked it and stalked towards Lady Taverness. “PUT MY CHESTS BACK IN THE ‘OLD OF MY SHIP! I SAIL WITH THEE TIDE YOU BALL BEARING BITCH!”

Squinting her one eye and wearing a deep frown, Lady Taverness calmly watched the approaching Cat. When the distance had closed and she heard the rumblings of discontent from the Cats behind her, she turned towards the crew of the Caveat Noir and yelled, “YOU WILL STAND FAST!”

Placing a paw on the rapier she wore, she spun back to Hiss and sunk down into a good fencing stance, “ONE STEP CLOSER,” she challenged, “AND THIS BLADE GOES THROUGH THE MIDDLE BUTTON OF YOUR FILTHY COAT YOU INSUBORDINATE DOG TOY!”

“ ‘ND OO EES THEE DOG TOY, EH?!” Hiss shouted back at her, nodding to the smallish canine standing next to the Rabbit.

Lord Pugwash suddenly looked very nervous, glancing from one crew to another, to Captain Hiss, and then back again to Lady Taverness. Being in the middle of a possible shooting mutiny was not his idea of a fun beginning to the day. “You said everyone welcomed the thought of their cut of the treasure being placed in the security of the town’s vault,” he accused Lady Taverness.

“I said I would speak to the captain about it,” she replied acidly; never taking her eyes off of Hiss, “But the little whore wasn’t here; was she?”

“No... no... I suppose you’re right. Yes... I knew that.”

“PUT MY CHESTS BACK WHERE THEY BELONG!” Hiss screamed again, now standing no more than fifteen feet away... just out of distance for the rapier. She leveled the pistol, aiming it directly at the Rabbit’s head. “DO EET NOW OR EYE SHOOT OUT YOUR OTHER EYEBALL AND LEAVE YOU TO TAKE POKES IN THEE EMPTY SOCKETS FOR COPPER COINS!”

Duroc snarled, and moved next to Lady Taverness. He shook his harpoon at the Cat. “A NAGA NUT HOOSHOIE!” he roared, and jabbed it in her direction. He then patted his massive stomach and it was quite clear what he meant.

Lady Taverness drew out the slender rapier worn at her hip, and pointed it directly at the Cat in preparation to a lunge.

Babacomb, Kelly, Mr. Flopears, and Toby the Lookout, standing directly abreast of the confrontation, immediately dropped the chest they’d been holding and grabbed for their cutlasses. With a crash, the chest fell to the wood planking of the wharf. One of its staves cracked near the middle and a small pile of gold coins spilled out. The metallic noise of the coins drew everyone’s notice and the tension swept over them... they’d become loose powder simply waiting for a spark.

“Wait!” Lord Pugwash yelled.

Like a small referee he held his arms up in the air. Though he would rather have run, he placed himself between the Cat and the Rabbit. “Wait! Please... fair sailors wait... we do not want bloodshed.” Looking to Hiss, he explained, “We had word from a spy that there was to be an attempt to take the treasure by force. I offered my vaults as a way to secure your riches. That is all! You may have your share back whenever you wish to leave!”

The Cat shifted her attention to him, and he squirmed under her hard green eyes. “Eh spy?” She looked back to Lady Taverness suspiciously. “Ewe ‘ave been poi-sen since eye met ewe.”

“Not her,” the Pug croaked, realizing now that the Rabbit’s profession was well known... and so too would be the fact that she’d taken his coin in the past.

“Ooo’s spy then?” the captain demanded.

“Does it really matter?” he asked her in a beseeching voice. “We have porters, we have guards, we have soldiers... the treasure will be safe. I promise you.”

“At what cost to us?” she demanded, not letting it go.

“Nothing!” the smallish Dog told her. “Nothing at all... except...”

“Eye new eet!” she cried and pointed the pistol at him.

“WAIT!” he yelled, placing his paws over his head and trembling. “WE ARE HAVING A FESTIVAL IN YOUR HONOR IN THREE DAYS! PLEASEEEEE POINT THAT SOMEWHERE ELSE! MY ONLY WISH IS THAT YOU AND YOUR CREW MIGHT ATTEND! WE ARE ALL SO HAPPY THAT TABOR IS DEAD!”

Hiss laughed harshly and raised the pistol into the air. “Stop cowering leetle wurm, eet is not eeven low-dead.”

She pulled the trigger. With the resulting spark-flash-explosion, Lord Pugwash fainted.

Looking at Lady Taverness, the captain said softly, “Eef we loose thee treasure, eye we’el ke’ll you.”

Sheathing her sword, the Rabbit responded, “If we loose this treasure Captain Hiss, you are welcome to try.”

Governor Gulo sat deep in thought, watching the false dawn lighten the sky in the east. Unlike any other night, he now was completely surrounded by his own kind. All around him by the small camp fire were the sleeping forms of Wolverines. He felt a contentment not felt for many years.

Unlike this troop, now dressed in the rags of what was, the Governor wore his best uniform, his dress sword, and the tall felt hat with a ruffled cock plumage that he’d so carefully kept tucked away. They had been meant for the final battle he’d hoped to face in the completion of his mission. He was glad now he’d thought to wear them to the camp of his lost brethren. Their leader, and the reason for all they had done thus far, was none other than Crown Prince Uric Graypaw Wolverine, Lord of The North Edge, Grand Duke of the Rustian Ocean.

This Majesty was now peacefully sleeping on the ground next to him, dressed in the same rags of clothing his group had adopted as they waited for rescue... a rescue that never came. Without a doubt, Gulo was sure the armada had been sunk to a ship in the name of the Labradorean King.

Such was war... such was life... and so happened things when they were beyond your control and the fates laughed at your misery.

To think it had all begun with a simple game of chess between two old friends; the Labradorean King Gaspar the Black and the Wolverine King Ludwig D’Gulo. As the story went, and the Governor had actually heard it from Lady Taverness who claimed to have been there, Ludwig fairly trounced Gaspar in the game. Gaspar, having drunk too much, stood and threw the game aside, attempting to strike Ludwig. Being a Wolverine, and a soldier of the highest order, Ludwig had not imbibed. Lowering himself to a fighting stance, he had simply redirected the Labradorean King’s attack and then tripped him, easily catching him when he fell backwards with an infantile sounding, ‘Oopsie’.

Gaspar was incensed by his friend’s laughter and his ability to so easily humiliate him in front of his guards; and on this day he had double the troops that Ludwig had with him. With a simple hand gesture, the Wolverine’s guards were dead and the Wolverine Royal family was taken prisoner.

“Now who is the game’s winner?” Gaspar roared drunkenly. Clenching his fist and shaking it in the Wolverine King’s face, he then swore he would take all of his lands. “And on that day,” he concluded, “When I have all that you own, I will hang you by the neck just to see your miserable life end.”

In the far distance, the Governor heard a pistol shot. His eyes narrowed as his mind grasped the sound like a battle cry.

Finding his Prince complicated some things and made clear others. Because of this twist of fate, there were now things he would have to take care of and still others that had to be arranged delicately in order to preserve a trust found only by enduring adversity as a comrade. He would not do wrong by Pirate or Ferret... nor could he abandon his Prince.

Gulo had always been a straight forward leader of Wolverines. Treachery and cunning were not a part of who he was. Like his people he was hard because he had to be hard, holding to the motto; within order comes victory. But he also knew you had to stay at least two steps ahead of the hangman.

The sky had brightened and the stars began to fade by the time he’d concluded the orderly thought progression of what he needed to do. The Governor now had a plan, and he would by necessity, hold his cards very close to his chest... very close indeed. Reaching out, he gently shook his Prince by the shoulder until his eyes opened.

“It is time to be up, My Liege,” he told the Wolverine in his native language. “I think you and I should take a walk before we wake the men.”

The Prince sat up, yawned and stretched. “I keep nothing from these troopers, Governor. I owe them my life many many times over. Besides,” he stretched again, yawning even larger, “The sentries are awake.”

“Those we can easily keep at a distance, sir,” Gulo told him. “What your troopers do not know, they cannot divulge under torture if captured. It is the way of battle leadership to give only the information needed, and nothing more.”

The other Wolverine thought about this, and then nodded. “You are right of course.” Holding out his paw, he said, “Be kind and help me up please. I gather it is time to leave this place and do what we must.”

“Yes, My Prince,” Gulo told him, “It is.”

Lady Taverness stood, paws on hips, supervising the arrangement of her treasure chests within the vaults of Blueportdoggie. Around her, in the flickering lamp light, was more gold than she had seen in her entire life.

“Of course it does not ‘all’ belong to me,” Lord Pugwash was telling her, “But you know the old adage; ‘He who controls the gold decides what’s what’.”

“It’s the ‘Golden Rule’ my little puppy,” she corrected him, “ ‘He who owns the gold makes the rules.’”

The Pug wiped a paw across his eyes. He’d not slept much the night before. Neither had Lady Taverness, though the Burgomaster thought she had, congratulating himself for once again being the ultimate lover. For her part, the demure Bunny had been totally delightful, leaving him more sexually sated than he’d ever been in his life; the entire while leading him to believe it was because of his skill.

After their ‘session’, the Pug had discretely lay awake, trying to see where exactly she’d hidden her ‘Letter of Marque’. Unfortunately, he’d found it securely tucked between the cleavage of her ample breasts. Goodness knows he’d carefully tried to free it from its hiding place, but every time he thought he’d had a good grip on the document the doe snorted, snored, and then rolled over; burying it under herself.

In his frustration, he’d actually toyed with the idea of simply murdering her. It would have been an easy thing to accomplish but: to then attempt the take down of two full ships of pirates... especially with them already within the protection of the city and none of the fortress guns pointed in that direction... he simply did not have the where with all too even try. Much easier to invite them all to one place, get them drunk and then kill them in one fell swoop.

Finally giving up, he lay awake savoring the plan he’d come up with... tweaking it in minute detail.

“I’m so pleased you like the rapier,” he said, looking up at the Bunny. She was even more beautiful in the flickering torch light. “It was presented to me by the Prince of Patoona when his ship straggled into our modest harbor after a storm.”

“Really?” she replied, not paying him much attention. “Patoona is what? ... Wolf?”

“Exactly right; and a very dignified and gentle race of creatures, I might add.”

She smiled down at him, obviously knowing better. “And thus the need for a well balance weapon at your side?” Her voice sounded incredibly innocent, and in the next was as hard as a Boatswain mate’s when she saw the porters placing a chest where she did not want it placed.

“Not there fools! A ‘dead man’s gold’ has to be stored exactly in the right configuration, or it becomes unlucky for whoever holds it. You wouldn’t want Lord Pugwash to suffer a sudden palsy or stroke would you?”

“Me?” the little Dog asked, feeling his skin crawl.

Lady Taverness turned and smiled at him. “It’s just a superstition Puggsy... nothing to worry about. I am honor bound preserve it though as it was preached to me by the pirates under my command. They refused to go near the stuff until I had the chests arranged exactly so. Since you have taken its burden off of our paws, the luck... or unluck... now comes to you.”

“Do as she says!” Lord Pugwash called out in a shrill little voice. “There will be no tempting the fates this day!” As he said this he brushed against Lady Taverness’ skirt.

Jumping back quickly, the spy Bunny drew her sword and lunged, parried, and lunged again at the shadows. This caused Lord Pugwash to scamper back out of the way. He wasn’t quite sure if she’d detected something in the shadows or was just stretching her form... fortunately it was the latter.

Returning to guard, she looked at the blade in her paw and told him emphatically, “This is an extraordinary weapon Puggsy. I would cherish the chance to try it out in a fencing match.”

“I remembered how much you liked to fence and thought you might,” he told her, pleased with the lavish praise, “So I arranged a match for you to be held during our banquet. That is, of course, if you don’t mind being the center of attraction?”

Sheathing the slender blade, she laughed. “And exactly when did you ever know me to remain in the shadows. Open the fencing match to any who wish to enter. We can have an entire day of sword play. I will place a prize of five gold pieces for the winner and five silvers for second place. We will make the preliminary fights one cut; blood flows and you’re out of the match. The final rounds will then be for five cuts... a little brutal, but what do you say to that? Eight fighters... then four... then only the two.” She held up two fingers and wiggled them at him.

“I say I’d hate to think of your fine body bleeding,” he told her. “One of the guards in my employ is the best blade I’ve ever seen in my life. I’m sure the idea of five gold coins in his pocket will bring out his blood lust.”

With lightning speed, the Rabbit drew again and lunged, her point stopping an inch short of impaling the little Dog. Pugwash froze, looking more like a lawn ornament than a Burgomaster. “How I wish you wouldn’t do that,” he finally croaked.

Smiling, the Rabbit recovered her lunge, made a crisp salute with her blade, and re-sheathed. "You're absolutely no fun Puggsy. I'll tell you a little secret... a very erotic secret..."

"What?" he managed to squeak.

"Imagine making love in the blood flowing from those little flesh wounds." She reached forward and cupped his chin in her paw, raising it up slightly. "You roll around and around and around in it, the whole time intertwined and knotted together until you're not so sure who is bleeding and who is not."

The little Dog whimpered.

"Come," she told him, sadistically breaking the spell and leaving him yearning for more of her erotic suggestions. "My chests are settled; lead me out of the labyrinth. It is time we had a strong coffee."

"With brandy?" he asked hopefully.

"But of course."

When they were once again above ground, the vault guards threw the massive bolt on the door, and went to their posts. The porters, waiting close by, were paid off and given a handsome bonus by Lady Taverness for their good job. The crew of the Caveat Noir promptly left with their Captain, while The Queen's crew remained behind, obviously waiting for their orders. As Lady Taverness and Lord Pugwash were about to enter his coach, Kelly approached with his hat in paw; looking very humble.

"Beg'n M'Lady's pardon," he mumbled, looking for all intents and purposes like a servant expecting a beating, "But I believe I made a terrible mistake."

Lord Pugwash paused on the top step, and looked first at Lady Taverness, now just below him, and then at Kelly. "What mistake?" he asked, though the question had not been addressed to him.

"Well, sur... with the Lady hollar'n and screaming the way she was about getting the treasure out to th' wharf, I plumb forgot about the chandlers."

"What about the chandlers?" the little Dog asked, stifling a yawn.

"They be's coming with the supplies this day, and the next, and the day after."

"Yes... and so?"

"I unloaded all of our loot... er... monies in ta your vault. I got's nothing to pay them with."

Lady Taverness cursed. Looking to the Pug, she told him, “I’ll need to retrieve one of the chests Puggsy Darling. Besides the chandlers, I have navigational aids to purchase, not to mention the Caveat Noir is in need of some replacement guns... annndddd.... I saw the most exquisite dress in the shops yesterday. I have an appointment so they might fit me just before tea.” She placed a paw upon his leg and moved her fingers softly up and down.

“I’m paying for that,” he said in a high pitched wavering sort of tone; responding to her like a bee to honey.

“Oh good!” she bubbled. “You can join me then and we’ll have a matching outfit made for the festival. I’m sure the dress shop will serve a good tea.”

He nodded, this time covering his yawn with a paw. “Good idea T... I like that very much.” Waving the vault keeper over, he told him, “Call the guards, and then take this fellow and three others back down into the vault to fetch one of the chests.” To Lady Taverness he said, “Why not join me in the carriage, my love. When they come back, you can have your crew escort the chest.” Pointing to the lightening sky, he told her, “It’s time for that coffee and perhaps some breakfast.”

When she’d mounted the carriage, the Rabbit stuck her head out the window and called to the navigator just as he was about to disappear through the door to the vault. “Mister Kelly!”

He stopped and turned back. “Yes M’um?”

“I want an accurate count of the chest, and records kept as to what we paid to whom.”

He gave her a broad smile. “Of course M’um... to the tenth of a copper!

Spectacles

“She did it!” Kelly yelled, tossing gold coins in the air. “Wheee heeee heeee,” he sang, dancing a jig right there in The Queen’s hold. “Wheeee heeee heeee... Ballast rocks to gold... I never thought I’d see it... that Rabbit’s so bold... Wheee heeee heeee... the mad Hare... and don’t you dare... call her a him... that’s a mighty big sin... Wheee heeee heeee!”

Toby the Lookout farted, while Mr. Flopears frowned. “We ain’t outta the pickle barrel yet ya old fool,” the Gunner told the Navigator when the song was finished. Turning to the bulkhead, he hung his lantern on a gimble, adjusted the wick, and then flopped down on an empty barrel.

Babacomb sat down on another barrel, his eyes bright in the dim light... watching... saying nothing. He showed no interest in the treasure.

Tabor held his lantern a little higher and began pawing through the contents of the chest. “Them Cats she stuffed into the one chest were supposed to load only gold,” he grouched, pawing over a variety of things scattered among the shining coins. ‘Unload the rocks, hide’em, and load the gold’, she told’em. I heard’er. Jewels are pretty, but it’s hard to pay a lubber with a ruby or topaz. Gold they understand.”

Taking in a deep breath, Kelly began again. “Wheee hee heeee...”

“Will you hush before someone hears you,” his Captain told him irritably, stopping the song right in its beginning.

“Fool!” Kelly answered him back. “Everyone’s too dang busy tossing weevilly flour at that chandler we got hung upside down. Ya shoulda seen the rest of them scatter when we did it too. Tomorrow they’ll bring out the good stuff and then we’ll spread some of this coinage around to get them all excited. Dang Cap’n... we ain’t ever got a haul like this so easy; and we got nine more chests in the vault get’n filled. All we have to do is behave ourselves.”

Toby grunted. “And you think that’s possible?” he asked. “Seems to me what you’re doing is hardly behaving.”

“I feel like dancing,” Kelly answered defensively. Turning towards the big bottomed Rabbit he furthered, “Ain’t nothing wrong with that. I say bring each and every one of the crew down here and give them some coin... that and the promise of more’ll keep’em on the straight and narrow.”

“First thing they’ll do is buy a cask of rum, and breach it right on the wharf,” Babacomb told him in a low voice. “Given the time to drink what they bought and they’ll be rolling around singing all about the ‘Mad Rabbit’; just like someone else I know.”

“There is that,” Mr. Flopears agreed.

“We got eight more chests coming, not nine,” Tabor told the navigator levelly. “Them Cat’s will want to come back when this is all over, and number nine is their ride out. I think we outta let ’em too. Think about it... they’re slaving away making you rich, Kelly Rabbit, while you’re out here having all the fun.”

“And what do you think we ought’a do then Cap’n,” his friend asked point blank. He and Tabor went back a long way.

“I’d wash ’em down and give ’em the bath of a lifetime ‘cept they don’t like our kind none,” the Captain chuckled. “Never fear, we’ll take care of those two when the time comes. As to the crew, I definitely wouldn’t let ’em start drink’n... that’s for dang sure.”

Kelly began dancing another jig, this time keeping his song to a muted humming sound.

“When’s the powder get’n here?” Mr. Flopears asked with a sigh.

The Navigator stopped his mad dance again; his chest heaving from the exertion. “What’s eating you?” he managed to ask, “The Pig?” He then laughed, slapping his thigh in mirth.

The other Rabbit looked at him without smiling, “That ain’t funny. That’uns give me the Willies ever since he come aboard. I’m happy he’s glued himself to the Lady Bitch.”

“He’s smarter than most and not as dumb as the others,” Tabor said, pulling a small wooden box out of the chest. The craftsmanship of the piece was exquisite. “He’s had this whole thing figured out long ago... plays a good part too... no ugga bugga... dang but I thought I was gonna bust a gut. Poor old Balls about shit im’self.” Opening the box, he carefully took out the object it guarded, and held it up. “‘N what’s this supposed to be that they’d be guarded in such a fancy box?”

“They’re called spectacles,” Babacomb told him. “They help you see better... you place ’em on your nose and look through the glass lenses.”

“Interesting,” Tabor muttered.

Placing his lantern on the deck, he placed the delicate looking setup on his nose and pulled the wire ear pieces in place. He blinked. “Be damned,” he muttered, looking around. “Be damned... that’s truly incredible.”

“When’s the powder gett’n here?” Mr. Flopears asked again.

“It’ll get here when it gets here,” Kelly replied, bending down to pick up the gold coins he’d tossed into the air. “You fella’s sure know how to spoil a party. Where’s the fun in being filthy rich if you can’t shower yourself in money and dance a little?”

From the deck above them came the clatter of tool boxes being set upon the deck and feet tramping about.

“Work crew’s here,” Toby said and then sniffed.

“Work crew?” Tabor asked looking at him. He hesitated and then said, “Toby... you weren’t ever this clear.”

The big bottomed Rabbit shrugged his shoulders. “You never said ya had a problem understanding me when I was up the mast. ‘W o r k c r e w’,” he said slowly, just in case his words had been misunderstood.

The Pirate Captain frowned and then held his paw in front of his face. “Not that; I’m talk’n about seeing... Looking through these little glass things I can see so much better. All of these years, and I never knew I couldn’t see so good.”

With the squeal of moving gun carriages the ship shuddered and leaned towards the starboard side.

Tabor looked upwards as if he could now see through the deck too.

“Getting my pretties cleaned, polished, and greased,” Flopears told him. “They’ll be top notch when the lubbers are done with’em. In the mean time, while they’re moved back out of the way, we’re having the bulwarks gone over too.”

“Your guns was already top notch,” Tabor growled. “Kelly,” he barked, turning towards the Navagator, “What else don’t I know about?”

The dancing Rabbit looked at his captain and smiled. “All new sails’n cordage, sur. I figured while we was in port, and while we was so flushed with money; we’d do a quick re-fit. I got carpenters com’n out’n my arse at this point.”

“And who’s watch’n em?” Tabor asked, giving him a harder look.

“Well... uh... the crew is.”

“Who’s crew; ours, the Cats, or the Wolverine’s?”

“I’ll go,” Babacomb said rising from his barrel.

“You stay,” Tabor ordered. “The rest of you get... and I damned well better be get’n Pugwash’s money’s worth. Start pay’n out the gold, Kelly, but you drive a hard bargain; just like it was your blood ya was giv’n up. The jewels and stuff leave here, that would be too obvious. Floppy... you make sure the powder and shot we get is the best.”

“Like I wouldn’t?” Mr. Flopears retorted, a hint of hurt feelings in his voice.

“We got all the ordinance we can carry topside,” Tabor told him, ignoring the implied hurt. “Purchase us some muskets and pistols... maybe a hundred of each. I want the best quality and I want a lot of it. Get us the powder and shot to go with them... bullet molds too so’s we can make more if we need to... and get us grenades.”

“You forgot rockets,” Flopears told him.

“And what do I need rockets for?” his Captain asked impatiently. It was obvious that the sound of so many strangers on his ship was beginning to bother him.

“Signals come to mind,” his gunner grouched.

“Fine, buy as many as ya want.”

Turning to Toby, he just looked at him.

“I’m not in the mood,” the Rabbit grumbled.

“Fine... hike your arse up to the taverns and scout around for any of our kind looking for a berth. Be sure to tell’em Lady Taverness is a fuk’n hard ass... not like a former Captain I knows of.”

When they failed to move, he began flinging gold coins at them. “AND DOUBLE THE GUARD ON THAT HATCHWAY!” he yelled at their retreating backs.

“You have quite a way with your crew,” Babacomb said softly when they were gone. His black furred shape was hard to see in the dim lantern light. His eyes glittered as if tear filled.

“I have my moments,” Tabor replied, turning his attention back to the dog. As he did, he heard the click of a pistol’s hammer being thumbed back.

“Ever wonder why they say the hammer is ‘cocked’?” he asked the Dog in a harsh seagoing voice.

“I honestly hadn’t given it a thought,” Babacomb replied. “It’s always been enough for me that it was.”

“Cuz it’s hard back and ready to shoot... just like your dick,” the Rabbit told him and then spat upon the deck. “Funny how ever’thing is sexual, ain’t it?”

“I’ve been dreaming of this moment for a long long time Captain Tabor,” the Dog replied, his voice sounding flat and emotionless, “And now I don’t know if I really want to kill you.”

“You been trying for so long, why the change now?” the Pirate asked him.

The Dog shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. It certainly seems like I should... but...”

The pirate took a seat on one of the abandoned barrels. “I ain’t as evil as ya thought, right? Least not compared to the rest of them I ain’t; that King of yours being a prime example.” He looked at the figure shrouded in the gloom. “You don’t know what you want anymore do you?”

Babacomb slowly placed the muzzle of the pistol to his head. “Maybe...”

“Don’t be stupid,” Tabor told him softly. “If’n your so all fired in a hurry to die, that can be arranged to the advantage of others; The Lady Taverness would be glad to help you out. Me... I’d rather see ya live.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re a fuk’n fine seaman,” he said harshly. “You caught that storm even before Kelly and he’s extremely gifted in such things. You woulda caught me too, if’n those fly’n harpies hadn’t settled the waters in my favor. Even then I’m guessing you plugged your ears... but not your crew.”

“Some did, but not enough.”

“You were a good adversary, Babacomb. I relished the idea of you trying to hunt me down.”

“You did?”

The Dog lowered his pistol, and inwardly Tabor breathed a sigh of relief.

“Absolutely... it kept me on my toes.” He paused as if considering something, and then said, “Let’s discuss something frankly between two old sailors. It stands to reason we should as I’m already dead and you’re mighty close to following.”

The former captain thought about this for a moment and then moving the hammer back to half-cock, slowly placed the pistol on the deck next to him. “I’m listening.”

“You never were a King’s man were ya?”

The Dog shook his head. “It was simply a means to an end. The King had what I needed, and I had what he could use in return. The King has many good sailors... but I was the best. It got me the ship I needed.”

“And all of that because your father was killed?”

Babacomb hesitated. "I suppose so... yes."

"Damned if that ain't peculiar."

"Why?"

"Death... how it affects ya, and how ya react to it. It makes ya wonder at the internal workings of the mind. I too am what I am today because of a death."

"Really?"

"We're being true here Babbie old boy." Tabor pointed at the Dog and then at himself as he spoke. "Just you and me here in this hold and a King's ransom sit'n next to us. I've got no reason to lie. If'n we get those other chests back on board and manage to leave this place unmolested we've got no reason to ever board another ship again. My intentions are to go somewhere inland. I'll have me a right fine house and I'll sit around all day bored to death; watching the clover grow. Eventually I'll die and get buried."

"You'd do that?" the Dog asked him incredulously.

"Fuk no!" The Rabbit laughed. "Why the hell would I ever want to be all land bound like a dry arsed lubber? The sea is where I belongs, and the sea is where I'm going to die... it's just a matter of when."

Babacomb smiled. "I suppose it's the same for me. I'll admit that I was rather fond of chasing after you. It's the challenge of it. You're just too damned lucky. I can think of a good half a dozen places I should have had you."

Tabor nodded. "I am lucky... and best you remember that. Now then... I need you topside watching the lubbers trying to fuk up a good thing. I'm willing to bet they can't even tie a decent knot. All they see is the easy money. See to the rigging too. Try to figure out how I can get another knot or two out of the old girl in a following wind. Spend what you need. There's plenty to go around and by the time we're done here the local populace is going to love us."

They stood and Tabor offered the Dog his paw. Babacomb griped it firmly.

"Aye, aye, Captain," he replied softly. "I've actually been thinking of that exact thing while piloting the Caveat Noir. Those Cats are a strange bunch, but Captain Hiss is good. Her ship is faster than The Queen and a lot of the rigging is her own design. In a good wind, the Caveat'll sail three cables too your two. We can definitely make The Queen faster but not 'as' fast."

The Rabbit nodded. "I thought as much. In a fight, I'll still pin'er down though; I'm better armed."

“Just don’t let Hiss capture the wind gage or all of your ordinance will be for naught,” Babacomb advised.

“I don’t intend to; and then again she’s a good ally.” He waved his paw in dismissal. “Now get. I’ll clean up here and then I have some things to take care of.”

The Dog respectfully knuckled his brow and turned to leave; but Tabor called him back.

“Tell me something sailor Dog,” he said to him, “Did ya ever nail old Lady T?”

Babacomb actually laughed, and then with a smile he replied, “I thought I did.”

“And did ya love her?”

“Aye sir,” he said softly the smile disappearing, “I did.”

Tabor nodded. “Thought as much.”

Balls knocked politely on the door of Lady Taverness’ bedroom by kicking it with his foot. The huge breakfast tray he carried prevented him doing otherwise. Vaguely hearing a voice he managed to push the latching handle down and then turning bumped the door open with his backside.

“Breakfast is here M’um,” he called out. “O’course, if ya gives it another few minutes, I’ll be tell’n ya it’s the noon meal.”

Pushing the door closed behind himself he turned and then froze to the spot. Standing before him in all of her nakedness, was the doe buck Bunny he had so come to both fear and admire. She was pointing a pistol at him, her one eye staring down its barrel. The other, now nothing more than an empty socket, gave her the look of a death’s head.

“Are ya teched in the skull?” he asked her loudly. “It’s me... Balls.”

The heart shaped tattoo on her left shoulder moved slightly, seeming to change shape as she wobbled slightly. “I don’t know you,” she replied, her one eye blinking.

“O’course ya do... ya jest had too much ‘o’ th’rum I’m thinking. Concentrate now... ya kicked me between the legs yesterday and I hollered blue murder... ya remember that does ya?”

She blinked again. “I do remember that,” she finally told him. Lowering her pistol she said, “I’m hungry.”

The old pirate held up his tray and rattled it slightly. "I can fix that."

Moving into the room, he set the tray on a table next to the bed. "Ya knows... Duroc is right beside his self that you went to the vault with little Puggsy there and left him behind. I think he wants to make a meal out'n the little humpy bastard."

Hearing a thump behind him, he turned to find Lady Taverness on the floor unconscious.

"What in the fuk?" he muttered.

Kneeling next to her, he quickly examined her; poking, prodding, and sniffing, as life on a pirate ship had taught him to do. "Oh dear Methusila's ghost'n what did the Pug bastard go and do?" he muttered when he saw her back.

Finally satisfied there were no broken bones, he put his arms under her and got her up onto the bed. It was obvious to him that she'd been whipped. "He finally found out, didn't he?" the old Rabbit whispered as he examined the wounds. "I'd say from the looks of this he was right upset. Well... we'll get you cleaned up my dear and then we'll go'n have a little talk with old Lord Fancy pants."

Moving to the wash basin, the old Rabbit poured some water into it and brought it back to the bed. Taking the fancy washcloth from the wash stand, he wet it and then rubbed a bar of sweet smelling soap on it to work up a lather. She twitched when he began to work and her eye opened; but she didn't speak.

"Normally," he told her, "On a 'Man 'O' War', when they have a whipping, they douse the prisoner with a bucket of rum. In your case, M'um, I think this here soap will do just fine." As he worked, he said, "After I'm done, I believe I'll go and pay a little visit to the Pug Dog. I'll go there and tell'em I have a message from my mistress. That'll get me in to see him real easy like. Then when he asks what it is, I'll just take my pistol out and put a ball between 'is eyes."

"No..." she muttered.

"Fuk says you," he replied, continuing the cleaning. "I'm a pirate and I'll do as I want. Nuth'n you can do about it."

"No..." she muttered again. "You do that and The Queen will never get out of the harbor. It's all right... I've been beaten before. He won't say anything."

"And why wouldn't he?"

Lady Taverness groaned. "He'd never live it down if word got out."

"Fine," Balls told her, "I'll not kill him... but how is it someone so small could do this to ya?"

“His man did the beating while he watched,” she told him. “I mis-judged how sadistic he is. He spewed all over himself.” She swallowed and then told him, “You leave this to me... I always get even.”

Balls took a towel and gently patted her wounds dry. They were bleeding, but they were fairly superficial so there was no need to stitch anything. “I can see’s why the Cap’n loves ya the way he does... ya got’s guts and a mean streak that equals his own.”

“He what?” she whispered.

“I know yur down an eye, but are ya deft too? I said Tabor loves ya... the poor bastard.”

There was a knock at the door and though Balls yelled at whoever it was to go away, the knocking persisted. Sighing, he covered his charge with a sheet and then went to answer the door.

“I am to check on Lord Pugwash’s guest,” said a largish Doberman Pincer when he opened the door. He was dressed in a similar outfit to the Rabbits and this pegged him as the Burgomaster’s personal servant. Without a doubt, it had been this fellow who’d done the beating.

“Is that a fact?” Balls asked him respectfully.

“It is... now step aside.”

The old Pirate smiled and held the door open a little wider for him. “Please do come in... I have a message for ya to take back to yor boss.”

“I will be pleased to do so; as soon as I see to his guest.”

As the Dog stepped into the room, Lady Taverness’ ancient looking manservant grabbed him by the collar with one paw and smoothly drew his knife with the other. In one quick motion he cut the Dog’s left ear off and handed it back to him. He quickly followed this with a kick to the crotch. As the huge manservant bent double, Balls placed a paw on his head and pushed him back through the door. Smiling, he slammed it closed.

“Fuk with one of The Queen’s own and ya went and fuk’d with all of us,” he muttered as he came back to the bed. “Ya sholdn’t otta do something so dang stupid unless ya got’s a death wish.”

“What just happened?” Lady Taverness asked in a near whisper. Her good eye was closed and the old pirate saw tears.

“Nuth’n,” he told her as he wiped his knife blade on the bed covers. It was the same knife he’d dug splinters out of her back with.

“He really loves me?” she asked.

“I never told you that,” the old pirate replied as he pulled the sheet back down. He winced when he again saw the red stripes on her fur. “But keep’n it out of the log book and jest between the two of us shipmates,” he told her, “Yeah he does.”

Stalemate

Gulo stood in the doorway of the town's uniform shop. He'd just delivered a small bag of gold to the shop's owner, ensuring his troops would be properly clothed and outfitted. It was actually twice as much as he would have paid, but Tabor told him it would go a long way in keeping the local populace in a loving mood. It was a good tactic and he had readily agreed to it.

His ears perked to a sound that was both loved and not heard for too long... the single tump... tump... tump... of a military drummer keeping time for his marching troop. Leaning against the shop's door frame, he waited for the soldiers to appear. For him, watching them would be like a hard candy given to an infant; sweet and cherished for what it was.

As they came around the corner, he smiled when he recognized his new friend from the fortress. Next to him strode a large Dog with a very white bandage about his head. This was an oddity, especially since the commander wore a very serious look... one usually worn when going into battle.

"What ho?" the Wolverine called out as they approached.

With a brisk command the Ferret halted his men and not until they were settled at parade rest did he smile. Seeing the uniform Gulo wore, he gave him a crisp salute. The fake Colonel saluted back with an equal crispness and then offered his paw, which was shaken warmly.

"Why not take a rest Pablo," the Wolverine offered. Let me buy you and your men lunch... a loaf with half a jug of wine for each of... how many?"

"A dozen plus my drummer," the Ferret told him; knowing full well the Wolverine already knew the count. "A thousand thanks my friend, but I am on official business. I only stop to rest my men for a moment. The march is good for them; otherwise they would sit around day after day and grow fat. As it is, unless I insist on musket practice once a week they would be sorely out of practice."

Gulo nodded to the Dog, who was looking impatient. "And the official business would be a missing ear? He's a big boy... he couldn't handle the problem by himself?"

Pablo lowered his voice, and said, "He claims to have been jumped by no less than five pirates... probably more... and then held down and tortured. Being that he is Lord Pugwash's personal knave I am duty bound to follow up on his complaint; especially since his Lordship sent him to me bearing an arrest warrant."

They both turned and looked at the Doberman. The Dog, for his part, snarled, "We need to be going before the bastard runs off."

“Bastard is only one Pablo,” Gulo said loudly. “I thought the count was at five or more?”

“I said bastards,” the Dog countered. “B.. a.. s.. t.. a.. r.. d.. ssss,” he vocalized, drawing the word out as if speaking to a half wit. “Lord Pugwash expects quick justice,” he added so the Commander was reminded of whom he represented.

The Wolverine hawked and spat upon the cobblestones, narrowly missing the feet of the Burgomaster’s representative. “Oh... s..o..r..r..yyyy,” he lamely apologized, “My aimmm... is not what it used to be.”

The Ferret’s men all chuckled. None of them liked the Dog as his reputation was well known. More than a few of the town’s harlots had been found beaten badly. The girls were always friendly to the soldiers so they took it personally. The girls had all been too frightened to say who’d abused them... but everyone knew. Ilene Cat had made it quite clear what she would do if the ‘culprit’ was ever caught. Like her mate, she was one to do exactly what she said she would too.

“I have an idea,” Gulo remarked happily. “I am having my men uniformed, but not all of them are so occupied, having finished earlier. You may recognize a few of them, as I found the camp you spoke of. Those who lived there will all be coming with me when we leave. Might we march with you? It would give them good practice as it has been a while since they were among their own kind.”

“It would be an honor,” Pablo told him with a smile, “Though I don’t think I’ve ever seen a Wolverine out of practice when it came to marching. Certainly you may join us.”

Gulo thought for a moment and frowned. “I’ve no proper weapons for them just yet,” he apologized, “But they do have wooden pikes carved out to practice with.”

“That would be perfect,” the Commander told him. Looking directly at the Dog, he said, “I believe I will give my men ten minutes rest.” Turning back to Gulo, he asked, “Will that be enough time?”

“But of course.”

Duroc leaned forward slightly and sniffed the air. His ears heard a strange and happy sound coming from down the hill. He felt no immediate alarm as the outer wall of the villa formed a good defensive position should it be needed. Besides this, the gate was securely locked. Balls told him earlier to lock it and then refused to let him into the small house. He’d explained softly that the Lady was tired, needed rest, and that he should keep watch.

“Come get me should there be a fuss of some sort,” his friend advised. “I’d send for a relief crew but since it’s jest you ‘n me there’s no sending a message to the ship.”

“What did you do?” the whaler asked him in a low voice.

“Nuth’n you wouldn’ta done ‘n probably a far site less,” the Rabbit explained. “When th’sun goes down we’ll be tak’n ‘er back to The Queen. I’m think’n she’ll rest easier there.”

“Little Doggie Breath got something to do with this,” the Swine growled.

“Maybe that’s so,” Balls agreed, “And there will be a reckoning; but right now we’ve a need to keep a lid on the pot. If we don’t do that, then we’ve failed th’ Lady and failed the ship too.”

The tattooed Pig looked at him suspiciously. “You didn’t like her none... now you do... why?”

“She’s a shipmate,” the old pirate hissed, “Jest like you are ya big dope. We sticks together... rich or poor, scurvy or shanks, cannon fire or the hangman’s noose. “He placed a finger on the huge Pig’s chest. “You fer me, and me fer you...”

“Just no ugga bugga,” Duroc finished for him with a smile and a wink.

Balls looked a little uneasy. “Yesss... there is that.”

The Pig smothered a laugh, and clapped him on the back hard enough it almost drove the old pirate to his knees. “No Ugga Bugga,” he squeaked. “Heeheehee...”

“You are one strange booger,” Balls told him, flexing his shoulders against the pain of the slap.

And now the Pig heard a singing of multiple voices... a cadence lead by one, and then joined by the many; and all in a language strange to his ears. He clutched his harpoon, and snorted.

Jumping the ten feet to the dirt below him, he ran to the villa’s door and banged upon it. “BALLS!” he yelled. “BALLS SINGING... BALLS SINGING FEET!”

The door opened, and the old pirate glowered at him. “What in hell are you on about?” he grouched. “Yor balls are singing? Ain’t that something yor supposed ta keep quiet about... dang how I wish I had balls that was singing.”

The Swine pointed to the gate. “They come.”

“Who comes? What in thee hell... yor saying ya gots singing balls that cum... Gawd but I’m pleased for ya, but it don’t do nuth’n for me if’n ya know what I’m saying.”

Duroc, no longer able to contain himself, dropped his harpoon and physically picked the old pirate up and carried him, complaining all the way, to the front gate. Placing him back down again he pointed down the road.

Balls was about to lay into him, but his big ears twitched. From the distance, he heard exactly what his big friend was trying to tell him about.

“Cooks got your food
But march you must go

To the left
To the left
To the left right left.

He’s got fish ‘n chicken
Eggs and roe

To the left
To the left
To the left right left

Sing’n

Hey – O
Hey – O
Hey – O
Boil m’ breakfast

Hey – O
Hey – O
Hey – O
Boil m’ breakfast.”

They saw the long pikes crest the hill, the first in line bearing a small flag attached to it... white with the letters ‘LT’ on it. As the soldiers breasted the rise, Balls and Duroc saw an immaculately uniformed troop of Wolverines lead by none other than their own Governor Gulo. Oddly enough it was this very same Governor was singing the marching cadence and he looked happier than either ever remembered seeing him.

Following the twenty five Wolverines was a smaller troop of Ferrets from the Fortress, lead by an officer and the Doberman Balls had so badly treated.

“Bollocks,” the pirate cursed. Turning to his friend, he told him, “This ain’t about you Duroc, so you stay out of it.”

“You said shipmates...” the Pig began, but the pirate cut him off.

“FUK WHAT I SAID... YOU GO IN AND STAND WATCH ON LADY T, ‘N THAT’S AN ORDER!” In a softer tone he said, “Anyone but one of our own tries ta get in, you use that har’poon you likes so much.”

Checking his pistols, the Rabbit calmly unlocked the gate and let himself out. Taking a few paces forward, he stood waiting for the soldiers.

“HALT!” Gulo ordered and his Wolverines, as one unit, stopped.

Turning to his troop, he yelled, “FEN!”

With a single motion they snapped to attention, bringing their long wooden lances to their sides. Each and every one of them, from their tall hats to their polished buttons, stood rigidly at attention, eyes looking directly forward.

“FA TEL!” Gulo ordered, and they all came to parade rest.

From behind the troop came a similar order and the Ferrets came to a more relaxed stance. The Dog and the Commander came forward and were joined by Gulo, while Balls stood where he was, waiting.

“Ya shoulda had them sew the bloody thing back on,” he growled at the Doberman when he came close, “It woulda healed well enough.”

Gulo looked from the pirate to the Dog and back again, the hair on the back of his neck rising up. “Is Lady Taverness well?” he asked.

Balls glared at the Dog and then spat into the dirt. “She’ll live,” he told Gulo. “She’s one of The Queen’s own, and we’re a tough bunch.”

“Is this one of the pirates who attacked you Bris?” Pablo asked the Doberman.

“One of?” Balls laughed. “I was the only one. Old Bris there might be tough enough to beat upon a woman, but pretty much he’s a big pussy... no offence to our shipmates on the Caveat Noir mind ya. After what he done, he’s lucky I didn’t gut’im and wrap his bowels around ‘is neck jest ta choke the shit out of ‘im.”

The Doberman took a threatening step towards the pirate but was stopped by the commander’s outstretched arm. “We’ll see who get’s something wrapped around his neck,” he growled. “That one’s the ring leader, Commander, arrest him.”

Pablo sighed. Removing a paper from the sleeve of his uniform, he unrolled it and began to read out loud. "In the name of Lord Pugwash, I hear by arrest you for the wonton attack upon his manservant, where upon you cut off his left ear." He looked up at Balls. "I will ask that you peacefully surrender your weapons, sir, and come with us."

"Jest you try and take'em," the pirate growled, placing his paws on the butts of the pistols.

Gulo pushed in front of the Rabbit and stood like a wall between his friend and his shipmate. "Certainly there must be some mistake Pablo. Balls is the manservant of our Captain Lady Taverness. He would not have left her side and I can assure you there are no others here besides the huge Pig. They are all the body guards she has with her and she is the honored guest of Lord Pugwash."

"I tell you there were at least five of them and I am lucky to have escaped with my life," the Doberman yelled. "In the name of Lord Pugwash I command you to arrest him now!"

Balls' had a pistol out and aimed at the Doberman before anyone could even think to react. With a click and a shower of sparks, the hammer struck the frizzen and the priming powder flashed but did not ignite the main charge. With a curse, he attempted to draw the second pistol, but Gulo had his wrist, forcing the pistol into the air where it discharged.

"FREZ VOLIE HUT!" he yelled in his native tongue and his troops immediately forced their way between where he stood and the fortress commander and his charge. Though they did not point their wooden lances at the Ferrets, there was no doubt that they would charge if so ordered. The Ferrets, for their part, were equally quick, forming two lines and pointing their muskets at the Wolverines.

"Half cock!" Pablo ordered, and within five seconds each of his soldiers had primed and set their hammers back to the safe position.

"Tell me what happened right now," Gulo growled lowly in Ball's ear, "Or I'll rip your throat out with my bare teeth."

"That Dog beat Lady T near to death," Balls hissed back. "Th' only reason him and his fuk'n Lordship are alive is cuz she told me to leave be. She said The Queen would never make it out of the harbor if 'n I put a ball in the little bastard's skull."

Releasing the pirate's paws, he told him, "Put your pistols up and do not reload. Let me handle this."

Turning towards the Ferrets, he called out, "Commander, I beg a moment's time to examine the evidence before the court."

"THIS AIN'T A COURT OF LAW! Bris bellowed. "HE JUST TRIED TO SHOOT ME... WHAT MORE PROOF DO YOU NEED?!"

Pablo turned to the Dog, and in a quiet but firm voice, said, "You will speak no more, sir, and if you do, I will have you killed in a most foul manner."

Signaling to his troops without words, he held up a finger count. Immediately, four of his soldiers came forward. Two grabbed the Doberman firmly by the arms and the other two stood in a threatening manner, bayonets leveled at his midsection.

Turning on his heel, the fortress commander walked briskly through the line of Wolverines and came to his friend's side. "We have a deadly situation here Colonel," he said formally. "This is not a court of law, nor do the two of us form anything close to a military tribunal. Legally speaking we are the ones on the outside of the law."

"If what I have been told is true," Gulo told him, "I would be compelled to gather the entire strength of two ships, and storm his Lordship's palace. Please bear with me. I do not wish to wage war with an old ally. My Captain has been beaten near to death, and I am told the culprit stands among us... he would be the one missing an ear. Further, I believe it is possible that he was ordered to do what he did... something that, should it be the truth, and should we bear witness to its telling publicly, a state of war would exist."

Pablo nodded in understanding. Looking at Balls, he asked him softly, "Is this true?"

"You bet it is," he growled.

Turning back to Gulo, he told him, "We would have to see the evidence and then we will decide what to do."

"Agreed," the Wolverine replied. "If you will follow me, sir."

To the pirate, he said, "Stay here."

Together, the officers walked to the gate and let themselves in. Going to the villa's door, they politely knocked and were promptly met by the huge Pig who blocked their way. After a moment's conversation, they were allowed inside.

Approximately ten minutes later, Pablo reemerged, walking by himself back to the area in front of the gate.

"Your mistress calls for you Mister Balls," he told the pirate quietly before walking through the ranks of the Wolverines. Coming to the Doberman, he nodded to the soldiers holding him. When The Dog was released, the Commander said, "Will you follow me please." It was not a question.

Leading the Dog around to the front of the villa, he followed the path to a very scenic overlook. Below them the ocean crashed upon the rocks and in the distance he could see

his beloved fortress. Walking to the edge of the cliff, the Ferret removed his tall hat and tossed it to the ground behind him; reveling in the feel of the wind through his fur.

“Why are we here?” Bris asked him. He had apparently calmed himself, now expecting that the officer would act on his behalf.

“Have you ever been to war?” Pablo asked him.

“No... why?”

“Because war is never pretty and many good people on both sides die. Never, however, are they the ones who so deserve to do so. I refer to those who sparked the conflict. That is why intelligent people seek a stalemate.”

“I’m sorry,” the big Dog told him, “But I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Take my fortress,” the commander explained, pointing at it as if speaking to a child. “Possibly it would never be used, though it has. Its actual intent is as a deterrent. So long as it has a defense factor equal to or greater than the attacker’s strength, we remain safe because a stalemate occurs.”

Bris blinked, still not understanding what the Ferret was trying to tell him.

Pablo sighed. “Very well... I shall be blunt. Colonel Gulo’s commanding officer was attacked this morning. Ostensibly she has claimed that Lord Pugwash had you administer that beating.”

“I...” Bris began, but Pablo stopped him with a finger held in the air.

“Let me finish.”

The Dog closed his mouth and nodded.

“Lord Pugwash, who is my commanding officer, will claim he did nothing of the sort. There is, however, no stalemate since you have a voice and will be made to tell the truth. When you do, there will be war and much blood will be shed.”

“I would never speak against Lord Pugwash,” Bris assured him.

“Then you would lie?”

“On my honor, you can count on it,” the Dog assured him.

“I see,” the Ferret said softly.

Placing a foot behind the Doberman, he lightly pushed him on the chest and then stepped back out of his reach. Bris, waving his arms wildly in the air, fell backwards over the cliff to the rocks below. The surprise was so complete that he never even yelled.

“And now you do not have to,” the Ferret said softly as he viewed the broken body on the rocks below. “Thus we maintain the stalemate and no war is allowed to exist.”

Turning, he picked up his hat and then walked back to the villa to rejoin with his troops.

Festival

For two days The Queen and the Caveat Noir rested, being attended to by a multitude of well wishing, hard working, chase after the gold coin, landsmen. This was not a bad thing for the ships, but for the crews it was not exactly all that good of a thing either. They were jealous guardians of their ships, which were every bit home, mother, lover, and friend. There was more than just a few hurt feelings when things were not done exactly so and someone's ears got boxed.

Though the Caveat Noir had nothing to hide, The Queen's hold was closely guarded, as that was where the payout gold was being kept. Only once did someone actually try to gain access, this being on the final day the pirates were to be in port. The intending thief, posing as one of the work crew, quietly entered through the forecastle paint locker and made his way to the very bottom of the ship. Here he took a very long and painful route, wiggling through the bilges; working his way towards the hold. Finally, managing to push up a loose plank, the young half drowned Raccoon was promptly hauled to his feet and a knife placed at his throat.

"No killing," a gravely voice said from within the darkness of the cramped hold. It was now full of all the supplies the ship would need for a long voyage plus four of the chests that had been brought back from the vault. "He tried, and he got caught... it'd be a shame to spill his blood; he's got guts. Hang him upside down from one of the yards and dunk him in the harbor a few times; then let him go."

"Aye Cap'n" Toby said, putting his knife away.

"Captain Tabor?!" the Raccoon gasped. "You're not dead like everyone said ya were! I'd never have tried if I knew you were alive... never! I want to join your crew, sir!"

"Crap," growled the voice. "Now look what ya went and done ya fat assed idiot."

"Sorry, sur... truly am. I'm guess'n we can't let'im go now can we?" He sighed. "I'll tie'im up and stuff a gag in his mouth."

"Fine... see to it. We'll hold him here until tonight after the festival. Once we've cast off it won't matter who he tells."

"Don't go to the festival," the Raccoon said quickly. "It's a trap."

There was a moment's quiet where the only thing heard was the tramp of feet on the deck above them and the squeak of The Queen's timbers as she moved softly with the incoming tide.

"Explain yourself," Tabor said finally, "And if ya lie to me I'll cut your tongue out and feed it to the seagulls."

“My mother’s a maid at Lord Pugwash’s palace,” the Raccoon explained quickly. “The stingy bastard didn’t even pay her last month because he said she wa was was... wasn’t doing her job good enough. I had to steal to feed us.”

“I’m struck with pity,” the Rabbit told him sourly, ignoring the stutter. “What’s that got to do with what’ll happen tonight?”

“She overheard Lord Pugwash talking to the fortress commander... something about his manservant falling off a cliff near the villa used by the White Bunny lady.”

“An accident like that don’t surprise me none,” the pirate muttered. In a louder voice, he said, “He was probably caught snooping like someone else I’m looking at. The Lady Taverness is in good paws and is quite adept at getting her own way.” He stopped and thought about this for a moment. “But it is peculiar; I’ll give ya that much. You hear anything about this particular ‘accident’ Toby?”

“No, sur. I been frequent’n the saloons and taverns doing the recruiting you asked me to do. I ain’t found narry but three like us, and only one wants ta join. The town folk don’t particularly care for Pugwash, sur. If his manservant was kilt, then there woulda been chatter.”

Tabor sat down heavily on a barrel. “And me stuck down here like some dang stowaway. I truly hate not having my paw on the tiller Toby. Two days and I ain’t even seen the light ‘o’ day. I got’s no idea what in hell’s going on and that’s really beginning to chafe my rigging.” Looking at the child in front of him, he asked, “What’s your name boy?”

“Gabby,” the Raccoon replied.

“And ain’t that just a little too appropriate,” the Rabbit muttered.

“It’s short for Gabriel,” the youngster said defensively. “My mother named me after my father, Captain Gabriel Bones.”

Toby laughed. “I know that name, sur. He’s that smuggler we used to call Captain Bonehead; remember Tabor? Right quick schooner rig... carried that yellowish top’sl.”

“Just fuk’n wonderful,” growled the spectacled Rabbit, “Another buccaneer’s brat kid. What’s the world coming too?” He sighed, “That would at least account for the guts he’s shown. Ain’t anyone else dared try stealing from us.”

He thought for a moment and again there was the quiet gurgle and groans heard only within the womb of a living ship’s hold. Reaching a decision, the pirate said softly, “Last we saw of old Bones was what, Toby... three years ago?”

“Aye Cap’n... I believe’s that’s so.”

“I heard yor father was caught out by a Labradorean sloop of war trying to off load some duty free by the full of the moon, Gabby. O’ course the King always gets a might bit peeved with smugglers not paying his squeeze. Fight or swing from a rope’s end... not much choice. Heard the crew give a good account of themselves before they was...” He looked at the Raccoon in the dim light. “The ship was lost with all hands Gabby. If ya didn’t know, then I’m sorry to have to give ya the bad news. Yor one of us... no doubt in my mind, so I believes ya; tell us about Pugfuk’s trap.”

The Raccoon was silent for a moment; stunned by the news he knew in his heart was true. Then he said in a quiet voice, “My.. my.. my mother said Commander Pablo and Lord Pugwash had a terrible argument... something about his Lordship wanting soldiers hidden around the palace tonight, ‘just in case’. The commander asked him, ‘In case of what?’ Old Pugwash just laughed and said, ‘In case some of them don’t get sick and die like they should.’

“The little bastard’s gonna poison us Cap’n!” Toby exclaimed.

“That would be an easy way to clear the decks,” Tabor agreed, “Cannon loaded with grapeshot would be a little too obvious. Stands to reason he’d try it too; we accepted his invitation to the festival and only a skeleton crew’ll be left to watch the ships. His people guard the wharf, and the harbor ways. He takes the ships and the Letter of Marque...” He thumped his paw on the chest next to him. “And he’s got it all.” Turning to the lookout, he said, “Curse me but I ain’t been paying attention to the cycles Toby... there ain’t no moon tonight is there?”

“Don’t think so, sur.”

“That clinches it then; there’ll be a boarding party coming from the harbor ways... long boats with muffled oars. You wouldn’t need but a few men to do it, but I’m betting there’ll be plenty. All these labor parties coming and going has give’em ample opportunity to plan their actions. They’ll know the ships inside and out. Seems old Puggsy took Lady Taverness’ bait, hook line and sinker. Problem is; now his greed’s threatening to pull us all overboard. He wants it all, and he’s pretty well set to get it.”

There was another moment’s silence broken by a loud groan as The Queen moved up against the rope bumpers placed between her hull and the wharf. It was then that her captain reached a decision. “Dang, but I don’t think she seen this one coming,” he sighed. “Suddenly I got a really bad feeling in the pit of my stomach Toby; It’s not like her to be so off her game. I need to get up to the villa and speak with that White Bunny Lady.”

Lifting the lid on the chest next to him, he fished around for a moment and then came out with a small bag which he tossed to the Raccoon. “This here is a turning point in your life Gabby,” he told the youngster. “You help me, and I’ll see to it you and your mother are not want’n when we’re done here. You agree to that?”

“Aye, aye, sir,” he responded.

“Good, you are now going to be my eyes and ears. You’re a good runner?”

“The best, sir.”

“Of course ya are.” To Toby he said, “Get me a towel for the squirt here, and then get me two of those fancy soldier uniforms... one big and one small. Close the storm shutters on my cabin windows so’s we can dress... and then I want you to hike your arse over to the Caveat Noir and tell Hissy I’m needing her company right now. Don’t take none of her crap either... right now means right now. You carry her if’n ya has too.”

Toby knuckled his brow. “Aye, aye Cap’n.”

By the time the fat lookout came back with the Cat Captain, Tabor was standing on deck dressed in a full blue militia uniform, complete with a saber, pistol, and white gloves stylishly draped over his belt. His cap was smaller than the usual Wolverine head gear, and he’d festooned it with a tall plume that just happened to be one of Toby’s favorite toys. Beside him, and similarly dressed except for the cloth dispatch pouch over his shoulder, was Gabby. Both stood ramrod straight showing a good military bearing such as Governor Gulo would have expected from one of his soldiers.

All around them, The Queen’s crew were busy putting the finishing touches on their ship; from swabbing the decks to applying gold leaf to her name proudly painted on the transom. There was a hustle to their work, as most would be going to the festival... and that meant rum.

“Don’t ewe lo’ok ‘andsom,” Captain Hiss said as she strode across the gangway. “Lady T w’ill ‘ave a fit eef she finds you out of the ‘old. Where are your work parties?”

Tabor smiled at her, liking his new spectacles very much. “I paid’em off and sent them packing... you should do the same. By the way, I never knew you had a wart on your face Hissy. These here glass lenses are the best treasure I ever pilfered.”

“Eet ees not a wart... eet ees a beauty mark.”

“Well then, ya better give it to Rosa cuz it’s not do’n ya any good.” He winked at the little Cat walking behind her mother and she smiled at him.

“Ees that a compliment or an insult?” The Cat’s captain asked him.

“It’s whatever you want it to be,” he replied, growing serious. “What do you know about the goings on up at Taverness’ villa.”

“Maybe something... maybe nothing. What do you hear... eh?”

“I been locked away like a not so favorite step-child for two days; so I ain’t heard much. There was a rumble about a dead dog who ‘just happened’ to fall off’n the cliff at the villa.”

“I deed ‘ear that,” she said, coming across the gangway and pressing one cheek to his, and then again to the opposite side in a quick and cordial Cat greeting. “I also ‘ear that Balls ‘as balls. ‘E is a good pirate... not afraid of death.”

“All right then,” Tabor told her, “Now ya lost me. Dam but that’s the very last time I agree to stay hidden. Let’s walk... we can talk as we go. Where’s Gulo?” he asked, leading the way back down the gang plank.

“ ‘E come two days ago and borrow one of my seex pounders. ‘Is soldiers mount it on a field carriage.”

“What else?”

“Tew swivels, fifty muskets, t’wenty peestols, and thirty grenades.”

Tabor stopped at the foot of the gangway and turned to look at her. “And that didn’t strike you as odd?” he demanded.

Hiss shrugged her shoulders. “ ‘E ‘as a job tew do just as you and I ‘ave a job tew do. I don’t ask; I just give ‘im what he reequesteed.”

“Babacomb and Kelly?”

“Off with two uff my crew to breeng another chest. That one we’el go into my ‘old.”

“Escorts?”

“Twenty uff Gulo’s soldiers with muskets and bayonets.”

The Rabbit was becoming angry... not with those around him, but with himself. It was as if he’d fallen asleep and everything had just kept on going. Now he was lost in a fog and he could hear the sea breaking on a very rocky shore. Try as he might, however, he couldn’t glean its bearing; making honest navigation all but impossible.

Pugwash wanted them all dead... Gulo armed to the teeth... a Dog that ‘fell’ off of a cliff... and a comment about Balls having balls. None of it was adding up.

“Where’s Lady Taverness?” he asked the Cat.

“Eye ‘ave not seen ‘er in three days now. Most likely shee ese at ‘er villa ‘aving wild sex with oo ever suits ‘er.”

“The Pig?”

“Eef she so wish I suppose.”

“I meant have you seen him?”

She shook her head. “Nor ‘im... not that I would cross the street to peesss on ‘im if he was ablaze. ‘E ees a cannibal.”

Tabor looked to Toby, who was still standing on the deck watching him. “Where in coal fired Hades is Mr. Flopears?” he hollered at him.

“In the town buying rockets, sur” the lookout yelled back.

“What in hell is he buying rockets for?”

“Because you told him he could.”

“Fine! Go find his arse and tell him to buy all of it he can lay his paws on!”

“But...”

“Just do it Toby... and then get back to the ship. Gather what crew is left on board and tell ‘em all to stay put and stand by for orders.”

“Rosa...” he said next, turning to the little Cat, “You do the same on the Caveat Noir... gather the crew that’s there and have them standing ready. I don’t want anything done just yet, but I’ll be back by the evening meal. I’ll explain what we gotta do then.”

“Aye, sur.” She told him from behind her mother. Then, before anyone but Tabor saw, she pulled her shirt aside momentarily bearing one of her small breasts while licking her lips.

“Oh for the love a... not nowwww...” he hissed.

Her mother turned to look at her. The little Cat just smiled sweetly at her and then jumped off the gangway to the wooden planks where she quickly ran back to her ship.

Turning to Gabby, Tabor handed him a small bag of coins. “That bags all gold,” he told him. “You run and take it to your mother. Tell her to spread it around the staff as a gift from Lady Taverness. That’ll loosen some tongues. Tell her if she finds out exactly what Pugwash intends I’ll give her two more bags just like it. Then you join me at the villa.”

“Yes sir,” he said, and was off at a run.

“Ewe be the bossy one after a f’ew days off,” Hiss cackled.

The Rabbit winked at her. “Walk with me now Hissy... give me five minutes to bend your ear and you won’t be a laughing. I’m think’n it’s nigh time we beat to quarters old Cat.”

When Tabor and Hiss arrived at the villa, both were surprised to find it looking more like an armed camp than a relaxing place to have a romantic rendezvous.

Stationed in the fore was the six pounder Gulo had ‘borrowed’ from Hiss, complete with an ammunition chest and a gun crew of six Wolverines, all in uniform and all looking very businesslike. Those not watching the pathway were busy polishing the bronze barrel or dabbing fresh paint on the carriage. To the gun’s left flank, and hidden from view, was one of the swivels with a crew of three. At the villa’s outer wall gate stood a sentry at parade rest while near the corners of the building armed sentries marched slowly around the perimeter, their eyes roaming the terrain.

A Wolverine, bearing the stripes of a Sergeant on his uniform, came forward to greet them. His hat, too, bore a slight difference to the other soldiers, as it had a blue bottle brush standing up from its front plate. This was not one of the soldiers stationed on either of the ships or the pirate would have recognized him. He saluted Tabor as an officer, looked suspiciously at Hiss, and then asked cordially, “May I inquire as to the nature of your business, sir and madam?”

“We’re here to see Lady Taverness,” Tabor told him after returning his salute.

“I am sorry, sir,” the soldier replied without hesitation, “But the Lady is unavailable at this time.”

“Eye am Captain ‘iss uff thee Caveat Noir,” the Cat told him loudly. “Ewe will step aside and let us pass... we ‘ave business with thee White Rabbit!”

The Wolverine blinked, but otherwise seemed totally oblivious to who Hiss was; nor did he apparently care. “I am sorry Captain ‘iss,” he told her quite civilly, “But you may not enter. If you attempt, you will be stopped with force.”

The Cat looked as though she were about to strike the soldier so Tabor caught her by the arm and pulled her back slightly. “He’s jest doing his job Hissy... no need to be causing a fuss.” He nodded to the soldier and saw a grateful expression on his face. “Is Colonel Gulo present, Sergeant?”

“He is off to the fortress, Sir.”

“You will need to send a runner for him, please. We need him here immediately as our business is urgent and it involves him directly. Is the pir... manservant here, the one who goes by the name of Balls?”

The soldier smiled a very large smile. “Yes sir, he is, though we took his pistols away for his own well being.”

“Now I would have liked to seen that one,” the Rabbit chuckled. “Would you kindly fetch him for me. Tell him Captain Tabor requests his presence by the front gate. He will vouch for us, and if need be, Lady Taverness can be consulted, though I’d rather surprise her.” He winked and the effect was immediate.

“Yes, sir,” the Sergeant told him.

Turning, he called out to the sentry at the gate in Wolverine. Coming to attention, the soldier shouldered his musket as if he were on royal guard duty, and then let himself in and marched off towards the house.

“Nice weapons you have there Sergeant,” Tabor remarked sociably. “It seems your men know how to take good care of them too.

“Thank you, sir. Colonel Gulo arranged them for us. It feels good to be armed again with something more than a wooden lance.”

“Have there been any disturbances here?” the Rabbit asked, looking around the area. He spotted the second swivel gun hidden in the bushes off to the left flank of the cannon, and smiled, inwardly blessing the find of his spectacles.

“Not since we took up our defensive positions, sir. It is my understanding that His Lordship was not all that pleased, but that matters not a lot to us. Our loyalties do not stretch that far.”

There was a minor commotion at the front door of the Villa, as their presence was announced and Balls immediately came out to greet them. As he walked, he wrung his paws like an old mother greeting her long lost children.

“What in the name of a dribbling plump butt are you two doing here?” he called out as he jogged to the gate. “Sergeant Hanson... let them in... these are honored guests.”

“As you wish Mr. Balls,” The Sergeant replied.

Turning to the Rabbit and the Cat, he held his paw out, indicating they should walk ahead of him. It was a mark of respect, and of polite courtesy. When they got to the gate, the old Rabbit held it open for them. Before Tabor could even protest, the pirate, now manservant, gave his Captain a huge hug, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“Lady T is gonna be so pissed at you, sur, but I don’t care anymore. I just want to get back on The Queen and leaves this place. Land is not where I wants ta be... no sur... ya can leaves it ta the sojers. Better ta be an honest pirate than a dishonest thief.”

“I missed you too,” Tabor told him, returning the hug warmly.

Balls looked at Captain Hiss and made to hug her as well until she growled at him, “Do eet and eye scratch yor eyes out.”

“Fuk you too ya lesbian Queen,” the pirate rumbled good naturedly; sounding a bit more like his old self.

His Captain reached out and tweaked his ear. “Be polite,” he told him, and then nodded to the soldiers outside the gate. “Tell me what happened and then let us inside. I’ve a need to speak privately with Her Worshipful White Bunny.” He then whispered, “The Bitch.”

“She ain’t a bitch,” the old Rabbit hiss whispered back, “She’s a good sweet Doe.”

Tabor blinked and then whispered back, “Wasn’t that long ago I stopped you from cutting her throat... and now she’s a kind sweet Doe?”

“Aye...” the manservant muttered in reply, dropping his eyes in embarrassment, “Well... things have a way of chang’n now, don’t they?”

Commander Pablo Ferret was a soldier’s soldier. Thirty year military veteran, recipient of five Purple Slashes for wounds received in battle, three Ferret Meritorious Medals of Valor, two Wolverine Medals of the Claw and Fang, one Alpha Wolf Medal status of the Iron Paw, and a Medal of the Scarlet Rose, which carried a Knighthood recognized by all seven of the Kingdoms... none of which he ever wore or spoke of. Duty was his mistress... honor was his life... and yet this afternoon as he gazed out over the ocean through his binocular device, he felt soul weary and terribly soiled.

“I’m sorry to disturb your thoughts, sir,” his Adjutant said softly from the area just behind him, “But Colonel Gulo is here to see you. He says you invited him to lunch.”

“Oh,” the old Ferret replied, standing from his device and blinking. “I believe I did make that invitation.” He sighed, wondering if he could plead sickness. He was, after all, feeling sick at heart. His conscious quickly squashed the idea. Colonel Gulo was one of the Wolverines from Osma Falls. He could not deny him. “Please show him up, and then have my mess readied. We will have the Bordonee Moulou wine with our meal.”

“That is your only bottle, sir,” the Adjunct said, “Are you sure?”

Pablo waved his paw in dismissal. "It is time it was drunk before it sours like an old soldier's heart."

"Sir?"

"Never mind. Go... do as I asked. It's a beautiful day and I wish to enjoy some of it before we eat."

A moment later, as he was again gazing out over the harbor, he heard someone politely clearing their throat.

"Is that you Colonel Gulo?"

"Yes sir, I do hope I am not inconveniencing you."

"Not at all. You are, in fact, a welcome diversion." He stood and turned to look at the Wolverine. There, standing next to the soldier, was a junior officer. He wore a back pack that obviously had some weight to it. The Ferret smiled. "It is good to see young soldiers," he said. "It reminds us that time does not stand still and we will not live forever. When you leave tonight, Colonel Gulo, I wish you to take this binocular glass with you."

"Sir?"

"It will be as a reminder of our working together again. The first time was at Osma Falls; and what a glorious time that was. Come now... we shall lunch on smoked fish and oysters, and I have the most perfect bottle of wine to go with it."

Lunch had been good and the wine superb. The Commander's glass was still full as he'd not even taken a sip before setting it aside. For him, this bottle was more symbolic than for taste. He had received it on the day of his knighthood and vowed never to open it until the day he was to retire from service; a fact known only to him.

"Commander," Gulo said softly. "The lunch was excellent but now I must speak to you on an urgent matter. May we please speak in private?"

Pablo, sitting with both paw's fingers intertwined and under his chin, raised one eyebrow as he looked at the Wolverine. "Certainly... and I too wished to speak with you."

Turning without rising, he dismissed his staff and was then surprised when the Colonel did not similarly dismiss his Lieutenant. When the door closed behind the last of the servants, the Wolverine formally stood.

"I have some things to tell you, sir, which may not be spoken outside of this room."

He made a motion with his paw and the Lieutenant picked up his duffel, Upending it on the table twenty bayonets spilled out along with a small hammer.

“One of my missions this day,” Gulo explained, “Was the spiking of your cannons so they could not be used against us when we departed this evening.”

“Whatever would compel you to do such a thing?” Pablo asked the Wolverine. Where most commanders would have immediately jumped to conclusions and called for their guards, the Ferret knew well enough that a Wolverine would never do anything without good reason.

“Loyalty,” Gulo replied simply. Turning to face the Lieutenant, he smiled and said, “Commander Pablo Ferret... it is my absolute pleasure to introduce to you His Royal Highness Crown Prince Uric Graypaw Wolverine, Lord of The North Edge, Grand Duke of the Rustian Ocean.”

Pablo blinked, recognizing the young Wolverine as one of the faces among the many within the survivor’s camp they’d constructed; understanding finally coming to him. This was the reason the Labradoreans were so desperate to sink the transport ship trying so frantically to make haven in Blueportdoggie.

Standing, he bowed deeply. “I had no idea your Highness or I would have made every effort to...”

“Not a word, Commander Ferret,” the prince told him. “I am only Lieutenant Graypaw. Anything more would be unworthy and unearned praise. I failed in my mission to rescue the Royal family; for that I do not even deserve the rank of Private among our soldiery. That Governor Gulo allowed me the rank of Lieutenant at least gave me back a small bit of my lost honor.”

Pablo looked at Gulo. “Governor?”

The Wolverine nodded. “Of the port town Saylavee.”

“Governor,” the Ferret said as he took his wine glass and carefully poured its contents back into the bottle, “I have some concerns to tell you about regarding the Burgomaster and tonight’s festival.” Picking up the cork, he placed it back in the bottle’s neck and smacked it in flush with the heel of his palm... resealing the bottle. “It would seem I have been in the employ of nothing more than a common thief and murderer.”

“Of that I am aware,” Gulo told him with a serious smile. “And it would seem that I have much the same problem.” He smiled sadly, “Times and circumstances make for very strange allies Commander, but in their own way; they are good allies.”

Duroc stood, concealed from view by a column intended to separate the spacious toilet from the foyer area meant for the occupant's more intimate visitors. It was all he could do to keep his huge stomach sucked in far enough to remain behind the carved marble. His ears strained to hear what was being said and his eyes watched Balls, who was standing behind the columns twin on the other side of the entrance.

He'd had little sleep over the last few days as he stood guard, wanting so badly for Lord Pugwash to come for a visit. He was disappointed when the only visitors turned out to be messengers, their letters always intercepted by the Wolverines and then delivered to Lady Taverness. At first these soldiers were armed with only wooden lances, but by the afternoon of the same day, Governor Gulo arrived with more of his troops, these pulling a cannon and carrying a plentitude of muskets and other arms. At least some of the tenseness left the Swine, but he found his belly rumbling for a meal of Dog meat... a particular small Dog; the other white meat.

"I'm fine," Lady Taverness said again, addressing the concerns of both Captain Hiss and Captain Tabor. She sat in a huge tub of bath water, with bubbles up to her neck.

"If you are so fine then," Tabor told her roughly, "Stand and turn around so's I can see your back."

"The only thing you'll see," she told him, adjusting her eye patch, are some old wound scars, and a heart shaped tattoo on my left shoulder. What happened, happened; and it actually benefited us a further mile or two in getting more of old Puggsy's treasure out of the vault."

"'Nd 'ow ees that?" Hiss asked her. Rising, she removed her sword belt and tossed it and her sword to the chair she'd been sitting in. Next she removed her shirt, exposing a pair of small firm breasts.

"It took me out of the equation and allowed the little prick time to scheme," the Rabbit replied. "So long as he was doing that, he wasn't thinking about anything else. His view of the world is quite myopic. All he can see right now is his triumphant entrance as the one who brought down 'The Dread Pirate Tabor'. He is putty in my paws."

"And what in the deep blue ocean are you doing?" Hiss' counterpart captain asked as she shucked her boots and pants.

"Eye am going to take a bath. Thee tub ees large e'nuf for all of us, ees eet not?" she winked at him. "Cum let us plot our eeven'ing while wee relax just a bit. Eet ees not as eef wee 'ave not se'en eash other's nakedness bee'fore."

"You don't like boys, and I don't like girls," the pirate declared, his voice rising. He was in fact, suddenly feeling his urges.

“But I like both,” Lady Taverness said in a silky voice. “I think Captain Hiss has an excellent idea.”

Moving to the tub, the Cat captain slipped into the water with a sigh.

“Balls!” the White Bunny yelled out, a note of happiness to her voice. “I know you’re listening you old woman... bring us some of that sangria you make so well.”

Tabor looked toward the doorway and saw the old pirate materialize from behind the column. “Yes m’um,” he said. With a grin and a nod to the tub, he indicated his thoughts about the Captain taking advantage while he could.

“Bring it quick like,” Tabor growled. With a sigh he grumbled, “I ain’t gonna get any rest am I?” Nodding to the other column, he said, “Take the Pig with you and leave him somewhere. Hearing him giggle when I get naked won’t make me feel all that manly.”

Balls looked towards his running mate and when the tattooed Pig didn’t move, Tabor yelled, “DUROC YOUR BELLY BUTTON’S STICKING AN INCH OUT FROM THE EDGE OF THAT THING YOR TRYING TO HIDE BEHIND! NOW GET BEFORE I GRAB YA AND DO SOME OF THAT UGGA BUGGA STUFF!”

Duroc took one large step and was standing with his paws on his hips glaring at the pirate.

Tabor smiled at him and winked.

The tattooed Swine smiled back and winked too. Then he turned on his heel and strode after Balls.

With a laugh, the pirate began shucking his clothes. Prancing across the room he jumped into the tub sloshing water all over the floor.

Gabby ran up the path towards the villa. The afternoon was beautiful, but his eyes didn’t see it. His mind was ablaze with the revelations that he’d been exposed to. At first his mother had cried when she saw him in uniform... and then she cried again when he handed her the pouch of gold coins and explained himself. She kissed him and then slipped the pouch down her front as she pulled him out of the kitchen to a very quiet pantry.

Kneeling in front of him, she said, “I already know how the little booger intends to do his dirty deed. He ain’t so smart... he’s just full of himself. There’s a whole case of ‘special’ wine locked in a cabinet in the kitchen. It’s to be served to his ‘special’ guests tonight when the Lord High Pigmy toasts the winner of the fencing match.”

“Can we switch it out?” he asked her.

“Done, and done,” she told him, jingling the coin bag wedged within her cleavage. “But you tell your new friend he’s to send someone he can trust to witness the switch... better... tell him to bring his own case of wine so he knows there’s not been a double cross, eh?” Leaning close, she whispered in his ear, “There’s revolution afoot and I’m a part of it. The people are tired of things the way they are in Blueportdoggie and it seems your friend’s arrival here was rather fortuitous. Old Pugwash hasn’t so much as glanced at anything going on around him. We got him and his pegged... just you watch and see what happens.”

“I never knew,” he whispered back.

She winked at him. “Of course you didn’t... because it’s a huge secret. Ilene Cat brought me into it when your Da disappeared. There’s been so much that’s happened and Pugfucker’s been directly behind it. Paying taxes is one thing, but people disappearing and other’s imprisoned unjustly... that’s quite another. Ilene told me she needed someone on the inside and I had my reasons for want’n to be here.”

“You’re pretty smart,” he told her with new found admiration.

“And who do you think was the brains behind your Da’s business?”

Gabby suddenly looked sad, and his face dropped. “About Da,” he told her.

She placed a finger under his chin and lifted his face. “It’s all right,” she told him. “I know he’s gone. Lord Pugfucker got a letter from the Black King, God curse him. My suspicions have always been that he informed the Labradoreans of the time and place your Da was supposed to off load for his traitor’s gold.”

“That’s why you’re working here?”

“Aye... it is.” She pinched his cheek. “And now it’s payback time. You go tell your new Captain he’s got friends on the inside; but you tell him too that Little Lord Smartypants will still have his militia here for protection and that’s something for consideration.

When Kelly and Babacomb arrived at the Caveat Noir, Rosa quickly informed them of their new status of preparedness.

“Best not to look so,” the Dog told her, nodding to the Cat crew lounging around and all of them armed to the teeth. “Keep a solid guard on the hold now that we have a chest on board, but have the rest of the crew stand down. If there’s to be an action, it’s best not to show your cards. If they know you’re waiting for them, they’ll change their plans or not come at all.”

“But if they don’t come,” she told him with the smile of youth and innocence, “Then that would be a good thing, no?”

“Not so much,” he told her, his battle instincts kicking into gear. “If it was me, I would simply change my plans and be waiting for the ships by the harbor chain. In the darkness, we wouldn’t see it was raised, when it was supposed to be down. The first ship runs into it... the second ship runs into the first, pandemonium ensues; and I would then board both vessels with cutlass and pistol. Surprise would carry the moment.” He held a finger up, “Surprise on your side will always give you a ten fold advantage. It would be much better that we let the foe attempt their boarding here and then nip it in the bud through the use of surprise rather than cannon.”

“Nip it in the bud?” she asked.

Reaching out, he ruffled the fur on her head, something he knew she didn’t like. “It’s a gardener’s term my mother taught me concerning her tea roses. To get that one perfect flower she would nip the various other buds off with her nails before they could bloom.”

“So we want them to attack us?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” he told her. “In that manner, we choose the battle ground and catch them out in the open before they can close ranks with us.”

When she still looked confused, he told her, “Let’s pretend Kelly is your enemy.”

“Here now,” the Rabbit protested good naturedly. “I ain’t no enemy to the Cat.”

Babacomb clapped him on the shoulder and laughed. “Neither am I,” he said, “And amazed I am to be saying that... but for now pretend with us, eh?”

Turning to the little Cat, he asked her, “Which would you rather do, shoot old Kelly here at a distance, or knife him when he gets closer?”

Rosa smiled and produced a knife as if by magic. “Eye wood knife ‘im,” she said with a wicked smile.

Babacomb turned and looked at the navigator, his eyebrows raised in surprise and admiration. He had obviously underestimated the little lookout. Nodding to a near by sailor, he told the Rabbit, “Do me the honor Mr. Kelly, and arm yourself with a cutlass. I would that you appeared more formidable.”

When the Rabbit had his weapon, he laid his ears back and growled at the Cat, “I’m gonna cut your bleeding ‘ead off and boil it fer soup!”

The effect he had on Rosa was quite remarkable. Though she did not run away, her body, of its own accord, told the pair that she was indeed intimidated.

“And what now, Kitten?” Babacomb asked her kindly.

“Now I weesh tew shoot ‘im.”

“Of course you do, but understand one thing... the only reason he brought a cutlass was?”

“Because you told ‘im tew.”

The black Dog shook his head. “Try again and forget I’m here. I am simply the teacher.”

Rosa looked down at her paw and the knife it held. “Because I ‘ad a knife?”

“Exactly. He saw the knife and he wished to be stronger. If you reached for a pistol...”

“ ‘Ee wood ‘ave brought a musket.”

“You grab a swivel gun?”

“ ‘Ee wood bring a cannon.”

Babacomb smiled. “So then... if you were the Captain of this vessel, what would you instruct the crew to do, since it is certain that we are being watched?”

Rosa looked around the deck, and then to a nearby sailor, she said softly, “Emma... pass thee word quiett like... stow thee weapons. Guard only thee ‘old. Make it look like wee are meek Pussy Cats, eh?”

Babacomb refrained from tousling her fur this time... she’d grown by leaps and bounds in just those few short minutes. Looking at Kelly, he found the Rabbit smiling at him.

“What?”

“Ya missed yor calling Dog breath. You should open a pirating school. You’re a good teacher.”

The Dog frowned. “What is the saying? If you can’s do... teach?”

“That’s not what I meant at all,” the Navigator retorted.

“Best you hike your arse to The Queen,” Babacomb told him, “And make sure they act in the same manner. I’ve a good idea Captain Tabor has already thought this one out. Check to see if Mr. Flopears has returned. I believe he was off buying rockets?”

Kelly smiled. "He does like things that go 'boom'."

"We was supposed to take the treasure and run," Tabor told Lady Taverness as he helped with her white canvas fencing blouse. It was sleeveless so that blood flow from any cut to her arms would be clearly seen. "We warn't supposed ta get embroiled in some sort 'o' revolution. That'll just get ya dead for the greater good; and the only greater good I care about is my ship, my crew, and my treasure... in that order."

"Did you or did you not get your chests of gold?" she asked while applying rouge to her cheek fur.

"You look like a painted whore," he grumbled.

"I am a painted whore," she replied. "You've said so yourself many times."

The pirate traced his fingers along the fresh whip wounds before lacing up the back of the blouse. "I'm in agreement with Balls," he told her, changing tact, "I say we waltz into the festival, put a ball into his head and then leave. Ya cut the head off the snake and those scum making up the body'll run for cover like the cockroaches they are. I say let's cut our losses and hightail it. Let the revolution clean up the mess. We got six chests 'o' gold, that's more than enough."

"And we paid out four again refitting the ships," she told him. "That leaves us with only one chest for each ship. Divide that with the crew and what does it leave us to retire on?"

Tabor stopped right in the middle of tying the laces. "Retire?"

The doe turned on her stool and looked up at him with her one good eye. "You can't possibly think I intend doing this sort of thing forever do you?"

Tabor's mouth dropped open. "I..."

She held up her right paw, spreading the fingers out so he could see them. "Five times now I have almost been killed... and I'm not counting the times I pushed Death away with nothing more than a promise to double his take. I'm talking about the times I was but seconds away and clinging to a thread. I am not a Cat with nine lives, which I don't believe in for an instant in any case, but you certainly can see my point. You've been tremendously lucky too Love. Goodness knows I've tried my best to kill you. Fortunately I wasn't successful. It was only a matter of time though; I'm damned good at what I do."

"You certainly are that," he mumbled as he finished tying the laces.

“Help me up,” she told him, holding out her paw. “I’ve a fencing match to win and then we’re going to fetch our last chests. After that what happens here is no longer any of our concern.”

“It’s not?”

“I’m the Captain,” she told him, “And if I say it’s so, it’s so. Win... Fetch... sail.”

“What about Hiss?”

Lady Taverness placed a paw under his chin and lightly kissed him on the lips.

“What about her?”

“You’d leave her here?”

“That’s her choice. Her Ilene is here and all a part of the stupidity. I wouldn’t count on Hiss for anything. Now... my fine buck... we’ve places to go and gold to plunder. There’s more treasure to collect; or have you forgotten Gulo’s map? We’ll take him with us and fetch it alone if need be... less to share that way.”

Holding her arms up, she told him, “Buckle my sword belt for me.”

Tabor picked up the slender blade and the thin leather belt fashioned to be worn around her slender waste. “You should have a shoulder belt and a proper frog for this sticker,” he told her. “Fall in the ocean and you won’t be able to get it off so easy.” Examining it closely, he furthered, “I can’t believe you think this thing is superior to a good cutlass.

“Everything in its time and place,” she replied in her softest voice. Placing a paw on his cheek, she said, “A cutlass is fine for heavy work and functions well in a boarding but it’s clumsy and made for just two things... to cleave meat and clear wreckage. You watch me work tonight and then tell me which I should wear into battle.”

“I won’t be there,” he replied flatly. Ducking her kiss, he bent down and wrapped the belt around her waist. He then clasped the buckle one notch too tightly.

“Oh yes,” she said sarcastically as she readjusted the belt, “You have The Queen to tend to and a boarding to fend off. I think you’re wrong about it but I won’t deny you your place on her decks. Pugwash doesn’t have those sorts of assets or he would have struck openly. He owns the fortress for goodness sake. What’s kept him from simply blowing us to splinters?” She placed a paw over her mouth and acted surprised. “Oh... could it be the Letter of Marque he so badly wants? He needs proof that he killed you doesn’t he? No Queen... no Knighthood... no land... no wonderful reward... oh bother, all blown to splinters and gone.”

“And thus the reason for them boarding us,” the pirate told her gruffly.

“His plan is to poison the lot of us and then confiscate the ships legally. You heard that from your own little informant’s mouth. Why would he board ships he can just take after the principles are all dead?”

Leaning forward, she gave him a quick kiss on the lips and then with her left paw, roughly grabbed his cod and gave it a squeeze. “You do what you think you must... just don’t get your balls shot off. I have no use for a second manservant.”

With that, she strode out of the toilet, making her way to the main hall where the Cat and the Wolverine waited for them.

Gulo looked uncomfortable sitting in an overstuffed chair as their final plans were laid out by Lady Taverness. His uniform had sweat stains under the arms and he held his tall hat upon his lap as if trying to hide a wayward erection.

“After I win the fencing match,” she told them as she paced the floor, “We will pick up the last of the chests which will be in the hall with us, and proceed to the wharf where we will embark.” She was beginning to feel the adrenaline flowing through her veins and it was hard for her to remain still. “The entire route, I intend throwing out handfuls of coins to the crowd,” she continued. “That will keep a large amount of warm bodies between us and Pugwash’s thieving band of constables. There will be no way they can take us by force.”

“Eye think ewe are dreaming,” Captain Hiss told her. She took a moment to look at Gulo and Tabor. “There ees too much missing from your plan... like thee guard of thee treasure.”

“Like the guard on the ships,” Tabor added, and then looked at Gulo, nodding that the Wolverine should include something.

“My part is done,” he told them. “The fortress will effectively be taken out of the picture. When we leave, the guns will be mute.”

“How did ya arrange that one?” the Rabbit Captain asked him roughly.

“I am not at liberty to discuss it,” he responded. “All anyone needs to know is that the harbor chain will be down and we are guaranteed safe passage out of the harbor. I also have approximately fifty more troops to bring along. We can split them between the ships.”

This caused Taverness to stop pacing. “What fifty troops?”

“Some of them are standing guard on this villa,” he told her. “They have been all that stood between you and certain death at the paws of Lord Pugwash... something you should be highly grateful for.”

“I asked for no such guard,” she told him quickly. Fifty more Wolverines would tip the scales drastically to the Governor’s favor during the following voyage.

“Because you are capable of taking care of yourself?” he asked her with a snort. “I bore witness to your condition, as did the Commander of the fortress. I am of the opinion that if it had not been for your manservant, you would be dead now.”

“His name is Balls,” Tabor growled. “Best you remember it.”

The Wolverine looked at him, his pale eyes showing no emotion. “Balls,” he repeated, and then added, “Is an honorary member of my troop, Captain Tabor. There is no higher honor.”

“ ‘Nd what about the revolution?” Hiss asked, sounding perplexed. “Eye ‘ave a personal interest...”

“I know what you have,” Lady Taverness told her coldly. “I will remind you that we voted on coming here to take what we could from Pugwash. I never signed on to free the oppressed. There will always be ‘the oppressed’ whatever port you decide to frequent for your sexual satisfaction.”

Hiss partially pulled her sword from its scabbard. “Ewe wish to warm up for thee fencing match? Eye am thinking perhaps...”

“Put it away,” Tabor commanded. “I’m sick of the lot ‘o’ ya. What do we now know... right now, between the four of us?”

“The harbor is secure for our departure,” Gulo offered.

“My sheep ‘as never looked this good,” Hiss added. “Eye am short ‘anded still but am full in thee ‘old and ready. Eye am also tired of thee land, but Eye ‘ave no choice to do what Eye must or the Caveat Noir ‘ave no ‘ome to come back to.” She looked pointedly at Lady Taverness. “That ees something you ‘ave no worry of, eh Rabbit?”

“My ship is ready,” Tabor cut in. “If it was up to me, I’d leave right now. I have it on good advice that the planned entertainment for tonight’s festival was to watch my friend’s and crewmates be poisoned. That rubs me against the pier without no fenders. A good fight is a good fight, but poison is outright cowardice. I’m of a mind to storm the palace, shoot Pugwash between the eyes and then burn it to the ground. Fuk’im; gold and treasure be damned.”

“You’re angry...” Lady Taverness began, and he turned on her.

“YOR FUK’N RIGHT I’M ANGRY! TWO DAYS I SPENT IN THE HOLD AND FOR WHAT? I’M SEEING A PLAN THAT’S FALLING APART BECAUSE NOW EVERYONE WANTS WHAT THEY WANT AND FUK WHAT WAS AGREED TO!”

There was a quiet moment among them and then he continued in a quieter tone. “Being that I can’t leaves no shipmate behind, be it a he, a she, a Cat, a Rabbit, or a Wolverine, I’m bound to do what I thinks best... but by the green ocean, I will do it my way.”

Turning towards the entrance of the main hall, he yelled, “BALLS... DUROC... GET YOUR ARSES IN HERE ON THE DOUBLE!”

The pair came running and stood in front of the Captain, both knuckling their brows; Balls having taught the Pig that it was a good thing to do in order to show respect.

“Yes sir?” they said in the same voice.

“You heard what’s going on, and don’t pretend ya wasn’t listening.”

“Yes sir!” they again chorused.

“You’re to go with the Lady Taverness and act as her body guards. She eats nothing, she drinks nothing... and the same goes for the two of you. Take Gabby with ya and talk to his mother. Find the wine... get a fresh case and swap it out; then keep an eye on things.”

“Gulo, you take forty of your troops and station them around the room where Lady T is fencing. I want them armed to the teeth and looking mean. Tell’em it’s shoot first and ask questions later... and you make damned sure that’s clear to the Pug Dog. Paint a fuk’n bullseye on his forehead while you’re at it so there’s no misinterpretation as to what will happen should the wind have an unfavorable change.”

Pausing to look at the three, he smiled a sly smile. “I’ll take the rest of the crew and hold the ships. I have a plan for that.” He turned to the white Rabbit. “I had Mr. Flopears buy up all the rockets and flares and such that he could find. I’m gonna let him play with them tonight just to see him smile. When you see the fireworks begin, that means we have the enemy in site. We’ll keep it up until they’re close alongside; and then we’ll let’em have it. Three star burst in the sky at the same time means they’re all done in... if the fireworks stop and there ain’t no starbursts, then come a running cuz we’re hand to hand or worse.”

Looking at the Cat Captain, he told her, “I ain’t ever left a fight, even if it wasn’t of my own choosing; you tell your Ilene that. Maybe someday I’ll open a tavern across the street from hers, but for the boys.”

There was the sound of steel leaving leather and Lady Taverness had her sword out and under his chin, poised for a death thrust.

“What makes you think you can just waltz in on this party and take control?” she asked him icily.

There was the sound of two pistols being cocked, and from the corners of his eyes, Tabor saw both Hiss and Gulo take aim at the doe’s head.

“Because I’m the Captain,” he told her softly. With the tip of his finger, he pushed her sword blade gently to the side. “It’s so because I say it’s so. Best you get used to that if’n we’re going to one day retire together.”

Lord Pugwash sat in the great hall listening to the sounds of sport sword fighting taking place outside the walls. Occasionally there was a cry of pain followed closely by the shout of a referee chastising one of the players for being too aggressive. ‘Draw blood’, they would shout, ‘Without serious injury!’ They would then shout for the doctor; the injured party would be stitched up and given a flagon of rum to drink for the pain.

Normally he would have been outside watching; seated in an elevated chair and glorying in the blood... so long as it was not his blood, he could consider it was all for fun. Now, however, he was expecting a visit from one whom he had had business dealings with in the past; one whom he’d used as an enforcer on many occasions. The Pug Dog respected this person, but it was the respect a veteran snake handler had for their most venomous and prized possession.

On the far side of the hall, a door opened, and a servant stood in just far enough to announce a guest.

“Who is it?” Pugwash growled.

“I don’t know, sir,” the butler replied. “The fellow has refused to identify himself except that he said to tell you; ‘The Moon is not made of cheese as you’d suspected’.”

The Pug smiled an evil smile, recognizing the old code phrase. Standing, he rubbed his paws together. “Show him in and then post guards on all the doors. I do not wish to be disturbed.”

“Very good, sir.”

The servant disappeared through the door and a moment later it opened again.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, sir!” protested the voice of a female. “You’ve made a terrible mistake. Please, sir, you’re hurting me!”

The figure of a black Dog came through the door, dragging one of the kitchen staff by the arm. "Shut up!" he commanded her, "Answer when spoken to and nothing further."

He pushed the maid to the floor. "Stay there and don't move or you'll have two chins." So saying, he pulled out a huge knife and held it threateningly. Looking to Lord Pugwash, he snarled, "And the same goes for you Your Lordship. You've always been a pompous little ass but I never figured you to be so damnably stupid!"

Taking a small bag from his pocket, he upended it and ten small gold coins fell to the floor making a musical sound as they danced across the tiles. "Perhaps you can tell me how it is that one of your staff has so much gold on her person... gold bearing the Labradorean eagle!"

"Captain Babacomb," Lord Pugwash replied, his face wearing a very large and worried smile. "I heard the most terrible rumor that you were dead; killed by The Dread Pirate Tabor, who was in turn killed by Lady Taverness. It is so nice to see it wasn't so."

"Captain Tabor is alive," the Dog growled at him, "And working with your dear sweet bunny. They've rightly buggered you hard enough that your bung hole's bloody. How is it do you think your manservant made his way over that cliff?"

Lord Pugwash went pale and collapsed back onto his over sized throne. He tried to talk, but found no words.

Babacomb turned and looked at the girl at his feet. "Never fear M'Lord," he said in a soft and dangerous voice, "We're going to fix that situation right proper and right quick." Looking up at the little Pug dog, he told him, "This is what I was born to do."

The sun was just going down and the festival was in full swing. Groups of people in lavish costumes were wandering in and out of the palace grounds while loud music poured forth from Pugwash's 'Great Hall'.

Balls looked around the courtyard where the fencing competitions had been held that day. All around them the ground was splattered with blood, and the air was heavy with its odor. "Amazing what people will do just for the sake of chasing down the gold coin," he muttered.

"Some even get balls shot off," Duroc giggled, and then elbowed the Rabbit hard enough that he staggered.

"That's not funny," the old Rabbit retorted. "I got my 'injuries' on the job. That's part a the risk 'o' pirate'n. This here," he said, pointing to the blood splatters, "Is a 'just for funzies' thing. The contestants use glorified Pig stickers, no offense meant. Good thing

too cuz if'n they was using a real weapon there'd be limbs lying about on the ground and a lot o'bodies."

The Swine's eyes lit up. "Limbs... take arms and legs... wrap in banana leaves then bury in sand with hot coals. Come back in time for dinner. We cal it Poi-poi Natsu."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that," the Rabbit muttered with a shiver.

"Not so bad," the Pig told him. "Dead never wasted then... live with you afterwards... till maybe you poop. Give you real reason to celebrate death. Have a war and eat for good long time."

Balls shuddered again and looked about to retch. "I don't eat meat ya dopey Pig... or didn't that occur to ya?"

Duroc smiled at him. "Cook vegetables same way... much easier to hunt carrots. Duroc know where they live and they don't move around so much." He thought about it for a moment and then giggled. "Pugwash make real good meal... just right size; no leftovers. Maybe bury with small pineapple in mouth."

The music stopped, and the pirate whispered to the pig, "We'uz being watched big fella."

"Only two of them," the Pig whispered back, "You want kill?"

"Not yet," the pirate told him. "We gotta keep a low profile for a while. Lady T'ud have us eat'n barnacles for breakfast if'n we rained on her parade. At least we got rid 'o' the wine. I feel a little better for that... but I still got a gut feeling someth'in bad's gonna happen."

Duroc dropped his harpoon and stuck his fingers into the Rabbit's ribs yelling, "UGGA BUUGA BUUGA!"

Balls screamed and jumped backwards, both paws on the butts of his pistols. "THAT AIN'T FUNNY!" he yelled, glaring at the tattooed Swine. After a moment and a few deep breaths, he let go of the pistol butts and smiled at his running mate. "Well... maybe it was just a little... but don't do it again or they'll be calling you Balls Junior."

Captain Henry Babacomb sat in the stern of the Caveat Noir's skiff waiting with his two remaining crewmembers near the mouth of the harbor. There was no moon and the weak light cast by the oil fed flame of the fortress' navigational beacon shadowed him heavily. Stealing the skiff, they had rowed far out past the breakers at the base of the cliff face; taking near two hours to do so. By the time he'd given the order to rest, the two sailors were near collapsing.

“You’ve grown soft,” he growled from the stern of the boat.

One of them almost retorted that he could have helped row, but though better of it and remained mute. It had been a while since he’d seen his old Captain in such a mood. Though he and the other sailor were armed with a brace of pistols and stout knives, he simply knew better.

Babacomb, shrouded in a black weather cape and tricorn hat, carried four pistols, a bomb, and his hanger. As he watched the night, the former Captain thought about how good it felt to be armed and on his own again.

“One more time, gents,” he told the pair. “One more time, tell me what your orders are so I know you have the plan down pat.”

“We’re wait’n for two ships, said the sailor to his left, “A sloop and a Brigantine. We let’s the sloop go past and then signals the ‘tine. They’ve orders to stop for us.”

“When we board,” continued the other, “I makes my way for’ard, and Pat here goes aft. You go to the quarterdeck and meets wif the Captain. We then stands ready for your orders.”

“Very good,” Babacomb told them. “Here’s a tidbit more. They plan on boarding The Queen and the Caveat Noir. It’s a rather nasty surprise cooked up by our Little Lord Pugwash and embellished by the fellow he hired to do the deed. That one has scrounged better than two hundred and fifty hands meant to do it... most just honest fishermen shanghaied and forced to his will. With that number, they’ll swarm and carry no matter how many muskets Captain Tabor can muster.”

“Gold enough to go around is there?” asked the one named Pat.

“Aye, gold enough to go around,” Babacomb told him, “But nary enough for those poor bastards.” In the darkness, the black Dog’s teeth looked razor sharp. “A pistol ball to the back of the head if they don’t swarm, and one to the front if they don’t swarm fast enough.”

“Why you doing this?” the other sailor asked him. “I kinda thought...”

“Thinking will get you killed,” Babacomb snarled. “Just look back on what’s happened and you’ll know that to be true. Every time you idiots had thoughts of your own, disaster struck and you died.”

“You coulda...”

There was the sound of a pistol being cocked and though the sailor couldn’t well see his former Captain, he saw enough motion to know it was pointed at his head.

“I meant ta say, sir...”

“I tried,” Babacomb replied in a near whisper. “I truly did. You’ve no idea how frustrating it was. I have been asked to oversee the endeavor... a last minute guarantee that nothing goes amiss.”

There was a silence between them then and through it, the sound of hushed voices came across on the wind. A ship was approaching in the dark, the incoming tide on her heels. As they stared into the night, a patch of stars disappeared and the outline of a sloop’s sail could be made out.

“Let them pass,” Babacomb whispered. “The other will be right behind. Is the lamp ready?”

“Candle’s lit and covered with a blanket, sir,” the one named Pat whispered back.

“Good... be ready now.”

Lady Taverness sat next to Lord Pugwash watching the final fencing match. Being a veteran fencer, she concentrated on their form and technique in order to plan her tactics. So far, the Pug Dog was right when he boasted of the guard in his employ. He was a Cat, and the best blade she’d ever seen; quick and sure of his actions. He appeared to be always two steps ahead of his opponent who, this time, was a Fox. Species wise, they were a good match for each other. The white Rabbit was confident she could beat him, but doing it without being cut, something she’d so far avoided through her own skills, was going to be hard.

Never taking her eyes off of him, she unconsciously allowed her paw to reach over to Lord Pugwash’s. At first he’d smiled but when the realization of whose fingers he was playing with struck him, he jerked his paw back as if his finger had been stuck with a needle.

‘cling ting ziiipp tick bing...

“OWWWwww... damn it!” cursed the Fox.

“CUT!” yelled the fencing judge. “Fencers take distance! Doctor!”

The doctor, an old sad looking Beagle, came forward and examined the wound on the Fox’s arm. “It’ll take a stitch... maybe three,” he declared. Looking up at Lord Pugwash he raised an eyebrow. The score was four cuts each. Pugwash gave a concerned look, and then scratched himself above his right eye.

“The wound is too bad to continue!” the doctor declared. “Match!”

The Fox loudly protested and there was a good deal of booing from the onlookers... especially those who had lost their wagers, but the doctor, gripping the fencer's arm tightly to staunch the blood flow, dragged him off to his first aid station.

Lord Pugwash stood and announced, "WE SHALL TAKE A MOMENT OF TIME AND THEN THE FINAL MATCH WILL BE FOUGHT! PLEASE... ENJOY THE FESTIVAL!"

With this announcement, he signaled to the chamber orchestra and they began to play. Turning to his guest of honor, he asked, "Would you like some wine my dear?"

"No thank you," she replied icily. "For some reason Blueportdoggie's wine has soured to my pallet, perhaps that's what happens when you're beaten near to death by the one who pretends to be your lover." She gave him an evil look. "I gave Death your regards Puggsy. He said he was looking forward to meeting you as he swings both ways. I do hope you won't mind but he intends to make you his doe." When she saw him shudder, she laughed lightly and continued in a very lady like manner, "As to having something to slack my thirst... I'll wait to take some rum once I'm aboard my ship tonight thank you very much. The sex is better there in any case."

The Pug shuddered as if an icy finger had been run down his spine. "Ah yes," he said, shaking it off, "So you are to leave. A true pity, I was hoping to keep company with you for a few more days. Your stay here has been a prosperous one for the town. I dare say that everyone presently here is flush with your money. We are grateful. Blueportdoggie will ever welcome you here."

"I'm so happy for you," she replied. "But once I receive my 'just' rewards, I doubt you will ever see me again." Turning to the little Raccoon standing next to her she said, "Go and find Balls and Duroc, Gabby. Tell them to get in here. We're up to the final match. I want to leave as soon as it's over. Then run to the ship and warn them of our eminent departure."

Gabby, still dressed as a soldier, saluted her, and then ran off.

"What a cute child," Lord Pugwash remarked. "And all this time I thought he was a stuffed toy."

Just like the larger versions standing around the walls of this hall," she replied, "and he is equally armed. Should you have any doubts to his ability to protect me, just try something."

Taking a well creased envelope from between her breasts, she handed it to him. "Hold this for me Puggsy," she told him. "But don't get any funny ideas. I've informed all of my guards to shoot first and ask questions later."

“They wouldn’t dare,” he muttered, accepting the fake Letter of Marque into his keeping. It was all he could do to keep from ripping it to pieces and throwing it in her face.

Leaning forward, the doe kissed him quickly on the forehead, leaving a bright red lipstick mark just above his eyebrows. “Tit for Tat,” she whispered in his ear. “Trust me... you won’t feel a thing if it comes to that, they’re all trained marksmen of the highest order.”

Tabor stomped around the deck near the ship’s wheel. “What do you mean they’re missing?!” he shouted at Kelly. “They can’t be missing! Something ain’t right... send a party to the Caveat and find them. If you can’t find them, look for whatever the fuk happened to them. Hiss would never leave her ship unguarded... NEVER!”

“Look for yourself if you don’t believe me Cap’n,” Kelly answered back strongly. “I’ve looked... Mr. Flopears ‘as looked... ‘alf the bloody crew ‘as looked, and I’m telling you that Hiss and her entire crew ‘as vanished. The ship’s a ghost.”

“Where’s Gulo?” Tabor yelled.

“He’s over there right now looking, cuz he don’t believe it any more than you do!”

“How many soldiers does he have with him?”

“Twenty that I counted.”

“Where’s the rest?”

“How the fuk should I know? Am I the Wolverine’s Master?”

Tabor turned, slammed his paw on the railing and looked back at the Caveat Noir. He could see Gulo’s troop moving about on board, shielded lanterns floating in the night like fireflies. “This just ain’t gonna do,” he muttered and then turned back to his ship.

“Mr. Flopears!” he bellowed, “Get your fuzzy butt up here!”

“To Kelly, he said, “Get to the Caveat and tell Gulo to hunker down. He’s got twenty soldiers available to him so we still got a shot at this. Tell him to remain out of site like they wasn’t there. We’ll do the party noises over here and make it look like everyone’s on The Queen. When the time comes, he’s to open up with all he’s got. If they get aboard, then it’s Paw to Paw and his bayonets will have to do.”

Kelly knuckled his brow, with an ‘Aye, aye,’ and took off at a run.

Tabor next looked to the Burgomaster’s palace high up on the hill behind them. It was well lit and he could hear the music even over the distance. Lady Taverness’ fencing

match would begin soon and he needed to be ready. Balls sent word with Gulo that the poisoned wine was found and disposed of. According to plan, Gulo's troops were then stationed around the hall looking as mean as they possibly could. The way things were now, Lady Taverness and her group were safe. Inside the 'Great Hall' Lord Pugwash's people couldn't touch them and if the wind took a turn, the soldiers would take the Pug Dog hostage and barricade themselves within the palace. Hiss assured him that if it came to that, Ilene and her revolutionaries would hit the local constabulary from behind, catching them in a pincer movement.

Mr. Flopears arrived in front of his Captain, bringing his thoughts back to The Queen. He knuckled his brow and said, "The pyrotechnic display is ready and waiting for a slow match Cap'n." The Gunner had been so involved with his flash and boom display that he'd not heard any of Tabor's ranting.

"Get the guns loaded with grape shot and ready to run out," the pirate told him.

"Sur? I thought..."

"FUK WHAT YOU THOUGHT!" Tabor yelled and then caught himself. He'd never yelled at his crew and it was definitely not the time to begin now. "I'm sorry," he apologized to his friend and crewmate, "But something is not right with the night Mr. Flopears. The entire crew of the Caveat Noir is missing."

"Missing sur? As in not there?"

"Vanished," he told him with a curse, "And that just don't happen... especially not to Hiss."

Flopears looked in the direction of the other ship. "Whose there now, sur? I see lanterns."

"Gulo and his soldiers. I sent Kelly to tell him to hunker down and hold the ship. Something ain't right, old friend, that's why I'm asking ya to load and be ready. They try a mass boarding we can still blow them to hell so long as we're ready."

"What about my skyrockets?"

"That part of the plan still stands," his Captain told him. "Load the guns, and we'll begin the party."

"Aye, aye, sir," the floppy eared Rabbit replied, and then went to do as asked.

A moment later his voice shouted in alarm from the main deck, "CAP'N... THE GUN'S UR ALL SPIKED!"

"Check's the swivels!" he ordered.

The gunner ducked below decks to where the smaller swivel guns were stored. A moment later, amidst a string of oaths, Mr. Flopears voice floated back to his Captain's ears from below decks, "Them ur spiked too!"

Lady Taverness stood on the elevated platform that ran the length of the Great Hall. At the opposite end stood her opponent the Cat. He did not look worried; though he'd watched the white doe Bunny beat her last two opponents five cuts to none. Both had been capable swordsmen.

Along both sides of the platform were all the revelers of the Festival. Most were ornately dressed and all were quite drunk. While they cheered and set their wagers, the chamber orchestra played as loudly as they could making it almost impossible to talk. Behind her, Balls and Duroc stood on either side of Lord Pugwash; the one with his pistols sticking ominously out from his jacket and the other with his huge harpoon and hungry sidelong glances at the Pug Dog.

Two treasure chests were sitting on a raised platform just below the trio, each with two of Gulo's soldiers standing at attention in close attendance. Only once was action called for, when one extremely intoxicated ruffian tried to gain entrance to one of the chests. Very quickly, and very efficiently, a musket's shoulder stock found its way to the side of his head. He was then dragged from the building in an unconscious state.

Holding her rapier loosely in her right paw the Lady Taverness walked part way down the platform and yelled to the Cat. "What is your name?" she called to him.

He pointed to his ears and shook his head, indicating he could not hear her. He was being attended to by the doctor who was stitching up a previous wound and made no effort to meet her half way.

When she tried to enter onto his side of the fencing piste she was stopped by the Judge who warned her back to her own side of the platform.

"And what do you think I would do?" she asked the Dog in a loud enough voice to be heard.

"Anything is possible for five gold coins, M'Lady," he replied in an equally loud voice. "It is simply my job to make sure the rules are upheld and no one is killed."

She looked up at the Cat. He smiled and winked at her. A thrill ran through her body. This one was going to be a good opponent... he was very confident. She would use this against him.

"What is his name?" she asked the Judge.

“I am sorry M’Lady,” he told her, “But to my Doggy tongue it is all but impossible to pronounce. You may address him simply as Cat... as I am sure he will refer to you as Rabbit.”

The doctor finished his work on the Cat’s wound, gathered his tools, and then moved back. When the Cat stood, there was a resounding cheer from those gathered to watch the bout. They were drunk and there would be blood... that was enough for them to be in a high state of excitement.

Coming to ‘first position’, Lady Taverness waited for the Cat to do the same and then she saluted him in a very crisp and precise manner. His salute was no less perfect and his smile never left his face.

Turning on her heel, she walked back to where Lord Pugwash sat like an ill fated god of alcohol. His face was red from drinking too much and his eyes were glassy as he stared at her.

“You have my letter secure?” she asked him, her voice hard and cold.

The little Dog patted his shirt. “Right here my dear... right here. Now you be careful. I wouldn’t want to see your pretty fur red with blood; much better to lap that wine than to spill it.”

His disgusting reference to a ‘heat’ he would give tongue service to... a heat she could never have, sickened her. For a moment, Balls, who was watching the exchange closely, was afraid he was going to have to grab her sword arm before she could run the little Burgomaster through the neck.

Spitting at his feet, she cursed and told him, “I cannot wait to leave this disgusting place.”

Lord Pugwash whooped a laugh and almost fell off of his throne.

The old Rabbit exchanged a glance with his counterpart and both frowned. There was no doubt to the Pirate and the Pig that the little fucker was up to something extremely evil.

The Dog who’d judged the fencing matches all day, doffed his hat and addressed the crowd. “LADIES AND GENTLEMEN...” he cried out. “I WILL ASK FOR YOUR ABSOLUTE COOPERATION DURING THIS FINAL BOUT BETWEEN THE LADY TAVERNESS RABBIT AND CONSTABULARY LIEUTENANT ...” He stopped and looked at the piece of paper he was holding. Moving to the Cat, he asked in a low voice, “Is this right?”

“Eet ees,” the Cat replied in a basso voice that belied his slender and wiry build. My mother wass a beeg kidderrr ‘nd she say Eye move about much when she was pregnant with me. Eet ees my name and Eye am proud uff eet.”

“All right then,” the Dog told him, “I’ll do my best to do you justice. So you know, I don’t speak but a few words of Cat.”

Walking back to the center of the fencing piste, he again addressed the crowd. “CAT AND GENTLEMAN, CONSTABULARY LIEUTENANT FRISKY MeRRrrOwWWw.”

He looked to the Cat and received a smile and a wink.

“DURING THE ENTIRETY OF THIS COMPLEMENTATION,” the Dog continued, “I WILL EXPECT ABSOLUTE QUIET. ANY PERSON NOT ABLE TO HOLD TO THIS RULE WILL BE REMOVED FROM THE VENUE BY ORDER OF HIS EXCELLENCY LORD PUGWASH! POLITE APPLAUSE IS ACCEPTABLE AT THE END OF AN EXCHANGE AFTER THE HALT IS CALLED.”

Captain Babacomb watched the activity on the Brigantine’s deck with a practiced eye. The Captain, though he stunk badly and walked with stooped shoulders, knew his ship; of that the Dog was certain. They were now ghosting into Blueportdoggie solely under tops’l and jib; towing the boats they’d need for the boarding. The Dog had not been pleased having to put into the wind in order to pick the Labradorean up as it caused the boats to clunk together. The former captain heard the number fourteen whispered in reference to the boats being towed, and he’d counted another six behind the sloop as she passed. With the inbound tide behind them he now estimated their speed to be three knots. Apparently arrangements had been made because even though the top of the main mast was even with the fortress battlements, there was no challenge.

On the larboard forequarter his ears heard the beginnings of a whimpered objection citing the love of wife and child. This was ended with a grunt as a deck knife was roughly shoved through the protestor’s ribs... a rough message to any other would be dissenters. The fellow’s body was then quietly dropped over the side as the ship’s decks were severely overcrowded and space was dear.

“The Slender Lady will move in closer than us,” the ship’s Captain told his new companion softly. The tone of his voice told of his resentment towards the intrusion of a ‘specialist’; but the gold being paid by Lord Pugwash more than made up for the inconvenience. “She c’n manuevar well using ‘er sweeps so she’ll be there to give support with ‘er four pounders and swivels; though I doubt we’ll need’em.”

“How many crew will stay on board the sloop?” Babacomb whispered.

“I’m think’n ten,” the Captain whispered back. “Old Julius is superstitious and ten is a lucky number for’im.”

“And how many here with you?” the black Dog asked. He then pointed to a dark object near the cliff face and added, “Steer another point to starboard; that rock juts out a good distance into the ways.”

“Steer a point starboard,” the Captain hissed to the helm. Turning his attention back to Babacomb, he told him, “Now that you and yours are here I’ll keep just two and m’self. We don’t need to get close up, so I’ll just wait for the boats to get back... n’fact, we don’t need to get close at all.” His chuckle was hard and cold.

“Your men will lead the boarding then?”

“You ask a lot of bleeding questions,” the Captain hissed accusingly. There was a note of distrust in his words.

“Let’s just say that Lord Short Fucker wants the job done right,” Babacomb replied. “Do you know the story of this ship’s previous owner?”

“Aye... hauled up on ‘is own yards by the neck for lack of a proper trading document.”

“Not from the yards,” Babacomb informed him softly, “From the top boom of the spanker. The line was around his shoulders; not his neck. He was then swung out over the side and used for pistol practice. For a base smuggler he lasted a good long time.”

“That was you done ‘im in?” the Hound asked, his voice now reflecting a formerly unfound awe.

Babacomb didn’t answer but asked instead, “How is the boarding to be conducted?”

“That’s how you’d do it... your men first?”

“Leaders lead,” the Black dog answered soberly.

There was a snort in the darkness as the other Captain allowed his derision to show. “Spoken like a true milit’ry man... Labradorean navy; less’n I miss my guess. A good crew is hard to come by Mr. Labradorean... I’d rather not lose my men on a first rush like that. Let the bleeding fishermen catch first volley. While the bastards try to reload is when my men’ll climb the bulwarks. In this business ya gotta take care of your crew or they’ll mutiny sure enough.”

Babacomb did a mental count. Twenty boats attacking two ships... ten to each... first seven in each group would be the conscripts then with perhaps one loyal crew member at the tiller of each. The odds were good.

“What’s the name of your ship?” he asked the Captain. “I presume you renamed her to ward off the bad luck of her former master?”

“Zelda’s Sweet Tits,” the other Dog whispered with a chuckle. “nd if ya ever met Zelda ya’d understand that one. For the sake of gentle folk everywhere, however, we shortened it on the transom to just Zelda. What’s yours?”

“It was The Lady Taverness,” Babacomb told him, “But that one is lost, I’m afraid.”

“We’re all lost in the end,” the Captain replied, “We just ain’t got sense enough to admit it.”

Tabor walked the deck doing a last check on their preparedness. Mr. Flopears was doing his best with the guns, but it was going to take more than he had to drill out the steel hammered into the touch holes. Kelly’s report from the other ship was that her guns were equally in the same condition. That meant the best they had so far besides their muskets and bayonets, was one swivel gun the Gunner had managed to resurrect from his armory.

Kelly, holding up one of the little bombs, suggested sticking fuses in the larger powder kegs and rolling them down planks onto the boats they were expecting. Tabor thanked him for the suggestion, but explained that an explosion that close to their hull would do as much damage to the ship they were trying to protect and that if the keg ended up in the harbor the fuse would go out in any case; just as it would with one of the bombs.

To complicate this, he also understood that if another ship came to within pistol shot and gave them a fat broadside, they were right bugged in any case.

He had his twenty, and Gulo had his. The best they could hope for at this point was for the attack not to happen. With Hiss and her entire crew missing, however, this was not something he would bet upon. The plan, therefore, was for The Queen to attract all the attention with her rockets, flares and firecrackers. The Caveat Noir would remain silent and seem the easier prey. As it was for right now, this was the best idea he could come up with.

“Gents,” he said softly to his crew, “It’s time we had us some music. Let’s break out some rum and mayhap have us a dance.”

There was the sound of feet running up the wharf, and then on the gangplank as Gabby arrived, running directly to Tabor. The little Raccoon properly knuckled his brow and then bent double, trying to catch his wind.

“Easy now,” Tabor told him, placing a paw on his back. “What’s the word from the palace?”

“Everyone... everyone is... in place, and the fencing match... match... is beginning.” Standing tall then, he pulled out the small pistol Lady Taverness had given him and said, “I’m here to help Cap’n; where do you want me?”

Tabor gently took the pistol from his paw and tucked it back into the youngster’s belt. He then took out two small bags from his own belt and handed them over. “I want you to hoof it back to the palace Gabby and report to old Balls. Your place is beside Lady Taverness. She’s very special to me and could use a sharp eye like yours to watch her back.” Reaching out he ruffled the youngster’s hair. “If anything bad happens, your orders are to find your mother and hightail it out of here.”

“But...”

“Those are your orders,” Tabor told him firmly. “If’n you don’t do that, there won’t be anyone to tell the story proper like, now will there? Tell Balls that Captain Hiss and her entire crew are missing... that the Caveat Noir is a ghost ship and all the guns on both ships have been spiked. You tell him I also said I got a bad feeling in my guts. He’ll know what that means.”

Gabby stood straight and saluted the Rabbit in the style of the Wolverines. They had obviously taken a shine to him as Tabor had himself. “I’ll protect your lady with my life,” he shouted.

Before Tabor could correct him and further order him to run like the Devil was chasing; the little Raccoon was back down the gangplank and heading up the wharf in route to the palace.

“Mr. Flopears,” Tabor said loudly as he watched Gabby run.

“Aye, Captain?”

“Leave that fuk’n dead horse alone and send up a rocket. Let’s see if we have any company yet. Lukey... get that squeezebox mak’n some music and I want it as loud as ya can make it.”

“Aye, aye, sur.”

The fencing match had stopped momentarily as the doctor stitched up the Cat for a second time. Lady Taverness was back on her side of the piste impatiently pacing back and forth like a caged animal. Turning to look at the Pug, she saw him smile and hold up his glass of wine to her.

“You are doing quite well, my love,” he said loudly, his words slurring from the drink. “I shall win a good deal of gold from your work this night.” He laughed a harsh laugh and

then tossed down what was left in the glass. A servant, standing behind him, immediately filled it again.

The Rabbit glared at him, wanting so badly to stab him through the heart. Turning away, she found Balls holding out a glass of water to her. Accepting it, she took a sip and then handed it back. "I need you to do something for me," she told him as she watched the old Beagle work on her opponent.

"Yes M'um," he told her in a flat voice, "You want me to shoot the little bastard don't you? I can easily hit him square on that red spot you left on his forehead from this distance if you like. His brains would make a nice display all over the residential flag, wouldn't they?"

She smiled an evil smile, "Still holding a grudge are you? And why exactly did you think I left that red mark, eh? Soldiers shoot better when they have something to aim at."

His mouth opened as he tried to think of something to say. Giving up, he simply said, "Damn but you're good. What is it you want me to do M'um?"

"The match is going too easy," she told him, turning back to keep an eye on her opponent. "I watched this fellow very closely when he fenced his other matches; he's extremely good. While we were fencing, I actually gave him several different openings that he didn't act upon. Apparently he thinks he's fishing me in. He gets me to believe he is lesser than he is and I drop my guard."

"So you want me to shoot him then?"

She looked at the old pirate in a hard way, and he muttered an apology. "Got it," he told her, "No shooting anyone."

"And that's exactly what I want you to promise," she told him.

"Mum?"

The white Rabbit glanced over at the doctor working at his deliberately slow pace. "If anything happens to me Balls, I want you to remain calm. Have Duroc gather what's left of me in his arms. I want you to personally take charge and get my body and our gold back to the ship. Tabor will know what to do when you get there. Keep the soldiers close but under control. I want their muskets cocked and ready, but I don't want them shooting innocent civilians. There shouldn't be an attack in any case because Lord Pugwash will think the battle already won."

"Ain't nothing gonna happen to you M'um." Balls told her, but his voice conveyed worry. It was like she'd had a 'death dream' premonition.

“Don’t make me slap you,” she told him and then smiled reassuringly. “Tell me what you’re to do.”

“Stay calm, have Duroc carry your... have him carry you, and keep the soldiers close. Muskets on full cock... then get everything back to the ship.”

“Very good,” she told him, “But there’s one last thing.”

“Yes M’um?”

She turned and again looked at the Pug Dog. He smiled and wiggled his fingers at her. In return she blew him a kiss. Taking Balls by the arm, she whispered in his ear, “Make sure Lord Pugwash comes with us. I’m sure he’ll quite willingly volunteer to do so, but I want him at the ship.”

Amidst the strains of ‘The Hen’s March To The Forecastle’, the first gunpowder star burst over the harbor. Tabor’s crew cheered for all they were worth and then laughed as Mr. Flopears lit a string of firecrackers; dancing around them as they crackled away like a child on New Year’s Eve. As he danced, Tabor touched his slow match to another rocket, and it hissed skyward showering a trail of sparks before it brightly boomed, momentarily lighting the harbor ways.

“I think I seen something,” Toby told his Captain as he peered into the night. “Not fer sure, sur, but maybe a sloop... say sixty feet. She’s gonna have fours.”

“Gotcha,” Tabor muttered, and then set the next rocket to fly more in that direction. Looking towards the Caveat Noir he found her looking totally lifeless. A sudden pang of grief gripped his chest. He found himself remembering a kiss he’d been forced into... and how both he and the Cat had spit afterwards.

“I need some rum!” she shouted. “Rum... rum... rum...”

Someone handed him a bottle and he took a good long pull, feeling its burn all the way down his throat. When he was done, he let go of a yell that totally drained the tension from his body. He was ready now, come what may... and woe be the poor bugger who tried to take his ship away from him.

Touching his slow match to the rocket’s fuse, he watched it hiss off in the direction of the enemy and wished it could do more than just illuminate the night’s sky.

The Captain of the Brigantine involuntarily ducked as a rocket hissed right over his ship’s masts and exploded on the far side of them, clearly illuminating his position. They’d just launched the boats, and all appeared to be going as planned when the ‘Dragon Rocket’

surprised him. He started to loudly curse, but a sharp pain in his chest stopped him from speaking so much as a word. His world reeled and quickly blended with the blackness of the night. As his senses dropped into the void, his body was caught and quietly eased to the deck.

With a jerk, Babacomb dislodged his hanger, and wiped it on the fellow's weather cloak. Aft by the ship's wheel also lay the helmsman; his blood pooling and running into the scuppers where it drained overboard.

Moving forward, the black Dog found another of the ship's sailors. This one suffered the same fate as his captain. Whistling softly, Babacomb heard a soft reply from just aft and on the other side of the deck.

"Captain," hissed a voice he recognized as the sailor named Pat.

Taking out a pistol, Babacomb cocked it, knelt and took aim at the spot in the darkness. "Move forward," he hissed back, "Watch for any strays."

As soon as he said this, there was a bright flash and the pop of a pistol firing. The ball whizzed over his head, and in the same moment, he fired his own weapon. There was a jarring thud as the sailor's body fell backwards to the deck. In the sudden silence, there was another thud from forward near the foremast as a heavy object struck something. The resulting sound resembled an overly ripe melon being split open. This was followed by the noise of a body tumbling to the deck. A second later and another voice hissed into the darkness.

"Don't shoot Captain... it's me... Scatter Brained Bob."

Babacomb recognized the voice of his former helmsman. "Walk aft," he instructed. "Keep your paws in the air."

Another rocket went off, briefly illuminating the deck. The other Dog's arms were in the air as instructed and his paws were empty.

"Quick Bob," the Captain told him plainly, no longer bothering to whisper, "Find a lantern... light it, but keep it shrouded. We've no time to lose."

There were red welts on five different parts of the Cat's body, one of them directly across his cheek. This one was the last blow dealt to him by Lady Taverness and finally there was the anger in his eyes that she'd been watching for.

"You must not strike with the flat of the blade, M'Lady," the judge again admonished her. "It shows total disdain for your opponent and is totally unsportsmanlike."

“Is that a fact?” she asked sarcastically, never taking her eyes off of the Cat. “What is the score now?”

“Three cuts to none,” he replied civilly.

“Tell Sir Frisky over there, that I will stop using the flat of my blade - WHEN HE DECIDES TO FENCE ME!” She paused to look at the Judge, firmly catching his eye so he knew she was very much in earnest. “You tell him the next strike I make will leave him bruised on the other cheek... how’s that for sporting behavior, eh? I’ll even give him a fair shot at defense to the given area.”

“The face is off limits,” the Judge told her evenly. “Now that you have told me your intentions, doing so will cost you a cut against in penalty.”

“You just tell him,” she replied flatly.

“Boats in the water,” Kelly called to Tabor softly. He was peering intently through his Captain’s glass into the darkness. “I’m making out ten or twelve, sur... but there could be more.”

“What are they doing?” Tabor asked as he lit the fuse of a pinwheel.

With a sputtering sound, the fuse was eaten in small chunks by the fire feeding on its gunpowder, and then with a hiss, it burst into a myriad of whirling sparks. Its shrill whistle echoed off of the rock walls of the harbor.

“I’m think’n the fortress is in on this,” Tabor said aloud as he watched the spark throwing wheel. “There’s no way they could be sleeping through this.”

“Maybe they just don’t want to get involved,” Toby told him, not taking his eye from the glass. “I count fourteen now. There seem to be two groups cuz there’s a slight distance between... maybe they’ll hit us from the bow side and the Caveat from the stern. That’s what I would do.”

“We’ll know soon enough,” his Captain told him.

“I can make out the sloop clear now, sur... she’s moving under sweeps.” After a moment, he furthered, “Her guns are out.”

Balls winced again when he heard the clear whack of Lady Taverness’ rapier slap against the Cat’s left cheek on her final cut. As the Judge called a halt, Cat Frisky launched a furious assault, cutting and slashing at a blinding speed, pressing her down the length of

the piste. All of his sword strokes were blocked with a click clank bing staccato sound that sent chills up the old Rabbit's spine.

This was stopped when one of the Wolverines, Balls recognized him as the Sergeant who'd been stationed in front of the villa, jumped up onto the raised platform and grabbed the Cat around the waste from behind, dragging him backwards.

"EYE WE'EL KEEL YOU!" the Cat shouted as he was manhandled out of her distance.

Lady Taverness simply smiled at him.

"CUT AGAINST THE RABBIT!" the Judge called out. "THE SCORE IS NOW RABBIT THREE... CAT ONE!"

The old Dog came over to Lady Taverness, and warned her once more, "Should you again use the flat of your blade Madam Bunny, I will again award a cut for the Cat."

She smiled at him, and simply nodded.

Taking the signal lantern from his Helmsman, Babacomb held it up and opened its shutter one time in the direction of the sloop for the duration of one second. As he watched, a similar signal was shone back.

"The sloop is mine," he told the sailor.

"Yours, sur?"

Without answering, Babacomb held the lantern up and faced the fortress, flashing the shudder three times.

With a resounding battle cry, the Ferrets of the fort's garrison burst forth from the thick entrance. Each of them bore a lit torch and ran down the road leading to the harbor.

"What in the Great Blue Ocean is that all about?" Tabor wondered out loud. Turning to the sound of the voices he saw the torches streaming down the hill towards them. "That can't be good," he muttered. Turning to the Caveat Noir, he looked for any sign of life, but saw none. "Gulo... what did you do to piss your friends off so?"

"Cap'n," Kelly called out, "What do you want us to do?"

"Fuk sett'n the rockets of in the air," he muttered. "Mr. Flopears!" he yelled, turning to find the Gunner.

“Aye, sur?”

“Set these damned rockets lower, we’ll launch them at the boats when they come closer.”

“Kelly!” he next yelled.

“SUR!” his Navigator yelled back.

“Get to the magazine, and bring up some powder and whatever bombs you can muster. Get the powder out on the pier pronto and blow the damn thing up. That’ll slow down those soldiers.” He looked at his crew for a moment, feeling emotional. “And the rest of ya’s... I love ya. You’re the best crew a Captain could hope to have.”

There was a cheer as his crew returned his sentiments.

“THE QUEEN!” Mr. Flopears yelled.

“THE QUEEN!” the crew yelled in one voice.

“Kelly... move yor arse!” Tabor yelled, feeling renewed. “The rest of you get the ship untied... as soon as he lights the fuse, we push off into the bay. Get the jibs up... they want’s paw to paw, by the good green ocean we’ll give it to them!”

The score was three to three when Gabby pushed his way through the crowd looking for Balls. When he found him, he saluted, and told the pirate, “Cap’n’s... Cap’n’s respects, s.. s.. s.. sir, and he says I’m to report to you.”

“How are things down at the ship?” the old pirate asked, keeping one eye on his charge.

Captain Hiss and her crew are missing,” the Raccoon began, but the old Rabbit held up a paw as the fencing match commenced again. Lady Taverness had been unmercifully playing with the Cat, much to the crowd’s delight. Lord Pugwash had hardly stirred from his seat, giving her the most pitiful of hand claps when she’d so strongly displayed her superiority with the sword. It was as if he knew better. Disregarding the Judge’s warning, the doe Bunny slapped the Cat twice more with the flat of her blade; screaming at him with each strike that he should meet her fairly. Each time the Cat looked to his Master in the briefest of pleading glances; but he was not yet allowed off of his leash.

Click clack swizz zip click... and the edge of her blade cut angrily across his chest in a diagonal stroke. The blade easily sliced through his white padded jacket, the cut area quickly staining red.

“FENCE ME!” the Rabbit yelled before the Judge barked his halt to the action.

Turning on her heel, the doe stalked back to her side of the piste and remained there, ignoring everything except the Cat, whom she watched intently.

Ball's bent down then and asked Gabby what the news was. When he was told, he turned pale. Standing, he physically forced his way through the crowd, threatening to shoot more than a few of the party goers when they resisted. Reaching Lady Taverness he climbed the platform. Positioning himself next to her, he whispered the dire information into her ear.

Without any show of emotion, she told him, "Remember what I told you to do."

He began to protest, but the look she gave him was almost enough to stop his heart. He was looking into the face of Death and he knew it.

Knuckling his brow, he muttered, "As you wish M'um... it shall be done."

"Understand me Balls," she told him in a very hard voice, "The fuse is burning and it just entered the bomb... there is no pulling it out now. You must follow my words to the letter."

"Aye, M'um... to the letter."

Gulo turned when he heard the soldiers from the fortress charging down the hill. This took him as much by surprise as it did the pirate. He was not expecting help from that quarter.

"Stay low," he hissed to his men who were all gathered by the outboard bulwarks. They had their musket's ready. He'd told them to begin with the bayonet, and fire their weapons only if they had to. His plan was to volley fire at the second wave after the first wave of boarders was stopped.

Moving to the wharf side, he looked down the length of the wooden pier and saw Kelly hustling down The Queen's gangplank carrying a good sized keg of gunpowder. As he watched, the Navigator placed it next to three like kegs. Punching a hole in one of them with a marlinspike, he stuffed in a length of fuse and uncoiled it back towards the ship. This he lit with a slow match passed down to him by someone on board. He then ran back up the gang way and the ships mooring lines were thrown off. Using her sweeps, the crew pushed their ship away from the dock and the gunpowder.

That was when the Wolverine heard the bugler sound the charge... it was the same call to charge sounded out at Osma Falls where he'd first met Commander Pablo. His eyes went wide... the Ferrets, the dock... and probably even The Queen if she didn't gain enough sea room, would be blown to pieces in no more than a minute's time.

Without thinking, he was up and running down the gangway. The Caveat Noir seemed to have other thoughts on the subject. Drifting out to the end of her moorings, she allowed her gang plank to slip from its fittings on her deck and the Wolverine was dumped to the pier with a resounding thud. Trying to rise, he screamed in pain as his leg tried to straighten from the sudden odd angle it was forced into from the fall.

His troops, knowing better than to leave their posts, did not come to his aid.

The fireworks stopped and this got Babacomb's attention. He was now at the wheel, while Scatter Brained Bob worked on getting the second jib up. He cursed to himself; they were fast running out of time. If Tabor managed to get The Queen out of the harbor... why hadn't he thought of this possibility? A moving ship was a live ship, and the pirate knew this.

"Bob," he yelled, as he tied off the wheel, "Check the starboard guns. If they're not loaded, we'll have to be quick... if they are loaded, the two of us will have to run out."

"Aye, Captain," came the response. "I'm on it."

The Judge called the two fencers forward, and then examined their blades. Lady Taverness' was covered with blood as it had not been cleaned since the match began.

"Doctor!" he bellowed, "Sterilize the blades!"

"Eye do not need that," the Cat hissed at the Dog.

"It's true," the Rabbit chimed in, "He hasn't touched me yet and my blade has only his blood on it."

"His blade has touched the ground," the Dog told her grufly, "And that's enough. We shall follow the rules... and I will see that we do."

Turning his back to her, he said something in a low voice to the Cat.

"Fuk that!" Frisky hissed at the Judge. He then spoke a mouthful in Cat that the Judge obviously had no problem understanding; after this he spat upon the fencing piste.

By then the old Beagle was there, climbing onto the platform with his bottle of antiseptic rum and white rags. "Blade," he said to the Rabbit, holding up the bottle and a rag.

She held it straight out towards him. Liberally applying the rum, he then slipped the bottle into the right pocket of his coat and rubbed the blade down with the rag.

Turning to the Cat, he again said, “Blade,” after which the process was again repeated, except that the bottle of rum he used on the Cat’s sword was taken from the left pocket of his coat.

Lady Taverness showed no sign that she’d observed this.

When they were done, the Judge had them both step back to their ‘en garde’ lines in preparation to commence the bout.

“ ‘elp me off with my jacket,” the Cat told the Judge. “Eet restricts mee too very much.”

Nodding, the Dog came forward and fumbled with the laces in the back of the jacket, finally freeing the Cat of the cumbersome padding. Frisky flexed his arms and the wound on his chest oozed blood. Looking directly at the Rabbit, he said, “That ees much better.”

Lady Taverness smiled at him. Taking her rapier, she slid its blade down the back of her jacket cutting its lace draws. Handing her weapon to the Judge grip first, she then slipped out of the jacket and shook herself, allowing her white furred and quite naked bosom to come fully into view. The room settled with a hush having the weight of a lead blanket.

Taking her weapon back from the Judge, she came to ‘First Position’, which the Cat matched, and the pair saluted each other in a symmetrical duet of perfection.

They both then came on guard.

Picking up a speaking trumpet, Babacomb went to the bow of the brigantine. Placing it to his mouth, he called to the sloop, hoping his voice would reach across the distance. “TAKE THE LAST THREE BOATS OF EACH GROUP!” he called out.

Behind him, the ship’s jib caught the night breeze and made a flapping noise, while in the night sky a Dragon flare lit the area. He could now see the harbor clearly. What he thought was the sloop had been nothing more than a large rock. Quickly searching the area, he found the sloop pulling hard towards the boats. Her sail was down and there was deadly intent in the use of her oars.

Aiming the speaking trumpet, he bellowed in his best Bos’n’s voice, “TAKE THE LAST THREE BOATS OF EACH GROUP!”

In the fading light, he saw the person at the sloop’s tiller remove their hat and wave it at him. The sloop was a good five hundred yards from the boats, but she was slowly closing the distance. The Dog hoped she would be in time.

Tabor heard his name bellowed from pier side, and moved to the aft quarter for a look. In the flickering light of the Dragon flare he saw Gulo laying on the wooden quay doing his best to crawl towards the kegs of powder. "GO BACK!" he yelled. "YA CRAZY BASTARD WOLVERINE, YOUR SHIP IS FAR ENOUGH AWAY... GET BACK BEFORE SHE BLOWS!"

"THE FERRETS COME TO HELP!" Gulo yelled back, continuing to crawl. "IT'S THE BUGLE CALL OF OSMA FALLS... THEY COME TO HELP! THEY ARE ON OUR SIDE! YOU CANNOT BLOW THE WHARF OR ALL IS LOST!"

The Rabbit glanced at the powder kegs and saw the glow of the fuse just leave the planking and begin climbing up the side of the keg. He had perhaps ten seconds to do something.

"FLOPEARS," he yelled, "FIRE OFF MORE OF THOSE FLARES... KEEP ONE IN THE AIR AT ALL TIMES! KELLY... RUN UP OUR COLORS! TOBY... KEEP AN EYE ON THOSE BOATS... THE REST OF YA LOAD AND KEEP YOUR HEADS DOWN!"

Taking his knife out, he cut one of the lines stretching up to the tops. With a practiced eye, he walked it to the stern rail where his swing would be accurate to where he needed to go. Climbing up on the railing, he adjusted his spectacles and then placed the knife in his mouth. Pulling out a pistol he launched himself into the air just as Kelly raised the Skull and Bones.

Lady Taverness' breasts moved violently with her actions. She parried, thrust, counter parried and then swept the air in front of her with a molinello circular cut that missed the Cat's nose by no more than half an inch. This jerked his head back and she followed the cut with another; her form flowing forward in one unbroken motion. The edge of her weapon grazed her opponent's wrist. Though blood clearly flowed, the Judge did not call a halt and her opponent did not acknowledge the hit, instead continuing his fight in an attempted cut of his own. The Rabbit blocked with another sweep of her blade, and then leapt back as the Cat pressed forward.

Feinting a sweeping head cut, Lady Taverness dropped like a cannonball fumbled by a drunken loader. Kicking her back leg out, she extended her blade creating a symmetrical straight line down its length, her arm, her backbone and then through to her leg. Her free arm was dropped downward and braced upon the floor.

Frisky, moving forward in his attempted attack on the feint, ran onto her point like a fat merchantman onto a jagged uncharted rock. His momentum carried him all the way to the hilt of her weapon. From here his face was no more than a foot from hers. In his eyes were shock, grief, and the realization that he was already dead.

"Eye deed not want to due theese," he managed to whisper.

“I know you didn’t,” Taverness whispered back, and then using the leverage of her position, pushed the Cat off to the side so she could rise. Her sword remained buried in his body.

The crowd was so shocked by the ferocity of the duel that no one spoke a word.

Standing in the silence of the room, the white Rabbit looked around at all the upturned faces as if in confusion. Turning she looked at Lord Pugwash and found the little Dog smiling at her. Duroc stood behind him just waiting for her order to snap his head off. Instead, she closed her eyes for a moment, looking suddenly unsteady on her feet.

Opening them again, she looked down at her left paw which until now she’d kept tightly closed. Opening her fingers, she gazed down on a good deal of blood, now flowing from an open cut in the palm of her paw. Finding Balls standing below her, she told him, “Oh bother... I seem to have been cut.”

Her eyes then rolled back into her head and she collapsed onto the fencing piste.

Festival

Black was the night;
No moon on thee inbound tide.

Thick darkness interspersed
With fuk'n rocket and flare;

There be's a boarding party underway.

Yea my bloody friend;
Hallowed be thy gunfire
And thy meat cleaving ways.

But damn your soul to Hell for it;
And know I'll fight ya
Till I c'n move no more.

Captain Tabor Rabbit

In the guttering light of a Dragon flare, the sloop's four pounders began to fire at regular intervals, one after another. There were six to a side, and she was forced to veer to the larboard in order to bring them to bear; but one by one they spoke raising geysers in and among the boats waiting to board The Queen. The two rear most boats were sunk outright. The third had broken oars, while the rest seemed frozen in time.

"EYE AM CAPT'N 'ISS UFF THEE CAVEAT NOIR," bellowed a voice through a speaking trumpet. "THROW YUR WEAPONS INTO THEE WATER AND KEEP YUR PAWS IN THE AIR."

One of the tillermen took out his pistol. Yelling, 'BOARD THE QUEEN YOU LOT!' he fired it at a head peering over the ship's imposing bulwarks. With a resounding 'oof', the crewman was hit square between the eyes and fell backwards. The coxswain was quickly chopped to pieces by the others in the boat and his body tossed overboard.

"WE DONE THE BASTARD IN CAPTAIN!" One of them yelled. "DON'T SHOOT... WE DIDN'T WANT THIS! WE WAS SHANGHAIED!"

All the boats but one yelled their agreement. The sailors in the last boat fired off a swivel and then picked up muskets, beginning to fire at the sloop. This fusillade was ended by the sharp crack of a four pounder and musket fire from the deck of The Queen. When the fight was done, the only thing left of the boat was broken planking and a few oars.

The night became black again as the last flare gave out. Another Dragon flare fizzled skywards and the area was again lit. Ahead, and next to the Caveat Noir, were the other ten long boats. As if on cue the sailors in the first seven boats opened fire on the last three to bloody effect. This was joined by musket fire from the decks of The Caveat Noir. In the blink of an eye live sailors became dead bodies. Those of the seven boats cheered and the cheer was quickly joined by those next to The Queen.

This lasted until a terrific blast rocked the air from wharf side.

Balls, leading the procession out of the palace, looked up hoping for the three rockets Tabor had promised when they'd won. He'd heard what could have been cannon blasts and musket fire... or it could have been more of Mr. Flopears fireworks.

"Give us a sign," he mumbled as if in prayer.

A single flare shot skyward as they had for a time now. There was the sound of more stringed fireworks and then what sounded like a multitude of voices cheering.

"That can't be good," he muttered knowing in his heart there was trouble. "Someone died... pray God it was the enemy."

Turning to check the column behind him, he saw Lady Taverness struggling in Duroc's arms. Gabby and his mother stood at the Swine's side looking equally surprised. The little Raccoon had the small pistol drawn and his eyes were looking warily into the darkness as if he expected another trap... or perhaps he thought he was seeing the Rabbit's death throws and didn't want to watch. Behind them was the rest of the troop, bearing the two chests and armed to the teeth. Lord Pugwash was now bound and tethered; staring at the ground, he was being marched ahead of the chests and watched over by two of the Wolverines.

At first, when Lady Taverness collapsed, the Pug had stood and acted so very sorry that the Rabbit was dead. 'Her heart must have given out,' he decreed, slurring his words drunkenly. "I would call for the doctor but I believe he has already run away. The poor bastard has had a long day after all." He giggled, and then said, "We shall keep her body here and render a state funeral with high honors." Turning to everyone present, he raised his voice as loud as he could and proclaimed, "I NOW FORMALLY DECREE THAT ALL OF LADY TAVERNESS' POSSESSIONS... INCLUDING HER SHIPS... BE HELD BY THE STATE UNTIL PROPER DISPOSITION CAN BE MADE!" To Lady Taverness' group, he said, "Should you have any input to this decision... gentlemen... you will note that you are surrounded by the Constabulary troops of Blueportdoggie. I would suggest you surrender your weapons forth with or I shall order them to open fire."

That was when Duroc picked him up by the neck and shook him like a stuffed toy. The Swine had almost taken a pistol ball for his efforts, but with a crash three Wolverine

muskets fired, killing the would be hero; making it crystal clear to anyone with like thoughts that such an action carried an immediate death sentence. Wolverines were not known to lay their weapons down for anyone.

A good fifty costumed 'members of the constabulary' quickly retreated from the Great Hall, leaving their leader to his own means. As soon as they were outside there was the sound of gunfire and screaming voices. To everyone present, it was obvious the constabulary had not been given the option of laying down their weapons.

Balls came close and fixed the Pug Dog with a dead man's stare. "Yor all alone now Puggsy old boy," he'd said ominously. Looking at the Swine, he asked him, "You feeling hungry Piggy?"

Duroc smiled at his friend. "UGGA BUGGA FIRST!" he declared.

The pirate's reverie was suddenly broken by a strong voice telling Duroc to put her down. There was an additional muffled grouping of words as he hugged the stuffing out of her; totally ignoring her orders.

"Thought you dead!" he said, his relief evident in his tear filled voice.

"Yes yes... I like you too," she managed. "Now put me down... BALLS! I NEED HELP HERE!"

"Serves ya right," he called unsympathetically, "For scaring the poop out of all of us like that."

"I had to!" she yelled. Turning her attention to the weeping Pig, she told him, not unkindly, "Put me down or I'll bite down on your jugular you bloody heathen!"

When he'd placed her upon her feet, the old pirate removed his coat jacket and placed it upon her shoulders. "Ya gots fine tits there M'um. I was a bit worried one of them would be missing by the time you were done.

She flashed him once, and then buttoned the jacket. "The Cat's blade was poisoned, which was stupid because he really was good. If I hadn't faked my death by cutting my own paw, Lord Pugwash would have ordered an immediate bloodbath. I saw them in the crowd... full cocked and ready for the word. Instead, old Puggsy got pompous and threw his hand down early enjoying the power he thought he had."

The explosion caught them all by surprise.

"THE SHIP!" they both cried out and immediately ran down the path followed by Duroc, Gabby, and his mother.

The Sergeant in charge of the Wolverines gave the order for quick march, and they too were off, but still organized, and still ready to fight at a moment's notice.

Though the explosion hadn't taken down the entire structure, it had done considerable damage... but not as much as it would have had Tabor not done what he did.

Swinging across on the line he'd cut free was the easy part. Experience taught him what to do and how to do it so he was where he needed to be. His first attempt was to shoot the fuse as he swung. If he was successful, he would then swing back again and rejoin the fight. When the ball missed by a good foot, and though he was still high in the air, he let go.

Landing on the wooden planking with a wood rattling thunk the pirate captain took the knife from his mouth and threw it with dead accuracy. The blade sunk into the keg's side, partially severing the fuse.

Smiling as he thought he'd gotten it, he was appalled when, with a small burst of orange sparks, it continued burning up the side; no more than a few seconds away from reaching the powder. Running to it, he flipped the keg onto its side and rolled it towards the side of the pier where it disappeared over the side. He smiled again, thinking he'd been in time but his ears heard a thump and clatter rather than a splash. Without a doubt he understood what had happened.

"FISHING DORY!" someone yelled, and then wrapped him in a huge Rabbit hug.

No more did this happen than the sum total of everything evil and unholy erupted. Tabor and the other person were propelled a good twenty feet backwards where they bounced onto the planking. The other Rabbit, refusing to release the hug, stayed on top of him until the debris stopped falling. He then raised his head up and asked, "Are you all right Cap'n?"

"Kelly?"

"Aye, sur, it's me right enough."

"I thought you were up on deck tak'n care of things for me."

The other Rabbit rolled off and sat up, taking in the damage done by the powder. Since the fishing dory was tied dockside, it had made the perfect cradle to channel the force of the explosion upwards. At least it had only been the one barrel set off.

Looking up at The Queen's bulk, now a scant fifty feet from them, he finally replied, "I was... damned if I wasn't. I don't know Cap'n; but I'm fuk'n glad I was here for ya."

Tabor looked up at his old friend, the ringing in his ears getting louder. “You’ve always been there for me Kelly... always... come close and give me a kiss now so’s we can go to sleep, eh? T’was good sex warn’t it?”

Kelly bent over his captain and gently stroked his ears. “It was good, sur... a damned good run it were with the wind on a fair quarter most of the way anyhow.”

Bending down, he kissed his Captain full on the lips. When the kiss was released, he said, “I recon I’ll be get’n on then love.”

The captain’s eyes became fixed on the Dragon flare, now falling on the other side of the harbor. “Get’n on to where, Kelly? What’re ya on about now?” He squinted his eyes, “Is that Smithe I see?” He made an attempt to wave and smiled when he saw the wave was returned.

Kelly stood and his form began to dissipate with the darkness. “He always said he’d come for me. You just remember, ya old barnacle,” the Navigator told him, “You owe me a dance and I expect you to pay up.”

Tabor tried to tell the Bunny that he’s give him more than a dance... but the ringing in his ears had grown overpowering and his eyes closed of their own accord.

He was suddenly so very tired.

A Time To Heal

Tabor woke to the gentle feel of a ship tethered to land but not moored. Something moist and dark obscured his vision... not a good sign. He didn't move at first, waiting from experience to see which part of his body would hurt him the most. First he wiggled his toes and then stretched the muscles of his legs. Next he worked the muscle groups up to his torso and past to his head. When the results were positive, he stretched his arms and the fingers of his paws. There was still no pain. Carefully he moved his paws to his scrotum; after which he gave a sigh of relief.

"How many days?" he mumbled finally. His mouth felt like it was full of gun wadding.

"Two," said a voice he recognized as Balls. "We be's across the harbor from all the celebrate'n."

He heard a chair scrape on the floor and an arm carefully slipped under his shoulders.

"You tells me if anything hurts, but I wants ya to sit up 'n drink, then I'll get you to one'a the windows so's ya can piss. Yor bladder's gotta be rock hard by now cuz ya ain't soiled yerself. Rum or water?"

"Water."

A tankard was held to his lips and he drank.

"Where's Kelly?" Tabor asked when he'd finished. "The stupid bastard's gotta have the biggest backside 'o' splinters ever seen on the ocean. Hugged me tight, he did. Wasn't for the shield of his body, me and Davie Jones would be a court'n right now to be sure. I gotta thank him for his misery." He paused and felt his head. "I got a rag on my eyes, Balls... why?"

"Jest a precaution," the old pirate replied in a quiet voice. "I kept it moist to help with the eye'r'tation. Yor peepers were still blood red last I looked. Let me take's it off and give a look see; then we'll have us a piss."

The pirate turned manservant turned pirate again gently reached round and untied the wet rag over his Captain's eyes. Moving it slowly away, he watched for a reaction and was relieved slightly when Tabor blinked. His eyes were still red but not nearly as bad.

"What'd you do to my cabin?" his Captain asked.

"Warn't me, sur," the older Rabbit replied. "Lady Taverness 'as moved her things back down from the villa, and there's been a lot 'o' gifts from the town folk. They seem to think you're a blessed hero for some reason. There's a new brace 'o' pistols that make

yor old one's look ragged. I'm figurine you won't mind so much if'n I keep those. I got's kinda attached to'em."

"Fine," his Captain replied sniffing, "For services rendered I freely give'em to ya." He sniffed again. "Smells like some damnable bordello in here," he grouched. "Now tell me where Kelly's at."

Balls helped him swing his legs out and then grabbed his arm, pulling him up from the hammock. After they'd taken a step towards the window, he said calmly, "Kelly's dead."

Tabor stopped moving and just stared out the window. "The splinters and the explosion... it must have been too much. He saved me Balls... damned stupid fucking bastard... he..."

"Was shot dead on the starboard side when he looked over the rail at the boarding that never took place..."

"He put himself between me and the powder... he wrapped his arms around me like some fuck'n bear and..."

The old pirate got him walking again. "Was shot dead on the starboard side when he looked over the rail. Weren't no one on the dock with ya asides Gulo and we got him put up on Hiss' ship. I fig'ered you deserved a little quiet. That'uns already clomping around on his splint and barking orders like some fuk'n harpy in heat."

When his captain was positioned at the window Balls took a position behind, bracing him back to back while holding on to the storm shutter fittings on either side of the jambs. "Let it out Cap'n," he said gruffly, "Ya can't keep it in... not now or your soul'll rot like poor old Babacomb's. I heerd him a whaling again last night. Take yor piss now and drain yor spleen."

Tabor strained and at first couldn't make water; his body, his bladder, and his emotions all felt as dry as a desert. He tried again, letting go with a string of oaths the likes of which he seldom ever did, cursing Kelly, cursing Taverness, cursing Balls and the crew... even cursing The Queen. Perhaps that last was what hurt him enough to rupture the bubble; as after that the tears flowed as freely as his urine. He didn't stop crying until he was once again asleep in his hammock.

Balls, ever close, and sitting again in his chair, heard the door squeak open. Turning to the noise, he found Duroc strangely peering at him. The old pirate scowled and pointed at the door. He then made a shooping motion with is paws, indicating the Swine should leave... but he didn't. He just kept looking at his friend in that strange way. Finally, with a small motion, he threw something onto the floor and then left as quietly as he'd come.

When the old pirate bent down to see what had been tossed, he found the short white nub of a Dog's tail.

“E ‘as been eempossible,” Captain Hiss told Ilene. “All thee day long, clomp, clomp, clomp, and scream, scream, scream... mon desidue the lungs that bastard ‘as.”

As if on cue they heard Governor Gulo’s voice shouting some sort of garbled instruction to a soldier on the wharf.

“You need to get him laid, love,” Ilene told her in their native Cat. She was reclining on a small sofa delivered to the ship especially for her comfort. “Speak with me this way, please... I find it so much more... well... it’s easier on my ears.”

Hiss paused to lift her wine glass and saluted her mate with a wink. “As you wish my love.” She took a sip and sighed, sitting heavily in the matching chair to the sofa. “I am just glad to be here with you... alive and breathing. So much... just so much...”

“It almost fell apart,” the one legged Cat told her softly, “Surely you know that. If it wasn’t for Black Dog Babacomb, it would have. He’s a strange one to be sure.” She sipped her wine, listened to Gulo’s voice bellow once again, and then asked, “What are the state of your guns?”

“All repaired and in fine order,” Hiss replied. She was dressed in a new blue naval coat, the lapels backed in crimson and the buttons made of solid gold. “Tabor’s Mr. Flopears is a bloody genius when it comes to the guns. He had both ships back in commission within a day. I shall never make that mistake again. The Dog found it out and realized we were being watched.”

“What of the Zelda?” Ilene asked. Slipping off her wooden leg she rubbed the stump of her leg. “I can still feel my foot occasionally,” she said absently. “I find that so amazing.”

“I gave the brigantine to the Black Dog,” Hiss told her, “And any of those in the boats wanting to join him as crew. He earned it.”

“I heard he shot five of them.”

“It’s his crew,” the captain replied with a shrug. “I would have shot more, considering some were from the original crew.”

“And the sloop?” her lover asked, already knowing the answer.

The thin Cat leaned back in her chair and took a sip of her wine. “I gave it to Rosa as her first command,” she finally commented. “It is time she grew up.”

“And the crew?”

Hiss sipped her wine again. “Ten of my best hands and the cook... but the cook only for the honeymoon. She’s Siamese and does this little fish roll that is so very good. I wanted to make things as nice as possible for our children.”

“You forced Rosa to marry my Kate,” Ilene accused. “I saw it in her face during the ceremony. Nothing but heart break will come from that.”

“She ‘as a dew’ty to purr’form,” Hiss said, reverting to Rabbit. “Wee shall seee ‘ow she feel af’ter the honeymoon, no? Ewe taught your dau’ter well Eye ‘ope?”

“Of course I did,” the other Cat replied with a sly smile, “Although I didn’t stuff her into a barrel to do so. What did she name her new command?”

“She wanted to name it ‘Tabor’,” the captain snorted, reverting again to Cat. “I told her I would burn it to the waterline if she did, so she left it unnamed for the moment.”

“Un-named is unlucky,” Ilene told her mate and then sipped her wine, looking out the smallish stern windows to hide the mirth in her eyes. “I sent them a surprise gift by the way.”

Hiss leaned forward and smiled at her. “You always were the romantic one,” she said, using one paw to hold up the lapel of her new coat; it too was a gift from Ilene. “What did you give them?”

“A stowaway,” she replied, her eyes catching some movement at the stern windows of The Queen across the harbor ways. In her time she was a very sharp lookout.

“A what?!”

“Well...” she said, turning back to her mate, “There was this sad little Raccoon fellow sitting on the end of the wharf yesterday. He was wearing one of those silly Wolverine uniforms. I know his mother quite well... she was a great help in the Cause and volunteered to remain within Pugwash’s palace as our spy. I asked her if her son could go sailing for a few days. She said it would be just the thing. That brigantine, you have to understand, was his father’s ship. He’d been so excited when the sun came up and he saw it anchored in the ways. Perhaps he thought his father had come back... anything is possible with the sea... don’t you agree?”

“But of course. You should have seen the condition of the Caveat after the storm we weathered. That we survived, by itself, was a miracle.”

Ilene nodded, having been told the story of the storm several times already. “Well, the poor little fellow was completely devastated when Black Dog threw him over the side with shouted instructions never to come back.”

“He what?!” Hiss was shocked that her Navigator would treat a child so cruelly.

“Babacomb, that is his name, yes?”

Hiss nodded.

“Well... Babacomb threw the little bilge Rat over the side; one, two, three, splash,” Ilene told her in a measured voice as if she were speaking to a person who was a bit slow in the head. “Apparently the little fellow snuck aboard and was rummaging about in the Captain’s cabin. When the Dog found him, he was clutching a small family portrait he’d gotten from some secret place. The account I heard claims the old Black Devil turned pale white when he got a good look at the picture. He snatched it right out of the youngster’s paws, grabbed him by the collar of his fancy little uniform and then threw him into the bay.”

“Nooo...”

“Yesssss...” Ilene assured her. “He then yelled something about bad luck, the world not being a fair place to live, and that the past could never be changed because that would prove there was a ‘just’ God. He then left the helmsman in charge and locked himself in the cabin. The one time someone tried to open the door, he almost got his head blown off.” She paused to take a sip of wine. “You heard the howling my dear... God knows it’s kept half the town up these last two nights. You don’t have to be a good lookout to know it comes from that ship. Already half the crew has deserted.”

Hiss leaned forward in her chair, realization suddenly gripping her senses. “So you sent the little soldier BOY on my DAUGHTER’S boat.”

“Certainly... she’s earned it. I see nothing wrong with a little... well...they’re all so young and innocent... it so reminds me of the old days.” She giggled and had another sip of wine. “He’s still a virgin, by the way. I asked him. I was actually tempted... buutt... I thought it would be better saved for ... well... for later.”

“ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND?! HE HAS A PENIS!”

“And so...” the plump Cat retorted, sticking her tongue out at her lover, “You have a puss, no?”

Gulo began ranting again in the near distance.

Hiss screeched, snatched her hat from its peg, and then pulled it down over her ears. Stuffing a pistol in her belt she stalked out on deck, slamming the cabin door.

Ilene laughed as she heard her mate laying into the Wolverine; cursing him soundly in Cat. Hiss was a tremendous lover when she was angry. Sometimes foreplay took a turn away from simple hugs and cuddles, especially when it was steered such. The plump one

legged Cat was very good at playing the off tuned fiddle called love, and her darling Hiss was a very good dancer.

Babacomb looked up when he heard Tabor's voice. Though the distance was too great to distinguish the words, there was no mistaking the grief pouring out into the afternoon air. The Rabbit would be the Devil to pay when he had his senses back about him. Mentally he ticked off the questions he would be pressed with. 'Why hadn't he said anything? Why had he arranged a boarding of his own? Why had he trusted Hiss and not him?'

Why, why, why... and then again why?

He looked back down at the pistol he'd been playing with. Occasionally he would fire at a bottle he's tossed out of the brigantine's stern windows. The distance was great enough that, to this point, he'd not hit it. He could have easily enough; he was a capable shot, but each time he pulled the trigger he saw the smuggler hung out off the end of the Spanker jerk with the impact and cry out.

"So fucking many of them," he said, giving voice to his thoughts. "We... I..." he paused for a moment, reaching down so very deep into his feelings. "Come now Henry, you must own up to your sins and press them to your loins. The feel of the climax is too irresistible, is it not?"

Cocking the hammer back, he flipped up the frizzle exposing the pan and then put the warm metal of the muzzle to his lips. Blowing into the barrel he cleared out the remnants of his last shot.

When he was done, he whispered, "I have killed so fucking many... so many... and for what?"

He looked out the window and answered himself. "I can tell you for what, old bean. It was a means to an end now, wasn't it?"

Squinting one eye, he held the pistol out and looked down into the barrel. Satisfied, he placed it between his legs butt downward. Taking his powder flask, he tipped it up, keeping his thumb over the opening and pressing the small button allowing the measuring tip to fill.

"I only wanted The Queen... I wanted to see her roll over and sink beneath the waves."

Releasing the button, he moved his thumb and allowed the powder to pour down the pistol's barrel. He then set the flask back on the small table.

"Certainly you did.... and justifiably so. I wanted the same thing in spades... burn her first and then sink her... maybe gut every pirate on board first though."

Dropping a ball into the mouth of the barrel, he followed it with a lump of wadding and then pressed it down gently with the pistol's tamping rod.

"And then I fell in love with a fucking Rabbit," he continued, "And not even a true female at that; marvelous piece of work that one is."

Placing the rod back into its place beneath the barrel, he picked the pistol up and looked at the pan, making sure all was right.

"I did... didn't I? Worse mistake I ever made; better to be feared as a bastard revenueur than to be in love... love makes you weak."

Picking up the powder flask again he charged the pan and then set the frizzle down. Checking the flint, he lowered the hammer to half cock. Squinting out the window against the glare on the water, he watched for the glint of the greenish bottle.

"You're wrong, you know... love makes you strong. Look at that child... that..." He glanced at the little family painting he'd placed in a frame and hung on the wall. "Why do you think the smuggler lasted as long as he did? Love did that... it made him strong."

The black Dog sighed and looked down at the pistol. "And I killed him for want of official trading papers... because the King so decreed I should. 'Make them bleed', he told me. 'Make them bleed, Babacomb and I will give you that frigate. Thirty six brimstone spitting twelve pounder long guns... and you can do whatever you bloody well wish with her..., hunt down whomever you want with her... kill whomever you want with her.' "

Aiming the pistol out the window he squinted one eye and saw the smuggler dangling at the end of the rope. "He got what he had coming," he said in a hard voice.

"According to who?" he asked.

"The King, of course," he answered.

He cocked the hammer back. "And if the King told me to hang myself... would I say, 'Aye Aye, sir and with a new rope or will an old spliced line do?'" "

There was a soft knock at his door.

"Go away," he yelled without looking.

"Commander of the Fortress to see you, sir," said a voice he didn't recognize.

Without waiting for permission, Pablo opened the door and stepped in. Taking one look at the Dog, he said, "You look like death Henry."

“Thank you for telling me,” the Dog countered, “People have looked at me and said that before... and meant it.” He turned and looked at the soldier. “I was having a hard time understanding why it was...” He paused and blinked, and then smiled. “Oh hell... I can’t think of a further come back that’s worth a fart.”

Aiming the pistol again at the distant bottle, he squeezed the trigger. With a splash and a rainbow of glass shards, the target was hit and disappeared under the water.

“Very nicely done,” Pablo told him, meaning it.

“I’ve been trying to hit it for the last two hours, so good shot... no, not really. Just enough time to sober up and yet not enough time to properly search my soul... just in and out of that harbor I’m afraid.”

“Did you find anything?”

“I’m still sounding the waters,” he replied, laying the pistol on the table. “Is your cargo ready to load?”

“It is,” the Ferret told him, “But we shall wait until after dark, the same as we did in moving it down the cliff face.”

“So what made you decide to bring her down? Surely that was the best placed gun in your cadre.”

“It’s a howitzer, not a gun,” the Commander corrected him.

Moving into the room he sat at the table across from the Dog; the chair making a scraping noise on the deck. “So what made you do what you did?” the Ferret asked him. “You answer me and I will answer you.”

Babacomb tipped his chair back and began the reloading process again. Without looking up, he asked, “Do you ever think of those you’ve killed in the name of whatever master you were serving at the time?”

The Ferret leaned heavily on the table top. “All the time... and sometimes not at all. It depends what I am doing at the time.” He gently reached out and took the pistol from his friend. Cocking the hammer back, he flipped the frizzle up and took over the loading. “On a good day,” he said softly, “I rise with the bugle and I go to bed with the bugle. In between, other than the meals I eat, there is nothing. On a bad day I see their faces in everything I do. I see them to the point that I believe madness has finally set its claws into my brain and like you; I begin thinking there is but one way out.”

Babacomb nodded in understanding. Rising, he crossed the small room and picked up a poor bottle of wine; little better than vinegar.

Turning, he told the Ferret, "It's all I have."

"Rum would be better."

Putting the bottle down, he picked up a small keg and fitted a bung to it. Bringing it and two mugs back to the table, he poured two glasses. "Four hours till dark. We'll load two hours after that."

Pablo put his lips on the barrel and blew. When he was done, he said, "You should rest this one... it has exercised enough today."

The Funeral

I will miss you old friend.

Like the storm's violent waters,
White frothed 'n shipped o're the bows,
Yor life has washed by the boards
'N pissed down the scuppers
With the hiss of the waves;
Quickly swallowed
N' not spit out.
Fuk
I miss ya.

The wind's shifted back on itself,
Grow'n icy cold it damp'ns m' spirits.
Cuz I no longer got you at my back
Shoot'n the sun and the stars,
Mark'n the bloody charts,
All the while cus'n me;
Keep'n us safe.
Fuk
I miss ya.

Sewn into your favorite hammock
With a twelve pound ball placed at yor feet
The sea's to be your wedded bride
Ya now stink to bad to keep
So
We will quietly say goodbye
Old Friend
'N slip you o're the side.

I will miss you sailor Kelly
Aye...
Miss you bad I will.

Captain Tabor Rabbit

A Time For Truth

Tabor sat alone in his cabin, a small lantern mounted in its gimbal casting just enough light for him to read again the letter he'd read a hundred times already. They'd heaved too for the night and the motion of The Queen made the lantern light move around the paper. This made no difference to his ability to know what the words meant. Having received the note from Balls' paw on the first day he was awake, he'd already committed the words to memory. The two very first words made him want to cry and to lash out; all at the same moment.

'My Love,'

'I know you will not believe when I tell of my love for you. Nor will you believe when I pen the words; 'I have always loved you, and always will'. I will smile and add this is probably justifiable for all the times I've tried to kill you. But then again you did return the favor.'

Placing his freshly cleaned spectacles square on his nose, Tabor saw Rosa's little sloop coming into the harbor of Blueportdoggie under a full press of sail. As he watched her approach, gauging she was coming on a little too aggressively, there was a puff of black smoke as her little swiveled bow chaser sounded out.

He started to say, 'Somethin's up Kelly,' but stopped himself; knowing that his Navigator was laid out on deck, sewn into his hammock and ready for burial. Watching the sloop, he refused to look at the lumpy canvas lying on the main deck.

The sloop was aimed directly towards his ship; which was still tied off to land but across the harbor from wharf side. When she was close, the tiller was thrown over and the lithe single masted vessel turned neatly into the wind. The sails flapped noisily as the sloop was caught in chains, but it arrested her progress nicely. Rosa standing at the tiller, waved at him, for which he waved back. Leaning on the rail next to her was another cat, finely dressed in a blue calico skirt, while on the bow and busy taking in the jib, Tabor recognized Gabby Raccoon. He'd wondered where the little fellow had gotten off to.

Rosa cupped her paws around her mouth. "Eye 'ave news!" she yelled in her high pitched voice. "May I come aboard?"

The pirate almost told her no. Mentally and physically he was still sore from the last few days, while his closest mate, still waiting to be buried, was beginning to bloat. The crew was presently taking turns keeping him washed down in order to keep the flies off.

Giving in, he sighed and cupped his own paws around his mouth yelling back, "Come ahead!"

'You will not understand the reason I have 'gone ahead'. I'm not so sure I do myself, but when you hear the news of 'how' I traveled, you will think me no more changed than the line of a good sword attack into a closed quarter... that is to say, once a spy, always a spy, and ne'er to be trusted. The attack travels down the blade, controlling it all the way through to the fatal touch of the tip. I alone knew of the revolution when it was suggested we raid Blueportdoggie.'

There was no need for a boat to be launched as the sloop was small enough to be easily handled under sweep. When she was alongside, Rosa agilely clambered over the side and quickly came to Tabor. Knuckling her brow with the single finger and thumb of her right paw, she lowered her voice and told him, "Thee White Rabbit 'as gone."

Tabor looked at her and smiled a sad smile. "I kinda figured that would happen eventually... but tell me how you know being that you've just returned from yor shakedown cruise. Ya did shake'er down good didn't ya?"

The little Cat punched him on the arm and scowled. "Wee fuk like Rabbits..." she growled with a smile. She then gave him a more severe look than he'd thought her capable of. "Ewe R not list'ning... Eye say Lady Taverness ese gone. We follow a sail... thee sloop ese fast, you see... but thee sail ese not so fast. Eet was another sloop 'nd she fire at us when we close."

"That would be a wise choice by the Captain," Tabor told her. "I would have done so myself... too many damned pirates in these waters. You have to show yor teeth if you're to be left alone."

"Leeeesen," Rosa told him, her face serious. "Through the glass eye see thee white Rabbit. Shee ese dressed in that yellow dress and 'as her... her..." she made a motion with her paws trying to describe what she saw.

"Parasol," Tabor filled in for her.

"Aye... parasol... Another ship ese on the horizon and eet get close very fast. Eet 'as sails the Caveat Noir only dream uf 'aving."

"A frigate?" the pirate asked her.

"Oui... thee big frig-at... Labradorean."

"You're sure?" He asked; a sudden sick feeling in his gut.

“Aye... Thee fore top’royal eese all black. We keep distance and still follow until we get a beeg ball across thee bow and then we turn and run like ‘ell. Thee other sloop... eet stay on and make thee friendly sign.”

Tabor scowled. “Go and tell your mother and Gulo,” he instructed. “I’ll tell Black Dog. We’ve a bit to discuss in any case and I’m think’n it’s time we did so.”

He looked out over the bay and judged the tide. He then judged the distance to the Brigantine. The sea was half way to high, maybe three hours to the ebb. “Tell your mother I’m weigh’n anchor at the turn.”

“Aye, aye,” she told him and began to turn away. Thinking of something, she looked back and smiled at him. “Ewe like the name I give thee sloop?” she asked, having named it after him.

“Ships are female,” he chided. “Best you change it before she comes ta not like her new master.”

‘Lest you think I played you... no... there is no proof that I did not; other than my word. The history of what happened created itself. You and I were mere participants, swimming against the tide and praying for a sandy beach. When you left for your ship, and I for my fencing match, the plans were as we’d discussed... nothing more. I did not know of Babacomb’s ploy, though I am grateful to him. Should he have not done what he did, there would have been a great amount of death. You should not fault his omissions.’

Tabor rowed himself to Black Dog’s new ship in The Queen’s dory. As he passed under her stern he saw one of the sailors repainting the name on her transom to the one that some rigorous sanding had exposed from under the newer paint.

“ ‘Gabriel’s Sara’,” he muttered, reading the name out loud. “Interesting choice.”

Passing into the shadows on the larboard side, the pirate found the air about her thick with distrust and the crew who had remained aboard sullen. Coming alongside he shipped his oars and accepted the line tossed down without comment. Climbing the ‘Jacob’s ladder’, he saw the Labradorean standing on the quarterdeck watching Rosa’s sloop through a telescope.

Swinging a leg over the rail, Tabor heard Babacomb say loudly, “She sails it well.”

“Aye... that she does,” he answered as he walked to stand with the Dog at the rail. “Her mother was right to give it to her.”

“I suggested she should,” the ex-Navigator told him. Collapsing his glass he turned to look at the pirate. He did not offer to shake his paw, nor did Tabor extend his own. “What news?” the Dog asked him.

“Lady Taverness has flown,” Tabor told him point blank. “Seems she met with a Labradorean Frigate.”

“Most likely the Royal Horse,” Babacomb said with a nod. “She’s been sailing these waters right enough; watching for something. My only questions would be; how did she make contact and was this what the frigate was watching for?”

“Does it matter?” the pirate asked with acid in his voice.

The Dog took this placidly, knowing what it was like to be betrayed by the doe. “Perhaps... perhaps not,” he replied softly. “If she fell off the face of the world it wouldn’t matter at all... but should she go and bring back a fleet, it would matter quite a bit.” He turned back to the rail and looked out over the water.

“I liked ya better before,” Tabor told him without smiling. “If this is what hav’n a ship does to ya then better to stay a Navigator.” He spat over the side.

“I am sorry for your loss,” the Dog said earnestly. “Kelly was a good mate no matter which way you splice the line.” Pulling his glass back out, he again watched the activity surrounding the sloop. Gulo seemed extremely upset, even at this distance.

“Thank you. I’m sorry for it too,” Tabor replied, softening his tone just a bit.

“You disapprove of what I did?” Babacomb asked, not turning to look at the Rabbit.

“No. You did what ya felt best and saved the lot of us by doing so. I got no bones to pick with that.”

“You don’t like the fact I have a ship again then?” the Dog asked, finding himself perplexed for some reason.

“Six pounders and a light hull... fast but fragile and no match for The Queen,” Tabor told him. He spat over the side again and then furthered, “You could have a fleet of ships and it wouldn’t bother me at all. What I don’t like are secrets.”

“I have no secrets,” Babacomb told him in a quiet voice, turning to look at him.

“Your ship is six inches deeper than she should be. Considering you’ve half a crew and none of the treasure loaded, that’s pretty deep.”

“I ballasted heavy.”

“Why?”

“Because it pleases me.”

“You’re repainting the old name on the transom, why?”

“Because that too pleases me.”

“I sail at the ebb,” Tabor told him, the edge back in his voice. “Best you make what arrangements ya need to make and quickly or stay the fuk here... I don’t care anymore.”

Turning, he stalked back to the Jacob’s ladder.

“Where will we be going?” Babacomb called to his back.

Tabor swung a leg over the rail and fixed him with a look. “You tell me. All I know about is a map that belongs to Gulo. If I don’t like what he has to offer then The Queen’ll sail by herself; just like she always has in the past. I have a crew back in Saylavee wait’n on me and I’m think’n it might be a good time to go and fetch’em since I’m sure as hell running out of friends here.”

With that he climbed down the ladder and rowed himself back to The Queen.

‘Try to act surprised when Gulo tells you of the treasure he means to fetch. It is worth more than anything you could cram into your ship’s hold. With luck I will meet you there... but you can tell absolutely no one of this. If you do... all will be lost before it can even begin.’

Precisely at the turn, The Queen’s jib and fore t’gallant sails were hoisted and allowed to shake out. With the assistance of two long boats hauling on a tow line, she slowly turned her head round to face the harbor entrance. Now having the tide and the wind both behind her, she quickly gained way leaving the two boats, and the twenty Wolverines in them, behind. Though they took to their oars with shouts meant to encourage the ship to wait, Tabor just smiled and waved to them from the stern. The Queen, with a further sail set and Balls at the helm, easily out distanced them... as had been the plan.

Babacomb’s Brigantine, now looking like an ant hill from its overload of Garrison Ferrets, made sail to follow, but she was sluggish with the weight. Drawing deeper than was normal, she was also forced further out into the ways where the current was less of a help.

The Caveat Noir, handily away from the wharf to the cheers of the populace of Blueportdoggie, was forced to turn back and pick up the Wolverines left behind by The

Queen. Tabor could clearly hear Gulo's voice bellowing across the bay and he laughed in spite of himself.

"Listen to him Kelly," he yelled out. "And tell me that's not a voice you could hear all the way to Hell's gate from the other side of Heaven."

The crew was used to this, having witnessed their Captain speaking with their dead in the past. It was who he was and they accepted that. In some small way they were reassured that when it was their turn to be sewn into a hammock they would not be forgotten.

The wind touched Tabor's cheek in a kiss and he heard the sound of dancing feet. The ship's timbers creaked and he recognized the sound of his Navigator's familiar giggle.

The old Rabbit smiled. "Yer doing well now Kelly," he said aloud. "Just a little while longer and you'll be at rest. Now tell me... what do you think I should do; eh?"

'... *dance* ...'

"Be it so then," the Captain said softly as he looked at the shrouded form lying on the deck. "Be it so."

Facing his crew, The Dread Pirate Tabor bellowed as loud as he could, "LISTEN TO ME ALL OF YOU! I WANT THIS HERE VESSEL TO HANG ON EVERY OUNCE OF WIND WE CAN PULL FROM THE SKY! TEND TO YOR SAIL'N ORDERS LIKE IT MEANT LIFE OR DEATH AND JUST YOU HANG ON; CUZ WE'RE GONNA STRETCH 'ER WINGS!"

As the crew climbed to their stations aloft, the Captain instructed his Gunner, "MR. FLOPEARS... PREPARE US A PROPER SIGNAL GUN FOR THE FORTRESS!"

Next he sought out their music maker. "SQUEEZEBOX GET YOR CONCERTINA AND PLAY IT FOR ALL YOU'RE WORTH!" he bellowed at the sailor.

Cupping his paws around his mouth, he then yelled into the rigging, "GET READY TO SHAKE OUT ALL THE SAILS BOYS... WE'RE GONNA TAKE OUR MATE KELLY RABBIT FOR ONE LAST DANCE! "

Only Rosa's little sloop did the pirate one better. Seeing The Queen was about to leave, she called the Cat back up from re-painting the name on her transom and immediately set sail, ignoring her mother's orders to turn back. She even left Kate on the dock standing next to her mother the rotund Ilene; which of course, she'd meant to do.

The one legged Cat, understanding the little Cat's needs, pulled a kerchief out from her big bosom and waved it gaily in the wind. "Godspeed, you little dickens!" she yelled after her new daughter-in-law. "And good hunting!"

The little sloop came alongside the larger vessel, every stitch of sail she could muster flying. Since the wind was from behind and she drew much less depth than the bigger ship, she easily crowded past. As she did so, the little Cat took out her speaking trumpet and hailed Tabor.

“EYE ‘AVE TAKEN YOUR ADVICE MON CAPITANNN... EYE ‘AVE RENAMED MY SHEEP!”

Looking down at the sloop’s transom, Tabor almost choked in mirth. Clearly written in gold flake was the name; ‘Tabor’s Little Mistress’.

The Queen’s hull groaned and then quite distinctly on the wind, the entire crew heard Kelly’s laughter.

‘HEE HEE HEE... HEE HEE HEE... HEE HEE HEE’

And then Mr. Flopears touched off the starboard carronade. The fortress responded, and on the tails of the resounding boom, Squeezebox Rabbit began to play ‘The Hen’s March To The Forecastle’.

For the rest of that day, The Queen and Tabor’s Little Mistress chased about as if they’d not a care in the world, each taking turns in the pretend hunt; the one of the other and back again.

Towards sunset, with the other two ships in the near distance and the wind dying to a mere whisper, the crew gathered on deck and consigned their shipmate Navigator Kelly Rabbit to the deep.

As the plank was tipped up, and he slid over the side, Tabor tossed a handful of gold coins in the air above the body. “One last dance within the gold,” he called out... and as he did, the sad song that Squeezebox was playing took a happier turn.

When the song was done, the crew quietly went about the business of settling their ship down for the night. With no clear destination, and the others to yet catch up, they would sail slowly under just jib and spanker.

Tabor stood for a moment alone, watching the sun sink into the ocean until he saw the light’s green flash which was a navigator’s time to fix the degrees on his sextant.

Turning, he retired to his cabin... alone.

‘... and so my darling, I will bid you adieux. I hope and pray we will meet again.

I shuddered as I penned those words... a premonition perhaps. Is that not what we always say at graveside?

But I am not dead... nor are you.

I carry you in my heart my love.

Ask me not why... for I cannot tell you.

Just know that I do.

L.T.'

Underway

From the journal of Private Vesa Dufva; also known as Tuuva by his peers.

As best recounted: It is The Third Day of The Second Week of The Seventh Month of The Forty Eighth year of Our Monarch Ludwig's Birth. May God preserve him and damn the Labradorean King, Gustav the Black, to Hell's nether most region.

'We have set sail to the rescue of our Monarch, or so we all hope.'

The Wolverine private made no comment as a fellow soldier sleeping on the deck beside him, moved and almost spilled his ink well. Holding the petit glass bottle in one paw, he carefully wiped its bottom with a small rag and then set it back into the ink well of his lap desk. Other than his soldiering accoutrement, this portable desk was his only possession. Recognizing his ability to write, he'd been singled out from among his brethren by Crown Prince Uric to be the unit's unofficial historian and presented with these tools for his new profession. To aid in this, he was also been given a small oil lamp, secured to the ship's bulkhead in the cargo hold of the Caveat Noir. This was where he normally slept, his writing being done after hours, as soldering took all of his other time.

Dipping his quill, he again carefully transcribed his thoughts.

'Presently we are very crowded aboard the Cat's pirate ship. It feels so very odd to be affiliated with those who so blatantly break the laws; but who are we to judge when King Gustav is imprisoned, and King Gaspar attempts to take what is rightly Wolverine? Is this not also piracy of the highest nature? Besides this, a good ally is a treasure, no matter how coarse the gold.'

'Our routine, thankfully, is still of soldering. This helps take our minds off of what must certainly result in the death of most of us. In the mornings, we drill on deck under the watchful eye of our Sergeant. Though we cannot march, we maintain shooting practice, taking turns in our groups of fifteen. This is in three ranks of five, where the first rank play fires, then moves to the rear to play reload, moving forward as the front rank fires and falls back, until we are again in the front rank and ready to fire again. In this way we can maintain our volume of fire at four rounds per minute while at the same moment maintaining our mobility.'

A good portion of the day is also spent on our equipment and uniforms. Though we eat, work, and sleep in our single outfit of undress clothing, we each maintain a uniform to be worn into battle; dress blue with white piping. This is worn once a week for inspection."

He paused to look out over his sleeping brethren, his weak light almost illuminating the dark hold. They were closely packed together and more than a few cuddled in a comradely fashion. It had been almost a year since they had departed their home with the Prince and yet none of them grumbled even a little. King, Country, and Hearth were their

credo. Blowing gently on his written words, he then wiped the quill on a small rag before continuing.

'Yesterday, just before we were to depart, the pirate ship named The Queen took flight early, leaving the Wolverine part of her crew behind. This caused a great concern for Governor Gulo as he thought the ship was running away. Desertion of one's comrades is the foulest of sins and though none of my fellow soldiers voiced an opinion, I know what they must have felt in their hearts.'

'The Queen, however, is manned by Rabbits and by nature they are a strange lot. I'm not sure there is any true understanding their kind but I personally find the Cats to be no less curious in their mannerisms. Better for Governor Gulo to handle the translations, because if it had been one of us and the Cat Captain had unloosed her tongue in the same manner she had on the Governor, I dare say she would not have lived long. As we Wolverines are tempermented, similarly the Cats are a fierce lot. It is my opinion that they are much less stalwart than we are but on the water there are few who match them; except, perhaps, the Rabbits.'

'As the Caveat Noir swung back to pick up our brethren she almost collided with the Black Dog's ship. He carries the Ferrets who volunteered to help us. Though it is supposed to be secret, we noticed that he was very heavy and on our departure from the harbor it was not hard to see where the great ship killing howitzer had been mounted. There were also the tell tale scrape marks down the cliff face. The feat of moving such a heavy piece of artillery is quite remarkable.'

"Tuuva," called one of the soldiers softly, "It would be best if you shut your light now and get some rest. Tomorrow will be a long day, eh?"

Tuuva was a pet name the young soldier's friends had given him. In their language, his Northern name was hard to pronounce so as with all soldiers, he was renamed with a 'nom de guere'. In this case, 'Tuuva' was, in fact, the name of a very heroic soldier in the Wolverine's past; heroic but slow of the mind. As the history went, Tuuva, in his slowness, mistook the call for retreat as the one for a charge... and so, single handedly, he charged the approaching enemy and held the bridge leading to the Wolverine's home; dying in his efforts. To be named after such a soldier was a great honor to his young mind, though his brethren actually meant it in reflection of the hero's slowness of mind.

"A little bit more Grunoro and then I will rest."

He smiled when he was replied to with a snore. They were all tired. It was the life of a soldier. Only once a week did they rest. On the Seventh Day, they dressed in their best uniforms and met in prayer, after which, they had the rest of the day to do as they wished. On the other six days, their hearts and souls belonged to their Sovereign. As long as any could remember this strength had kept their country free.

Dipping his quill again, he resolved to write at least another page before resting.

'As the Rabbit's ship sailed past, I saw the strangest being perhaps I have ever seen. He was a huge swine with a big belly and many tattoos on his smooth skin. He does not have fur like us Wolverines; though he has a large amount of wild looking head hair. He also appears to be a ferocious warrior, bearing large tusks which I am sure he could use to great effect in a fight. Indeed, the soldiers who were in attendance at the Festival spoke of him and the old Rabbit bearing no testicles with great respect. From what I understand, this great Swine, ignoring his own safety, grabbed the Lord of the town by the neck and shook him like a little toy. This action sparked our troop's response in killing the one who would have killed the Pig, and the rest of those hidden in ambush ran like the cowards they were. In this the Swine was fearless. During the aftermath of all that happened, he disappeared with the Lord and was not seen again for two days. The Burgomaster was never seen again... and yet no one questions the Swine; perhaps because it was considered a saving of good rope. There have been additional rumors about this incident whispered among the other soldiers but they are too ghastly to repeat.'

'By the time we left the harbor the decks of our ship were severely overcrowded. The Black Dog's brigantine, coming up behind us was equally so. There is hope that tomorrow the Rabbit pirate will negotiate and perhaps the twenty left behind, and more, might be allowed back aboard his ship to lighten the load of the Cat's vessel. This is the second day that the Rabbit pirate sails just upon the horizon with the little Cat's sloop apparently carrying messages back and forth. That little sloop ship is very fast and can sail closer to the wind than the larger vessels, or so I overheard one of the Cats saying. I'm sure they would be very surprised to learn I can speak their whiny tongue. That, of course, is a secret.'

Taking a moment to rest his eyes, Vesa breathed in the scent of his sleeping brethren and found comfort in its familiarity. Across the hold, someone farted and he smiled. If this had happened when all were awake there would have been much elbowing and good natured insults. Bending again to his work, he penned;

'The day we left the harbor, the big ship and the little ship stayed just out of our reach and appeared to be playing with each other. We watched them off and on as our duties allowed, but I heard the Cats, who watched at length, remark in admiration at the ability of the Rabbit. They laughed several times when they saw him 'steal the wind' from the little ship. I am not exactly sure what this means, but it must surely be the mark of a good sailor to be able to do so. Towards sunset the Rabbit ship reduced sail to just two sheets of canvas and remained like that for the night. It was obvious to me they did not intend to lose us as they hoisted a lantern signal to their yards.'

The Wolverine next to the youngster rolled over again threatening to spill the ink and it was only Vesa's watchfulness that prevented it. Sighing, he again replaced the ink bottle into its well and then stoppered it. He would write more on the morrow. The Sergeant had whispered to him that if things went well, he would be transferred to the Rabbit ship. Apparently there would be a requirement that he learn Rabbit. He did not feel this would

be too difficult a task. While they were marooned in Blueportdoggie, he had been assigned the task as translator for the group because of his quickness of tongues. In the time they'd been there, he'd learned to speak Ferret and Cat fluently, as well as the town's locally based language, which was a mixture of Labradorean, Cat, and Rabbit.

Carefully putting his camp desk to rest, the young soldier blew out his little lamp and rolled over on the bare wood deck, instantly falling asleep.

The following morning, as the soldiers did their best to take breakfast, all four ships came close; though The Queen maintained the wind gage and thus control of the seas which would allow her a speedy departure should the need arise.

“What is happening?” Vesa asked the Wolverine standing next to him. Both held their breakfast of a single boiled egg, two slices of bread and a mug of tea. They were patiently waiting for a place to sit among the ship's guns so they might enjoy the small repast.

“I understand there will be a meeting of the Captains today Tuuva,” the other replied as he sat to the deck. He then cordially motioned to the area next to him and the youth sat. “They have much to discuss, I presume, before we proceed on the voyage.”

“What is there to discuss?” the youngster asked of the veteran. “I thought it was understood where we were going; why not just sail there?”

“Trust,” the other Wolverine replied, beginning to peel his egg and tossing the shells overboard through a water passage in the bulkhead. “As always, that should be the first thing on the table; not bread, butter, and a bottle of wine. These Captains are not Wolverines so rightfully, I suppose, they do not trust one another. This is a natural occurrence between the species; but it must be overcome if we are to succeed.”

“Unity in all,” Vesa said, nodding his understanding as he sipped his tea. Being freshly out of port, it was strong and delicious. Later, when the rations grew thin, what the cook served would be little more than hot water. “I have learned that Cat's are very distrustful at best,” he added. “I believe it is in their nature. Ferrets are soldiers like us... but not exactly like us. I believe they are good to their word. Labradoreans I trust not at all, for good reason, and Rabbits... I don't know, as I have never had any dealings with them.”

“You will soon enough,” the other soldier chuckled. “It would seem that our Tuuva has been singled out for a special assignment.”

Vesa stopped peeling his egg and looked at the veteran, his mouth dropping open slightly. He had never been singled out for anything other than a joke of some sort. “What?”

The other Wolverine smiled and held up a paw. “I am sorry Tuuva, but I am sworn to secrecy.”

From across the deck, another of his brethren, leaning against a starboard side six pounder, called out to him, "Congratulations Tuuva... you will make us all proud, I am sure of it."

"Proud? What am I to make proud of?" he called back. This caused many of the soldiers sitting close to chuckle.

"Fenus and Lox are down preparing your uniform for you," added another soldier from near by. Apparently everyone but the recipient of the strange orders knew what was to be.

Sergeant Urhea came out from the Captain's cabin, the door banging closed behind him. "Private Vesa Dufva!" he called out, his more southern accent butchering the pronunciation of the youngster's family name.

Standing, the Private called out, "HERE SERGEANT!"

"Come with me to the stern of the ship," the old Wolverine instructed, and then turned on his heel and made his way aft.

"Quickly Tuuva, gulp you egg and go. I will take your bread and tea. Tomorrow morning I will return it from my rations."

"Thank you Franz, but you may have my portion freely," the youngster said, handing his meal over. "Suddenly I am not so hungry. Just take the plate and mug back to the galley for me."

"Certainly," his comrade replied with a courteous nod. "I am happy to do so. Good luck. Your uniform should be ready when Old Urhea is done with you. I expect he will see to your inspection personally."

Sergeant Urhea placed a paw on his private's shoulder as the pair looked aft over the wake of the ship. Though he'd never said so, the child was like the son he'd never had. On the horizon Blueportdoggie could just be made out. "The soldiers of your unit like you very much," he told the youngster in a strong voice, "And that includes me."

"Thank you Sergeant."

"You are about to be given a mission, Tuuva," his Sergeant intoned.

"So I have gathered," Vesa replied earnestly. "I wish I might have heard of it first from you though Sergeant."

The other Wolverine chuckled. "You know how it is Tuuva, you have been a soldier long enough to understand there are no secrets among the brethren. In this case, your orders

are a true blessing. Governor Gulo and the Prince wish to see you in but a few moments. With no secrets among us, I believe that after your meeting, if you hurry below decks you will find your battle uniform ready for you and in spotless condition. You will put it on please. Bring your musket and duffle when you are called for as well. These things, too, have been packed for you.”

“What is the mission, sir?”

The older Wolverine smiled. “I cannot tell you, as that will be voiced only by the Prince. He is a good leader and we must allow him to lead, otherwise the chain of command breaks down and there is no strength of unity.”

“Yes Sergeant.”

“Tell me Tuuva, do you speak Rabbit?”

“No, Sergeant.”

“How long would it take you to learn?”

“I think a week, perhaps, to speak it clearly. Two weeks to fluency... three to write it coherently.”

His sergeant sighed. “ ‘Coherently’ ... such a large word. I wish I had your talent Tuuva. To be able to learn a language like that is of real value. I know it was you who bartered for all of our food when we were in camp. You may take much teasing from your comrades because of your age, but you have been a great help. We all know and appreciate that.”

“It was all meant in good fun Sergeant... I have always understood.”

“You will have but a few days to accomplish the task of speaking and writing Private.” Turning to face the younger Wolverine, the Sergeant told him, “Go now to our leader’s cabin that they might inform you properly.” He saluted the Private first. “Always Ready!”

Vesa’s heart leapt to his throat as he returned the salute; he had never been so honored.

From the journal of Private Vesa Dufva:

‘Governor Gulo and the Prince have informed me that I have been selected to go to the ship of the pirate Rabbits. Unfortunately they were very busy going over the details of a large map the Governor had pinned down to their small table. The Governor had nothing

more to add to my order and so I was dismissed. They are both great Wolverines. I must prepare...'

With a curse, Vesa smeared his fresh line of ink as the ship healed onto a new tack.

"Tuuva!" the Sergeant called down into the hold. "They have called for you."

"Leave that," Fenus told him. "The Captains are waiting. Lox and I will pack it up for you. I'm sure the meeting must be nearly over and the Rabbit Captain will want to leave. You are to go in his boat and the rest of the troops will follow. Rumeus was standing by the open skylight and heard it spoken."

Lox just smiled and, gently reaching out, took the camp desk from the young Wolverine. With his eyes he motioned to the ladder leading up from the ship's hold. Vesa nodded and rose, only to find Fenus holding out his musket. It had been freshly cleaned and the stock polished to a high gloss.

"What is a proper Rabbit greeting?" the youngster asked, as he accepted the weapon. The pair had been stationed on the Rabbit ship for some time and had been part of the twenty left in the boats.

"Tuuva!" yelled the Sergeant again. "This is no time to act the school boy! Front and center now!"

Lox and Fenus looked at each other. "We know but a few words in Rabbit... perhaps you could maybe splice them together and sound reasonable."

"Tell me quickly," Vesa hissed. "I must go. I should have thought of this earlier!"

When Vesa was shown into Captain Hiss' cabin, he was very nervous. As he walked, he heard raised voices bordering on shouted rage. This was hardly what he'd been hoping for. All was supposed to be unity and team work. How could they possibly hope for a rescue of the royal family if the structure of discipline was so fractured.

When the Sergeant opened the door to the small cabin the talking stopped. Vesa had to keep his knees bent so his tall hat would not be crushed on the low overhead. He was dismayed when his Sergeant stayed outside and the door closed behind him.

Coming to a stooped attention, he stared straight ahead, using his peripheral vision to see who was present. Captain Hiss was seated at her small table on the other side of the compartment, while the Rabbit they called Tabor stood behind her. His back was to the wall in a solid defensive position. He had two finely polished pistols sticking out of his sash, both of which, the soldier noted, were at half cock. Governor Gulo and Commander Pablo Ferret sat upon the ledges of the stern windows, while the Labradorean Black Dog

leaned against the long twelve stern gun. This weapon was well secured; hog tied in place and its bulk splitting the cabin in half. Near him and on the Wolverine's side of the room, was a youngish Cat, missing all but one finger and a thumb on her right paw. To the Private's left was Crown Prince Uric.

"He's kind of cute for a fur head," the young Cat said in her whiny language.

"Ilene spoiled you," Captain Hiss replied in Cat from across the room. "One stowaway for her simple giggles and now all you can think of is penis."

"Puss is good too," the young Cat replied with a grin. Obviously she was comfortable with no one knowing her language. "But sailing is better than both," she added quickly.

"Eye am at least 'appy for that," her mother replied in what Vesa thought certainly to be Rabbit... or at least a close pidgin of the language.

"If I might interrupt, Captain Hiss," Prince Uric said with a bow to the Cat Captain and then to the little Cat, "And young Captain Hiss." When they both nodded, he proceeded to introduce Vesa.

"Captain Tabor, may I introduce to you your new scribe. I'm sorry he does not know navigation, but I am told he is a quick learner. His name is Private Vesa Dufva." To Vesa's delight, the Prince's pronunciation of his family name was flawless. "He reads," The Prince continued, "And writes; and I assure you will keep your ship's log in meticulous order."

"But does he speak Rabbit?" the pirate growled.

The Prince turned to the Private and told him in Wolverine, "I do hope you learned at least a few words of greeting Private."

"Yes My Prince, I did."

"Very well; you may address your new Captain."

Vesa, forgetting the lowness of the overhead, clicked his heels together and stood straight at attention. This crushed his tall hat, pushing it down over his eyes, where upon he shouted, "EYE EYE CAPEETAN... EYE IS PLEASED JOIN YOUR FINE CREW OF LESBIAN RABBITS... LARBOARD, STARBOARD, UGGA BUGGA BUGGA; THANK YOU, YOU'RE WELCOME, AND EVERYTHING GOOD!"

There was a full three seconds of shocked silence before the entire room erupted in laughter. When it finally died down, Captain Tabor told the assembled Captains, "I couldn't 'a said it better m'self. Wrap this one up and put a bow on his head... after an

introduction like that I'll have to take him along just to keep him from being shot by old Gulo."

Tea

“Tea!” Balls said sharply, stabbing a finger at the scrap of paper Vesa was using for practice. “Tea ain’t for drink’n... it makes a ‘tuh’ sound, or a ‘thuh’ sound if’n it’s got an ‘h’ with it or a ‘thuh with a E’ sound. Thee pen... thee sea... thee ship. Write it again!”

The young Wolverine blinked, and then again – perfectly – wrote the letter ‘T’ on his scrap of paper.

The old pirate snatched the paper away from him and slammed it down upon the chart table. Grabbing one of the charcoal sticks, he crudely drew a ‘T’ on the paper. “Like that!” he said. “If’n it’s a capitol ‘T’ then ya crosses it at the top like it belongs on a gallows. If’n it’s a child ‘T’ then ya crosses the line a quarter ways down like it was the main t’gallant yard.”

“Main t’gall’ent yurd,” Vesa repeated, his mouth struggling to form the words properly.

Duroc came quietly up behind the pirate and began mimicking him. Vesa, long practiced at the stone face, didn’t even crack a smile, though the rest of the crew picked up on what was happening; pausing in their work to watch.

“I’m tell’n ya, and yor not list’n,” Balls said loudly. “Name me the sail all the way out on the end of the bowsprit.”

“Fly’n jib,” Vesa told him.

“Spell it!”

“I. T.: it.”

“What? If’n yor mak’n fun ‘o’ me, I’ll cut ya till ya bleed purple. Spell ‘Fly’n Jib’ smarty pants.”

The young Wolverine screwed up his face in thought and then said, “‘F L Y I N G - J I B’.

“What’s it attached to?”

Duroc made a motion describing the bow sprit and then made as if he had one between his legs and was poking the old Rabbit from behind.

“Bowel spirits,” Vesa managed, almost losing his stone faced composure.

“It ain’t got nuth’n to do with yor guts!” Balls yelled, getting himself even more worked up. “Bowels is your guts!” His voice changed to the sounds of a taunt. “We had us a pirate named Bowels once... but he crapped his’self to death... hang’n off a the what?”

“For chains?”

“FORE CHAINS... THEY’S CALLED THE FORE CHAINS! IT’S WHERE YA GOES TA CRAP! THAT’S WHAT THEYS FOR! THAT’S WHY WE CALL’S ‘EM THAT! WHERE IN GOD’S GOOD EARTH DO YA CRAP WHEN YOR MARCHING?”

Duroc made a thrusting move acting as if he was holding on to Balls’ hips, his tongue lolling out of his mouth in pretend ecstasy.

“Dig hole with paw,” Vesa said calmly, “And fill in when done. Less show you’re there if tracked.”

Balls’ face screwed up as if in disbelief. “ ‘N where ya gonna dig a hole in the ocean?” he asked almost civilly. “Spell...”

Whirling about, he yelled, “WILL YOU STOP DOING THAT YA MORONIC PIG?!”

“Moronic... or Pig?” Vesa asked.

“PIG! SPELL PIG!” Balls screamed.

“S W I N E,” the youngster intoned, and then smiled.

The old Rabbit turned bright red, his eyes bulging. He began to say something when Duroc wrapped his huge arms around him and picked him up off the deck giggling like a child.

“PUT ME DOWN AFOR I CUT YOR GIZZARD OUT AND TOAST IT CRISPY DOWN IN THE GALLEY!”

“Cannibal,” the Pig said softly. “I knew you...”

“I AIN’T NO GOD CURSED CANNIBAL!” the pirate yelled, kicking his legs around in the air.

The crew standing around on deck began to chant, “Ugga Bugga... Ugga Bugga... Ugga Bugga...”

“What’s all the noise about?!” Tabor yelled as he came on deck. Seeing what was going on, he pointed at the Swine. “Put him down and go forward... play with yourself or something, but stay away from him for at least an hour.”

When the Pig, grumbling, did as instructed, Tabor walked over and looked at the old Rabbit closely. He was standing rigidly, his features contorted as he tried to breath. His face had turned a bright red and his eyes blinked; but he didn’t appear to be seeing.

Tabor, coming closer, waved his paw in front of his face. When there was no response, he gently blew in one of the old pirate's ears. "Dang," he said softly. "Balls, don't do this... not now. Ya gotta come back to me. I'm think'n ya got yourself all worked up over nothing for nothing. Don't up and pop the stopper from the jug. I'd have no one to talk to at night... come on now... them nights is so damned long."

Vesa came up on the other side of his teacher. "If I may, sur," he said quite plainly in Rabbit. "My grandfather suffered a similar affliction. May I take care of Mr. Balls, please?"

Tabor looked at him. It had been only one day that the youngster was on board. "You could speak Rabbit all along, couldn't ya?" he accused. "The dirty joke is once again on Captain Tabor, right?"

"No sir, I haft learned tru the teachings of my new shipmates. They have been quite amiable."

"Ya mean your fellow lesbians?"

Vesa blushed. "I am truly sorry for that my Captain. May I take care of Mr. Balls now? If we do not get him into the shade and laying down, his blood will boil. He will then collapse, foam at the mouth for a bit; and die."

"Aye," Tabor told him. "Do what needs to be done. Usually it's Balls that takes care of us... and we've not had no one to do so for him in return. We'll take him to my cabin." Turning towards the bows and the sulking porker sitting out on the bow sprit, he yelled, "DUROC! COME HELP FIX WHAT YA FUK'D UP!"

After checking his ship and seeing that everything was in order, Tabor came into his cabin to find his old shipmate resting easy in his hammock. Vesa was pouring a cup of red liquid overboard through the stern windows. Duroc was sitting quietly next to his friend looking very concerned. He glanced up as Tabor came in, his face a dreadful mask of sorry.

"I not mean harm my friend Balls," he said quietly.

"I know ya didn't," his Captain told him, "But in the future I think ya might remember Balls ain't quite as young as he used to be. He told me he was having his moments, but I never knew it was quite this bad."

The Swine nodded and then began to weep. Laying his head on the old Rabbit's chest he muffled the sobs in his friend's blanket. Slowly a bandaged arm came up and stroked the tusker's ears.

Crossing quietly to the Wolverine Private at the window, Tabor asked, “What did you do?”

“I bled him by half...” he looked at the cup searching for the right word, “Half a pint, sur,” he said, pronouncing the p‘in’t as ‘in’. “A pint is how you measure your ale, yes?”

“The ‘I’ is long... pronounced like ‘eye’ – p-eye-nt,” Taor corrected. “And aye, it is.”

Vesa looked at him and nodded. “P-eye-nt,” he repeated. “I bled him by half of that. It’s what my mother used to do for my Grandfather when he would have the fits and staggers. I think that Mr. Balls should not have rum any longer. Perhaps switch to wine and no more than one bottle a day... and no meat,” he added.

“We don’t eat meat,” the Rabbit told him with a chuckle. “He’s jest a lot older than he lets on.” Taking the cup from the youth’s paws, he said, “You did good Vesa Dufva. Thank you. Go up on deck, and practice your navigating now. Mind the wind and keep us to the windward of Black Dog. It pisses him off if I don’t let him control the waters.”

“He told you that?”

“He don’t have to... I just know.”

When the Wolverine left the cabin, Tabor sat on the windowsill watching the Swine and the Rabbit. They were the most unlikely pair he had ever seen; and yet there they were, tighter than a bugger’s knot tied twice over.

Looking back to the now closed cabin door, he reflected upon how it was that he came across his new navigator.

The day of the Captain’s Council Tabor had not been in the best of moods. Always, he would turn around to ask Kelly’s advice on something or other, and always he felt such disappointment at the realization he was gone. Captain or not, he felt at a loss simply for someone to talk to. Lady Taverness was gone, Smithe was gone, and now Kelly. He had no one really to just pass the time of day with. He’d tried to talk with Balls, but the old bastard had been so grumpy lately not even the Swine could cross his shadow. Toby was good for a toss, but other than discussion on what the weather ‘might’ be like with a swig of rum or two, he was a lost cause. He’d tried to talk with Mr. Flopears, but old Floppy was even more torn up over Kelly’s death than Tabor. After the funeral, he’d disappeared within his armory and only came out occasionally to relieve himself.

That morning, the pirate captain was called on deck to see exactly what he’d expected to see. Hiss had her ship half a league out and on a closing tack; obviously she meant to come alongside for a shout. The wind was presently from her aft starboard quarter. Under

full sail, she was a pretty sight. Though she was heavy, she was still easily hauling a cable's length to his half. Seeing no signs of mischief, he was not upset by the sight.

Scanning the horizon, he found Babacomb's ship far behind and struggling to keep up. This made him smile. Black Dog was heavy, of that there was no doubt. It must be tweaking his balls good not being able to sail the lighter craft to her full potential.

Taking his glass out, he studied the Cat's ship with a practiced eye. He saw Hiss standing on the quarterdeck leaning on the rail and watching him in return. She was a cool one, and he smiled in spite of himself when he saw Gulo limp over near her. It was obvious even from this distance that he was saying something to her at the top of his lungs. Best guess, the explosion had deafened the Wolverine somewhat. His arms were waving, and it was obvious he was trying to give unsolicited advice on how to approach The Queen. Professional soldiers rarely made good sailors; and Gulo was no exception. They always seemed to think that a ship, like a line of soldiers, could just be pointed in a direction and it would go there.

"Let's get some more sails up!" He yelled without taking his eye off of the other ship. "Helm, get us in front of the wind so Hiss don't steel it from us. Ya know she'd like that."

Orders were given behind him; yelled out by Balls. Since Kelly was gone, the old Rabbit had taken over the duties of Navigator, though he wasn't very good at it. The stress was beginning to take a toll on his temper. Tabor resolved himself to watch the crew and see who he could promote to Bosun so they would at least have a competent paw on the wheel around the clock.

His body easily adjusted to the new feel of the ship as she turned to put the wind at her back. Hiss would have to haul a longer distance now before turning if she wanted to keep her larboard side to him... or turn inside of him now and give him the opposite side. She chose to turn, and the Rabbit delighted in how her ship was handled.

Gauging the distance, he figured the Cat captain would be alongside in about twenty minutes. He could play her if he had a mind too, but he was tired. Most likely she would have something to say about his impromptu departure from Blueportdoggie, as undoubtedly would Gulo. It didn't matter to him. He didn't have large enough of a crew to make much of a fight, should one occur, but he could run and he was lighter for kicking the Wolverines to the wharf.

Looking to the rigging, he saw the improvements Babacomb had made and approved of what he saw. There were places for six supplementary sails to be rigged out on additional yards attached to what was already in place. They would only be good in a 'wind to your back' situation, but he had no doubt The Queen would fly like she had wings.

"Toby!" he yelled to the fat bunny sitting up on the main yard, "Get us the Jolly boat ready. I'm think'n ya need some exercise."

Snapping his glass closed he signaled Balls to come over. When the two were close enough their whisper would not be heard, he said, "I'll most likely be going over to the Caveat Noir for a meeting; that much is a given. While I'm there I want you to hold the wind gauge. Anything funny and you move away. Further... I'll be taking that ugly assed red feathered hat you bought me. If I come out on deck without it on my head you sail away and don't look back. We got the treasure in the hold which is enough for the entire crew to live like Kings for the rest of their lives. Go somewhere safe and divvy it out; then you burn The Queen. There'll be no turning back after that."

"Aye, aye Captain," the old pirate replied, knuckling his brow.

"Oh... one last thing," Tabor added, "Before ya do that, take the Pig home. If you don't, no one else will and that would be a shame. Do that and then pay off the crew after ya get to wherever ya decides ta go.."

The rest of what happened had been no more than routine. Hiss called out to him with her speaking trumpet and the invitation was made. The seas were no more than a foot so after the ships heaved too rowing over had been easy. Coming aboard the Caveat Noir, he'd gone straight to the quarterdeck and stood looking at Gulo and Hiss. He offered no warmth with his greeting. With the hideous hat upon his head and his two pistols stuffed into his waist band he appeared imposing; which was his intention.

"I'd say this is goodbye," he told them gruffly, "Unless you have something else on your minds."

"Eye luv thee cover," Hiss told him nodding to the hat. "Ewe look like my Gran' mutter." She then smiled her Cat smile. "Ewe for'get the first re'a'son we follow thee Fur Head? 'E 'as a map."

Gulo coughed, politely putting one paw over his mouth. Obviously he didn't appreciate the term 'fur head'. "We have things to discuss," he said in a softer voice than usual. "Babacomb will be here in a moment. Perhaps you would like a glass of rum?"

And that was how the meeting began... over rum.

When everyone was present, Gulo unrolled the map on the table and stuck pins into the corners to hold it down. "On this spot of the world," he told them, "Marked by the 'X', is the greatest treasure of all times. I refer to, of course, the Wolverine Royal Family."

"I'd like to say it's been nice knowing you Gulo," Tabor growled, rising from his chair, "But I'd be a damned liar if I did."

"Wait!" a younger Wolverine said loudly. He was dressed as a Lieutenant of the Wolverine's army. The Rabbit stopped and looked at him. Suddenly all was still in the small room. "You are the only one present whom I have not been introduced to Captain

Tabor,” he said calmly. “I am Crown Prince Uric Graypaw. The family Governor Gulo speaks of is mine. They are being held captive by the Labradoreans.”

“And this is supposed to matter to me?” Tabor asked in a tone that was not sarcastic; it was an honest question.

Gulo made to say something but the Prince held up a paw keeping him silent. It was the first time Tabor’d seen Gulo act in any way subordinate.

“I don’t suppose it would matter to you since other than the island of Saylavie, we Wolverines are a land locked people... but... I am asking for your help Captain Tabor. If it were your family, I would help you.”

Tabor turned and spat out the open stern windows. “Sure ya would, and as soon as you did I’d steal your money, bugger you dearly, and maybe, if you was lucky, I might kiss ya before leaving in the morning. Your kind hangs my kind and that’s just the way it is.”

Gulo clearly wanted to leap over the small table and throttle the Rabbit but the Prince placed a paw on his arm. “Would everyone please excuse Captain Tabor and myself? I wish that we could speak in private... if this is acceptable to the Captain?”

“Fine,” Tabor grumbled, retaking his seat. “Kick’em all out and let’s talk.”

When the room was empty, the Prince came to sit across from the Rabbit. Taking the jug of rum, he poured a glass for both of them. “Governor Gulo speaks highly of you,” he said as he poured the drinks.

“That’s a lie,” the Rabbit growled. “Gulo wants what Gulo wants, with no thought to anyone but himself. He’d sooner speak well of a hungry shark than he would me.”

“Funny you should say that,” Prince Uric told him, stoppering the jug and holding his glass out. Tabor picked his glass up and clinked it against the Prince’s before taking a sip. “He did mention a shark,” Uric told him, “But I believe the name spoken was ‘Babacomb’. I find it curiously interesting that he joined with us without question.”

“He’s got issues,” the pirate captain told him flatly. “Just like all of us... no better... no worse... it’s just getting to him. I kinda been expecting him to go swimming with a cannonball clutched to his chest.” He sipped his drink again and gave a wistful look. “It’s good rum,” he said softly, “But it ain’t gonna buy my vote.”

The Prince sat, carefully smoothing out his blue jacket. “I’m not intending to buy your vote Captain. You must help willingly or what we wish will not be possible.”

Taking a small envelope out of an inner pocket, he slid it across the table to the pirate. “A friend told me you might be hesitant. She asked me to give you this.”

Tabor looked at the letter, but did not move to pick it up. "She's dead to me," he said in a tired voice. "I got no reason to complicate things more than they are. She can stay dead."

"May I tell you a story?" The Prince asked.

"You got till I finish this drink," the pirate told him, "And then I'm leaving."

Prince Uric raised his glass in salute. "Your time, sir, is very much appreciated." He then swallowed the entire contents.

"I do hope you're not going to tell me she was the best ass ya ever handled because it's better ya don't go there... she's not a she in case you were wondering."

The Wolverine smiled a strange smile. "Heavens no... I have far too much respect for Mistress Taverness to have attempted such a thing, though I will admit she is very beautiful."

"A little worse for the wear these recent days, I'm thinking."

"She is still beautiful, Captain Tabor. She always will be. Alas, she was only my Fencing Master."

"Go figure."

"It's true. My father firmly believes in being taught by the best. In fact, the way that he found her was quite revealing in its nature. She was totally unknown in our country, and that worked well for her. She has never been one to call attention to her... shall we say; talents?"

"Then how did the King... I can call him The King can't I?"

"Yes, please. Respect is always good to have and to show; even for those who do not deserve it. My father, however, does deserve it."

"I'm sure he does." Taking another sip of his rum, the pirate asked, "How is it he knew she was a Fencing Master if she was so careful to keep it hidden?"

"Three ways," the young Wolverine said with a smile. The rum was apparently setting its teeth into his neck. "By the way she wore her sword was one way." He held up one finger. "By the way she walked was another," he chuckled. Jerking with the motion of the ship, he held up a second finger. "Is the ship moving, or is it me?"

"The ship's moving," the pirate replied, smiling slightly. "It's a Cat ship and it rides hard like its skinny queen Captain."

Prince Uric's mouth dropped open slightly. "You mean you and Captain Hiss..." He made a circle with his left index finger and thumb, and then poked his right index finger through the hole.

"Nooooo..." the Rabbit chuckled. "It's only an expression. I don't like the female type... and especially not no Cat female types; and she dam sure don't like the males. What was the third thing?"

Prince Uric smiled and blinked. "By the way she killed five assassins who were trying to kill my father. Well... four... my father managed to disable one of them."

"That would do it," Tabor agreed, subtly moving the Prince's glass away from his side of the table, least the Wolverine might think to refill it. "What's this got to do with..."

"She was there when my family was taken by King Gaspar the Black. The guard made a good fight of it, but they were taken unawares and overwhelmed."

"I'm a little confused here Prince. On the one paw you're telling me she saved your father's life, and on the other, you're telling me she oversaw his capture. You do know she caught a ride on a Labradorean frigate, don't cha? That wouldn't exactly make her your friend and trusted ally."

"Yes... I gave her my blessing when she said she would go ahead of us into the Devil's den. She did not 'oversee', Captain Tabor, she witnessed. As it were, she'd been discretely introduced to King Gaspar's, wife by my mother. A friendship was found, and Mistress Taverness became Queen Fran's willing consort. Old King Gaspar was never the wiser for his wife's servicing as he never knew the secret. Mistress Taverness worked for us, you see, relaying important information through an occasional letter to my mother. She still works for us."

"Why?" Tabor asked flatly.

"I don't know," the Prince replied; and then fell out of his chair. Climbing back up again, he smoothed his coat and then promptly leapt to the stern windows and began vomiting.

Tabor picked up the letter. Looking at the handwriting on the envelope, he told the Prince, "If I was you, Your Majesty, I would stick to drinking water."

Taking out his deck knife, he carefully broke the wax seal holding the envelope closed.

The Letter

My Darling Tabor,

In this note, delivered by the Prince's paw, I know I may speak exactly what I feel without fear of the words being intercepted. It is time we must ask ourselves what we truly desire in this life. My only desire is to return with you to that little bed and breakfast where I received the tattoo of my love. To live out our lives there with no fear that the shadows of our past lives will find us in the middle of the night as we sleep.

To not see my death coming is perhaps my greatest fear, though it is more logical to truly hope for such a thing... one moment alive, and the next gone.

No treasure in the entire world could grant us this security. Gold is hard and cold... and uncaring of its owner. The friendship of a monarch, however, is warm, comforting, and all powerful. Such a thing could grant me my dream. It is for this reason I have gone before our small flotilla. To die while trying to obtain this dream would be but a small cost.

When you land, leave word with the owner of the 'Thorny Rose'. He is a friend of what we are; which under the Labradoreans is a death sentence.

Whatever fate I am to suffer, I now do for you, and only for you.

I have found what I have been searching for my entire life in the form of a pirate I could not conquer. If it were possible, I would bear your children.

I love you Captain Tabor Rabbit.

L.T.

Holiday Routine

From the sailing log of The Queen: Vesa Dufva navigator on duty, Captain Tabor Rabbit commanding.

It is The Seventh Day of the Second Week out of Blueportdoggie. Two bells of the second watch. The sun has come up; dawn is upon the new day. Night sails are still set. After first meal, day sails will be put up. Today is Seventh Day, May God smile upon us and bless our endeavors. Captain Tabor has informed me that today's shipboard regimen will be Holiday Routine. We watched the sunrise and then he showed me how to shoot the sun with the sextant.

From the sailing log of the Caveat Noir: Captain Hiss commanding

Meroww fsssttt rowllll tew sun ferowlll.

From the sailing log of Gabriel's Sara: Captain Henry Babacomb commanding.

Sun up two minutes past the hour. The seas are from the northwest with two to three foot swells. The winds are also from the Northwest, of medium strength and holding steady. The ship is on a port tack steering East North East on the compass. The skies are clear with a possibility of showers later in the day. Rain collection canvas on deck and ready. Night sails set with all ships in proper position. The Caveat Noir leads, The Queen follows next, and then Gabriel's Sara. Tabor's Little Mistress moves about at will. Breakfast at four bells and then day sails to be set. We will steer with the wind to our backs for the rest of the day. Holiday routine will be maintained in observance of Seventh Day. Note of interest: The Ferrets have developed into fine sailors... very agile in the tops.

Rosa tried to write in her log book, but her small ship had more motion to it than the larger ships. She was also right pawed and with her loss of fingers had to concentrate very hard to write anything at all.

“Gabby! Dew ewe no ‘ow to write?” she called out.

“No Captain,” he replied, taking time to coil a line on the deck, “I was never taught.”

“Fuk,” she said loudly.

He was her only hope. The little sloop had only a compliment of ten and she knew the Cats quite well. All had been handpicked by her mother as extremely capable sailors, though none of them knew how to read or write. Further, none of them knew how to navigate. This was her mother's way of keeping her dependant and she knew it. So now she was the fleet messenger. Other than the race to catch up, or the tacking to fall back, there was nothing to hold her interest except the little Raccoon.

"I'm sore," he said absently, "Maybe later."

The Cat on the tiller snickered. They were the only one's awake just yet. Life on the little sloop was easy compared to the Caveat Noir. Rosa, unlike her mother, was more lenient in some ways and yet more demanding in others.

"Did you have something to say?" she asked the helmsman in Cat.

"No Captain," she replied in a quiet voice.

"I think the fun is wearing off," Rosa admitted with a sigh. Closing the ship's log and placing the book back in its water tight drawer within the little chart table she turned to this Cat. "I had great fun running back and forth when we first began but now it's just boring."

"It is what it is," the other Cat told her with a shrug. Her name was Ellen and she looked very much at rest in the dawn light. "This is the best part of the day, why not just sit back and enjoy it. There will be times when you will wish for such peacefulness."

"You sound like Ilean," Rosa told her, yawning. "She's grown fat and content staying ashore in the comfort of her Tavern."

"I could think of worse places to be," the other Cat replied.

"How long have you been on the Caveat Noir?" Rosa asked, allowing herself to drift with the conversation. She was still young enough that actually being a Captain was not such an intimidating task.

"From the beginning, although I was very young when we began. Your mother is a very great Captain."

"Raccoon Boy," Rosa called out to Gabby, "Mek us sum Tea."

Without responding, Gabby made his way down to the little galley to fire up the stove.

"You should treat him better," Ellen told her. "You are married to Kate, but he is still your shipmate."

"Eh? And who are you to advise me? Mind the tiller and your own business."

“I say this in love, my Captain,” Ellen replied, ignoring the rude command. “Someday you will have that Raccoon boy at your back when the enemy is pressing your quarter. In times like that it is very easy to give up and die... especially when you know one who has oppressed you will die at the same time.”

“ ‘Oo are ewe to tell meee...” Lucy began in Rabbit, but stopped when Ellen held up the hook that was her right paw.

“We were in a fight with a Vulpine Revenue cutter,” the Cat said softly. “Never sell the Fox short as sailors. The captain of the cutter was about to strike your mother with his cutlass... a killing blow. His blade found my arm instead. It would have been very easy for me to simply ‘not’ do this. Your mother saved my life from what it was and though she is hard in her ways, she has always treated me fairly... as she does all of her crew. If I were you, I would take this day to myself and perhaps make one you have been treating badly feel a little better. And then I might study some of the navigational books I saw in the Captain’s cabin. It is hell to be lost on the seas and no idea which point of the compass to sail to.”

Rosa turned to look out over the ocean, not wishing to comment; nor meet the other Cat’s eyes. After only a few minutes, she got up and went down to the small galley and made tea for the Raccoon Boy instead of the other way around. After this, they retired to her small cabin. Sitting with the stern windows open to the air, they did nothing but talk. Mostly it was about their mothers, but there was also the finer moments when they simply let their thoughts wander and dreamed a dream of more peaceful times, favorite toys, and parents who showed them unquestioned love. In doing this they became children again if only for a little while.

Babacomb leaned on the quarterdeck railing, watching the sun dawn on a new day.

“How much longer before we arrive?” asked a voice next to him.

“I’m thinking another week unless the wind changes and drives us straight there,” he replied without turning. He recognizing the voice as Commander Pablo’s. “As it is, we’ll have a lot more tack ‘n wear to do as the direction we want to go in is almost directly into what drives our sails.”

“Will the wind change so?”

“Hard to say for sure. My nose says it won’t, but my ears say perhaps.”

“Your ears?”

“It’s in the way the wind sounds as it passes through the rigging,” the Dog replied. He turned to the commander, finding him dressed as a sailor, which was definitely more comfortable. Pablo held out a mug of tea to the Dog, who accepted it gratefully.

“It’s in the feel of the waves,” Babacomb continued, “And the smell of the air... and even how the sun reflects off of the water. One gets used to feeling things after a while that are not externally evident.” He smiled and sipped the tea. “That’s just an easy way of describing it however.”

“I understand,” the Ferret told him. “But for now I will simply enjoy what has been given to me this day. It is a beautiful morning, no?”

“Aye it is.” The black Dog sipped his tea again and then asked thoughtfully, “Have you ever asked yourself how many more of them you’re to see?”

The ferret chuckled. “If a soldier were to do that, he would not be a very good soldier for very long. We live with death at our elbow and he becomes a friend. You talk to him, and you ask that he might take you before the pain... well... there is death and then there is death,” he offered. “A musket ball between the eyes is much preferred to a debilitating wound.”

“Agreed,” Babacomb replied simply.

They were both silent for a time, enjoying the dawning of the day.

“I have an idea,” Babacomb finally said quietly.

“Speak to me,” Pablo replied.

“How would you feel about a race?”

“A race?” the soldier asked. “Where would we race to... around the deck perhaps?”

“No,” the Dog replied smiling at that thought, “Around the armada. “We deserve a day of rest... I am suggesting that we take time and actually have a little fun. The enemy will be there waiting for us when we arrive; so why not...” His face cracked a devilish grin.

Turning, he called out the duty Bosun. “Get the long boat ready to go over the side, but before you do, I want to check her rigging. Call the sail maker and tell him to bring his sewing kit and three of the ship’s spare jib’sl’s.”

To the quarterdeck watch, he said, “Signal the sloop and ask her alongside. I have need to speak with her captain.”

Turning back to Pablo, he said, “We’ll prepare a little secret weapon I’ve in mind first, and then we will issue our challenge. Would you like to join me as my boat crew?”

The Ferret smiled, though he hadn't a clue what was happening. "I'd be delighted."

Tabor's Little Mistress hove to next to The Queen. Rosa, holding on to one of the fore and aft stays, yelled across to Tabor, " 'ENRY BABACOMB'S RESPECTS CAPITAIN TABOR; AND 'E WANTS TO 'AVE A RACE. 'IS LONG BOAT A'GAINST YOR'S AND CAPITAN HISS. YOU 'ND ONE CREWMAN."

"Good great sea demons," muttered the Rabbit, "It's finally happened... Black Dog's stay lines 'as slipped."

"Go on," rumbled Balls. He hawked and spat over the side. "It'd be good fer ya. We got us a good long boat. I says ya can beat him fairly. Take the Pig with ya. Roll'im o're to the windward side and he'd make a great ballast weight."

Cupping his paws around his mouth, Tabor yelled back, "What did your mother say?"

LOOK FOR YER'SELF," she called back, pointing ahead of them.

Tabor looked in that direction and found the Caveat Noir's long boat filling her sails and heading in their direction.

"Deck there," Toby called down from his perch on high. "Cat boat coming our way!"

"How many on board?!" Tabor queried.

"I count two heads!"

"That cut's it then," Balls told his Captain. "That's a race'n crew. We been challenged... one ahead and t'other behind. Ya gots no choice but to defend The Queen's honor."

"Let's get'er launched then," Tabor told him. "I'm for it, but I'll take the little fur head. He's too damned serious all the time. Let's see if I can get him to smile." He looked aloft and then closing his eyes listened to the sound of the wind in the rigging. "All things being equal," he said softly as his eyes opened again, "Let's see who's really the better sailor."

It took the crews an hour and a half to get positioned for the race. As the boats sailed to their starting mark, the ships all turned, placing the wind directly behind them. Reducing sail they slowed to a crawl maintaining just enough head way for their rudders to bite. The Caveat Noir remained in the lead, while The Queen, one mile back, stayed far out to the lead ship's larboard side. The Gabriel's Sara, two miles further back, stayed far out to her starboard. This positioning easily defined the racing course.

Tabor's little Mistress was to be the official judging boat, and as so, shepherded the three long boats out to a point half a mile in front of the Caveat Noir where they lowered their sails.

Using a speaking trumpet, Rosa gave her instructions to the racers. "THEE RACE WEEL BE FROM 'ERE, CLOSE 'AULED PAST THEE CAVEAT NOIR TO THEE FAR SIDE UFF THE QUEEN. YOU WILL THEN TAKE THEE OPPOSEET TACK BACK TO BEHIND GABRIEL'S SARA. TURN THEN AND MAKE THEE LONG RUN PAST ALL THREE BACK TO THIS POINT... IS THAT AGREED?"

Each of the Captains, sitting at the tiller of their respective boats, waved in ascent. All of their sails had been lowered for the start of the race.

"EYE AM TO NAME THE WAGER... IS THAT AGREED?"

Again the Captain's waved, finding no mischief to her words.

"EYE SAY THEE CREWS OF THEE TWO LEWSING BOATS MUST 'AVE SEX TOGETHER!"

With that, she pointed to Gabby who was standing by on the swiveled four pounder. The young Raccoon placed his glowing punk on the touch hole and with a bang the race was begun with a new and intense sense of purpose.

"THAT'S NOT FUNNY!" Tabor yelled at the giggling Cat while sheeting home his main sail.

"Ewe better 'urry," she taunted him. "Ooo would you rather take... my mother or thee Dog?" This caused her fits of laughter and she wiggled her hips at him.

"EEF EWE WERE NOT MY D' AUGHTER, EYE WOOD SHEWT EWE!" Hiss yelled. With a practiced ease, she kept one leg over her boat's tiller while pulling on the main sail halyard until the canvas was fully up.

Rosa, now almost rolling on the deck in her mirth, couldn't even reply. Her own crew, all of them smiling broadly as they'd been in on the joke, were wisely cracking on as much sail as they could in order to move further away. This would now obviously be a very intense race so it would be best not to interfere with the racers. At the same time, however, Tabor's Little Mistress was also supposed to keep an eye on things. Should something go wrong they would be there to assist.

Babacomb and Pablo held off making a comment, concentrating instead on getting their sails up. Pablo then took a position on the windward side, holding on to a line and leaning far out to help balance the boat.

“TALLY-HO!” the black Dog yelled out as his sails filled and his boat leaned far over.

“WHERRREEEEEEEEEEEEEE!” yelled the Cat Captain pointing at the Dog’s boat. She then followed with a spat of Cat to her plump looking crewman, a Cat by the very unseafaring name of Punk’n.

Lifting up her speaking trumpet, Rosa yelled, “YOU CANNOT SINK HEEM MOTHER... IT IS AGAINSSST THE RULES!”

“SHE AIN’T GOT NO GUN TA SINK HIM WITH!” Tabor yelled happily. He then ducked when Hiss pulled out a pistol, turned, and fired it in his direction. A small hole magically appeared in his main sail. Laughing he pulled the sail’s sheet line tighter, until he judged the sail’s belly to be where he wanted it. “We’re gonna win this one, Vesa,” he told the Wolverine sitting in the bow tending the boat’s jib.”

“I certainly ‘ope so sur,” the youngster said over his shoulder. “We should at least get out of pistol range.” He then added thoughtfully, “I have never had sex before Captain Tabor. In my home land it is forbidden before you are married. I would prefer to remain chaste, but will do what I must.”

“You’re not home anymore Vesa,” the Rabbit told him as he kept an eye on the other boats. The sound of the water moving past the hull was delightful to his ears. With a thudding lurch, the bow cut into a small swell and water was thrown up and over them with a hiss. The pirate howled happily. “It don’t get no better than this Vesa. If we do lose, I’m thinking you might want to treat things as ‘a learning experience’. I never heard of good sex hurting anyone, so there’s nothing lost in the doing.” Judging his distance, the wind, and where he wanted to go, he yelled out, “Ready about...”

“Aye,” Vesa responded.

“Hard a lee,” Tabor sang out and then pushed the tiller over and ducked as the main sail’s boom swept over him to the opposite side of the boat. Tacking first, he was now heading off at a different angle than Hiss and Babacomb. By doing this, however, he fell back, though it gained him distance between. This tack would also have him pass close to the Caveat Noire, but his positioning would still keep the wind in his sails as they passed.

“We are falling behind, sur,” Vesa told him in a worried voice.

“Trust your Captain, Navigator... watch the other two boats and see what happens.”

No sooner had he said this than Hiss passed her boat in front of Babacomb blocking his wind. With a flapping noise of limp canvass the Dog lost way and fell back. Hiss yelled at him in Cat and let out with a whoop. No sooner had she done this and Dog pushed his tiller over, sweeping his short bow sprit across her stern. This took Hiss by surprise and she shrieked as it knocked her into the water. His sails refilled, Babacomb now took off

on the same tack as Tabor, without offering assistance. He was now a good three boat lengths behind the Rabbit.

“I now understand Captain,” the Wolverine told him, “And I think I shall indeed trust you in the future, sur. What should I do now?”

“Since we’re coning up on The Caveat Noir, I might suggest keeping your head down.” With that, an egg splattered against the mast. “They won’t bother us half as much as they’re going to let the Dog have it for that stunt he pulled.”

“It was a bad thing to do?” the Wolverine asked him.

“It was a wonderful thing,” Tabor laughed. “I only wish I could have done it myself.”

Another egg splattered on their sail, followed by Cat calls and hooting.

“AND THE SAME BACK TO YA!” Tabor yelled at the feline sailors taunting them.

“Huzza Tuuva!” yelled the Wolverines on board the ship. “Do your best! Make us proud!”

“I will try, Franz!” Vesa called back with a wave. “It is good to see you again!”

“We’ll stay on this tack for a bit,” his captain told him and then turn back the other way, but I’ll tell ya when.”

There was a multitude of shouts and the sound of things thrown finding their mark. Turning back, Tabor saw Babacomb with a huge grin as he was pelted with eggs and vegetables. Commander Pablo appeared to be having a good time as well. Picking up a head of cabbage, he chucked it back at his assailants and shouted at them in Ferret.

“I think Black Dog was right, we needed this,” the Rabbit chuckled. Turning back to his jib handler, he told him, “When we pass the Queen, you can do the waving for both of us. I can imagine the wagering is hot and heavy by now and the rum will be flowing. I’m definitely think’n this race was a good idea.”

Position on The Queen was taken with no less than ten separate legs; all of them tight and hotly disputed between the boats. Tabor maintained the lead at this point, though Babacomb had managed to shorten it to a single boat’s distance. The Rabbit, grumbling as he estimated time, distance, and wind, had to admit the Dog was good... perhaps even a shade better than himself.

Hiss too had been in the lead several times, but was now a good three boat lengths behind. She’d recovered quickly from her dunking. With the sail’s sheet line wrapped

securely around her wrist, she'd lost hardly any time at all hauling herself back aboard and setting sail. From far back, she cursed the Dog soundly for not playing fair; all the while wishing she'd thought to do the same thing to him.

With the wind blowing steady from the same point on the compass, the pirate knew he would have to cut very close to The Queen's stern to keep Babacomb and Hiss from crowding inside of his turn. This was a dangerous move. If he misjudged, both his longboat and The Queen could be badly damaged. He was happy to see Vesa take up one of the oars, readying to fend off without being told. He was a quick learner and the pirate suddenly felt regret that he would eventually lose the boy as a crew member.

As the boats approached, the Rabbits and Wolverines cheered until they were hoarse. A full third of the crew, mostly the Rabbits, had climbed into the tops, while the rest stood on the decks. Glancing up, when he was under the stern, Tabor found himself almost face to face with Balls and Duroc leaning well out of his cabin windows.

"HUUZAAAA!" they both shouted in chorus. The pirate smiled and waved at them, but his mind was truly busy watching the sea; feeling its every nuance and trying to read each of its secrets that would give him even a foot's advantage in distance traveled.

Black Dog and Pablo were the next alongside. They were good naturedly cheered, but as Captain Hiss came abreast of them, she was openly booed as the villain. She, in turn, cursed them soundly in her language and shook her fist good naturedly just before changing tack and clipping past The Queen's stern.

All three boats were now close reaching with a span between them of only a boat's length. In this way, none was cut off from the wind. Tabor, seeing this, let the air out of his sail and fell back pulling the tiller towards himself. As he came abreast of Babacomb's boat, his sails covered the Dog's and his wind was stolen. He in turn fell back, blocked Hiss' wind, and threatened to bump into her.

Upon hearing the Cat's string of curses, the Rabbit laughed, pulled his sail taut again and changed tack, gaining two boat lengths by doing so.

With only five positioning tacks, the boats were rounding the stern of Gabriel's Sara to the rousing cheers of her crew. There were enough of the Ferrets in the rigging that the ship actually had picked up a good knot in speed from the furry sail area created by their bodies. By this time, Tabor was solidly in the lead with Hiss pressing hard on his heels. Babacomb had strangely fallen back five full boat lengths.

With the wind now exactly behind them, Tabor let the main sail hang out to the starboard and had Vesa pull the jib out towards the larboard so they would catch as much of the wind as possible.

"It seems odd that Captain Black Dog dawdles, sur," Vesa said as he gazed aft.

“Trust me,” Tabor replied, “Since I’m thinking he don’t want to have sex with either me or Hiss, he’s up to something diabolical. He is a master at this.”

No sooner had he said this, than he saw Babacomb’s jib fall. A different sail was then hoisted... one that ballooned out like some huge pillow floating in the wind.

The Rabbit turned, judged the distance to the Caveat Noir, and then quietly cursed. She was a good league off. If the wind had been from any other direction, the Dog wouldn’t have been able to use his huge sail.

“Rosa,” he muttered. She was in on this somehow. Scowling, he quickly searched the area and found her sloop some five hundred yards distant and running with the wind; the same as the long boats.

Turning towards Hiss’ boat, he hailed her with a wave of his arm. “YOR CABIN OR MINE HISSY?”

When she gave him a confused look, he pointed behind them. From five boats back, Babacomb had already caught up three and would pass them by in a moment or two.

“EET EES CHEATING!” she screamed.

The Launching

(Virginity Revisited Before The Mast)

She's got a smooth clean bottom
N' he's got a top full'a new sail.

Th' salt waters calls ta them,
'Cum'n be's a ship,' it's say'n.

Aye... cum'n be's a ship.

The sight of 'em makes this old sailor
Weep tears of joy.

Times ta remember
N' a reminder that life moves forth.

Time ta launch...
A new ship floats...
We shall rejoice in this.

////////////////////////////////////

Her hull's copper plate dress'n shines,
All polished up by her mates.

His halyards n' stays 're well placed
Tuned by advice from his peers.

They's both aquiver with desire
N' she's wet w' love's sweet dew,
That grease what slicks the launch'n rails.

The sight of 'em makes this old sailor
Weep tears of joy.

Times ta remember
N' a reminder that life moves forth.

Time ta launch...
A new ship floats...
We shall rejoice in this.

////////////////////////////////////

That Cat be's crav'n th' touch of salt
Though he ain't yet embraced th' wind.

Her withers she wiggles all ready ta go
His cod's discomfit bulge'n like a belay'n pin

The sight of 'em makes this old sailor
Weep tears of joy.

Times ta remember
N' a reminder that life moves forth.

Time ta launch...
A new ship floats...
We shall rejoice in this.

>>>>>>>><<<<<<<<<<

It's now up to me ta swing the mallet
N' knock out th' launch'n chocks.

It's but a short slide down th' hill.
N' when the hull hits water
The mast is sure ta set sail.

We shall truly rejoice in this.

Captain Tabor Rabbit

The Launching

Governor Gulo lightly brushed Vesa's shoulders, as he slowly circled the youth in an impromptu inspection. It wasn't exactly a wedding being held this day but certainly every one of the crew of four ships seemed to feel it was. Sailors were a superstitious bunch, and this was definitely a good omen. Already most of them were quite tipsy from an extra ration of rum; the kegs finely broached and mugs passed all 'round. Even here within the Captain's cabin on The Queen their singing could be plainly heard.

"Are you nervous Tuuva?" Gulo asked him.

"Yes sir," the youth replied honestly.

"I would be too if I were you," the Governor admitted with a smile. "I've heard Punk'n Cat is a champion wrestler and also quite the lover. That's a good combination for a Wolverine to luck into."

"How did you hear this, sir?"

"Well..." the older Wolverine began, stopping to dab at Vesa's face with a dampened cloth, "Not that I listen to idle gossip, mind you... ahhh... well... I overheard two of the Cats talking on the quarterdeck of the Caveat Noir. It would seem you are all they have to talk about this day." Finishing with the rag he tossed it to the small table.

Vesa sighed. "But I thought they didn't like males, sir."

"Oh... that... yes; well this is true for the most part but there are exceptions to every rule. Though they have not yet done so on this cruise, there is a game the pirates play with barrels that can be quite revealing as to the silliness of some social rules. What sex you are hardly matters when it comes to the 'how' of where you find your pleasures." Taking the youth's shirt by the shoulders, he adjusted it and then smoothed it down so it looked less rumpled. "I am going to ask you a very personal question Tuuva," he continued as he did this, "And I do not want you to think ill of me. Would you consider me as your favorite sea borne uncle this day?"

"Yes sir," he agreed, and then made an unsure face. "May I sit? My legs are feeling a bit wobbly."

"Please, yes," Gulo told him, motioning him to the small table. "Let me pour you a glass of wine too. The spirits of wine work well to lubricate the body in preparation to love making. Never drink anything stronger if you wish to perform well."

Vesa sat solidly in his chair causing it to creak. "Perform, sir? Am I to be acrobatic then?"

The Governor smiled. "That is one way of putting it... yes... acrobatic. I like that description."

Plunking an empty glass in front of the youth, the older Wolverine pulled the cork from a bottle of Port with his teeth and then filled it full. Re-corking it, he placed it upon the table. Turning the opposite chair around, he sat upon it, folding his arms across its back. This was the same table Tabor and the Prince had shared during a similar conversation, but with a totally different emotional setting.

"Tell me Private," Gulo asked softly, "You really are a virgin as the rumors say you are?"

"Yes sir," Vesa replied. Picking up the tumbler, the youth drank the wine straight down. He shuddered slightly and then set it back upon the table. "I've never had wine before, sir. It tastes a bit like watered juice that has soured."

"You've never drunk wine before either?" asked the older Wolverine raising an eyebrow. "How long have you been in the army Tuuva?"

"I snuck aboard the Prince's ship the night before they departed, sir. I'd been told I was too young to volunteer."

"We shall switch to water then," the Governor told him thoughtfully, "Or later you might throw up at a very inappropriate moment."

"And when would that be, sir?"

"When you eat her, of course," he told the youth with a wink and a smile.

Vesa went pale. "I am not a cannibal," he hissed. "Do..." He stopped talking and looked around; checking to see they were truly alone. Lowering his voice, he said, "Please tell me that was a joke about the Swine, sir."

Gulo looked at him blankly. For the first time in many years he was at a total loss for words. Finally, with a stern look, he asked, "Are you playing me for a fool Private?"

The youngster sat bolt upright in his chair, sitting at attention. "I would never do that, sir," he said a little too loudly. The wine was obviously building a fire in his belly.

Gulo sighed, and slouched a little. "You are young and obviously inexperienced Vesa. You may ask me any question you wish and I will give you a straight and frank answer."

"Thank you, sir!" the youth replied with some relief in his voice.

Palming a paw in the air, the Governor told him, "Not quite so loud... you do know that ships have no secrets. No point in giving this conversation to them on a silver platter; now is there?"

Vesa giggled, and then hiss whispered, “Very good, sir.”

Gulo leaned forward like a conspirator and hiss whispered back, “Do you have a question then?”

The boy gave him a toothy grin. “What do females look like?”

The Governor, thinking to play along, whispered good naturedly, “You already know that Tuuva, you’ve seen plenty of them.”

The youngster blinked. “I meant...” he began loudly and then shushed himself, looking towards the door to the cabin. “They’re listening?” he whispered to Gulo.

The older Wolverine rolled his eyes and then nodded. Wiggling his paw around in the air, he indicated the youth should continue.

“I meant under their trousers, sir,” he continued in a whisper. “Do they really have a small cod, like Franz says... or do they have a gapping big hole like Lox claims his wife to be? I mean... it’s so very confusing. Fenus says they smell sweet like honey, but Sergeant Urhea says they stink like a dead fish three days rotten.” He made a face as if even the thought of that one was going to make him retch.

Gulo quickly refilled the glass from a water jug sitting on the table and waited quietly as Vesa drank it down.

“And what am I to do?” Vesa asked in the same whisper, plunking the glass back down to the table. “When I asked, all anyone would ever do is wink at me and make a movement like they just got a pin stuck in their backsides... only it was several pins... like; one, two, three, four, five.” His chair squeaked with the motion of his body as he jerked his hips back and forth. When he stopped moving, he said, “Fenus even told me to sneak up from behind and get her in a head lock like this...” he made a wrestling type move, “And then take her at my leisure... but... where am I to take her, sir?”

“Perhaps we should start at the beginning,” Gulo advised, putting on a fatherly stern face.

“Yes sir, the beginning.”

“You do know you have a cod... yes?”

“Of course I do, sir. I’m not the village idiot.”

“I never said you were an idiot, Tuuva. You are just young and inexperienced. Tell me now... what do you do with your cod?”

“I piss with it sir.”

Gulo sighed. “Yes... of course you do... we all do... but what else do you do with it?”

Vesa looked at him blankly.

The Governor thought for a moment. “When you are conducting musket drill, Tuuva, you take your ram rod and stick it down into the barrel of your musket... so,” he said, mimicking the loading of a musket. “Now then... could you perhaps tamp your powder with a piece of line?”

“Of course not sir.”

“And why not?”

“Because it’s all limp.” The wine was causing the youth’s cheeks to flush in a rosy color, and his eyes had a slight glassy appearance.

“Precisely,” Gulo agreed. “Now then... imagine that your cod is the ram rod and the barrel of your musket is Punk’n’s female part.”

“So it’s a right big hole then?”

Gulo almost laughed but caught himself. “Not precisely like that... no, but yes, a hole. It has hair around it,” he added as an after thought.

“A right big hole with hair around it... like Lox’s rectum then, sir? He was shot in the bum you know... poor fellow.”

This time Gulo had to turn around to compose himself; choking back the laugh he knew would spoil everything. When he turned back, the young Wolverine’s mouth dropped open when he perceived his commander’s tears.

“Were you crying sir? I didn’t mean to offend...” he stopped, his eyes growing large. “You weren’t shot in the bum too were you sir?”

“No...” Gulo hesitated for a moment, biting his lip to keep from laughing. “No,” he finally managed, “I was not shot in the bum Private. We were speaking about ram rods.”

“Yes sir... you stick it down the barrel of your musket and you tamp the powder gently so as not to make it explode... and you always hold the rod with just your finger tips in case the powder does explode and shoots the rod back up into the air.” He stopped for a moment and then chuckled. “Lox’s britches bulge out when he farts, sir. It’s the funniest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Gulo slapped the table with the flats of his paws and made a coughing sound. Taking the wine bottle, he poured Vesa’s glass full of Port and then downed it in one gulp. Wiping

his mouth with the back of his sleeve, he said, "That does taste watered down and sour." Once again composed, he asked seriously, "Tell me Private... have you ever woke in the middle of the night with your cod stiff like your ram rod?"

"Stiff... yes sir, but never quite that long. The most it's ever grown was this big," he replied, holding his paws a distance apart.

"That's very impressive," Gulo told him honestly. "Now then... and I wish a truthful answer... have you ever made that same motion on your cod that you make when tamping your powder?"

"No sir."

"You see then... wait... you haven't?" One eyebrow went up and his mouth dropped open slightly.

"No sir. I've been tempted well enough... it gets kind of itchy if you know what I mean."

"But you haven't?"

"No sir." Vesa's eyes drooped just a little as if he was tired. "I don't feel so nervous anymore sir. May I have another glass of the wine?"

"No... if you fall asleep now, you would shame the entire company. No wine." He thought for a moment, and then asked, "Why haven't you played ramrod with your cod Tuuva? Be honest now with your old Uncle Gulo. It's all good... there are no wrong answers."

"My mother told me I would go blind, sir; and how would I be able to shoot my musket then? I have only ever wished to be the best soldier I could be, sir."

Gulo pushed back from his chair and stood. "By the ancient's that is a sacrifice not many would make Private Vesa Dufva!" Raising his right paw he saluted the young Wolverine. "You are a far better soldier than I."

Vesa rose with such haste in returning the salute that he knocked his chair back to the floor. "Thank you sir! I will do my best to bring honor to the company!"

Gulo leaned forward and placing his paws on the table told the youth in a hissing whisper, "The only thing you have to know; Punk'n is the musket and you are the ramrod... with the difference that you must tamp her powder hard and repeatedly until it does explode."

"Yes sir," the Private hissed back.

"And Tuuva..."

“Sir?”

“If she stinks a bit... just hold your breath.” He winked. “It would be bad form if you told her it was so. That and you risk a beating for being honest.”

Tabor and Hiss stood side by side watching the festivities. Since there was only so much room on the ship, a lottery had been drawn on the Caveat Noir and Gabriel’s Sara with the allowance of ten crew from each to attend the ‘Cum’n Out’ party. The two captains were also expected to fulfill their end of the wager, pressed by honor to do so, but this was something both quietly and in an unspoken manner agreed to fake.

A full half of the crew was now merrily drunk with the remainder only sober enough that should there be a problem the ship could still be navigated. That half was the duty crew and the tradition for such festivities was well respected.

Gulo magically appeared behind the two captains and was promptly given a near empty bottle of rum by one of the crew. Swallowing the harsh liquor he tossed it overboard. It occurred to him that it would be jolly to take his pistol out and shoot it; but he resisted the temptation. Leaning close, he put a paw on both their shoulders and then whispered the news to them that his Private was even more virginal than anyone could possibly have guessed. He related the conversation he’d just had to them, after which he added, “When those bullets are spent, his ammunition sack is going to pop from never having been properly exercised.”

When they stopped laughing, he asked softly, “Captain Hiss, do you suppose we should warn your Punk’n of the waters she’s about to sail through? In all my born days I have never seen one so innocent.”

“N spoil ‘er fun? Eye wood not dew that to ‘er. Ee’van though ‘e is a male, Eye almost wish for thee honor m’eye-self. What fun eet wood be to take one such as ‘eem... no?”

“I get sore just thinking about it,” Tabor added merrily. “Isn’t it about time we began?”

“I will go and escort the Lamb to the Lion’s den,” Gulo agreed. “Captain Hiss... if you would fetch your Punk’n, I’m thinking we will have more dancing to do.”

“We’ll let them use my cabin,” Tabor told the Wolverine smiling a toothy grin. “I think they at least deserve that much... a touch of privacy, if ya will. I trust you will both agree privacy is a very rare commodity aboard ship.”

“That’s very magnanimous of you Captain,” Gulo told him earnestly. “I shall go and tell Private Tuuva of your offer.”

“I thought his name was Vesa,” the Rabbit said suspiciously.

“It’s a nick name his comrades gave him,” the Wolverine explained with a wink. “The Tuuva of our army’s folklore was a great hero; but slow of mind. I must admit beginning to think the shoe fits rather well.”

As he left, Tabor caught Hiss’ arm, holding her back for just a moment so he could whisper in her ear.

“What if I told ya we could watch?” he asked.

“They we’el bee in your cabin with thee door closed,” she told him. “Ewe ‘ave a secret passage?”

“Better,” he replied, “I have a closet.”

Hiss grinned at him. “I did not think uff ewe een thee closet liike that... but Eye like thee thought. Watching innocence deflowered...” She meowed and then began to purr. “ ‘Nd then wee pretend we dew thee dirty, eh?”

Tabor nodded. “Yor pretty quick for a Queen Cat. The wager is all paid off, ‘n the two of us goes back to what we like with no one the wiser. Now go and get your Punk’n, and I’ll take care of emptying out our hidie space.”

The ‘launching’ ceremony was truly a site to behold. Plump Punk’n Cat came out from the forecandle dressed only in gold and jewelry obtained on loan from the treasure chests carried in the hold. She’d been bathed Cat fashion by those of her shipmates onboard, Rosa among them. She was a Captain attending in her own right and not because of the lottery. Duly sprayed down with the expensive perfumes also found in the chest, the scent of the plump naked Cat was enough to near start a riot among the drunken rabble enjoying the party. She had to hiss and expose her claws to more than a few of the Wolverines and Ferrets attending.

“Geet a’way fr’ m me weeth yor leetle dickies!” she screeched at them. “Eye bite them off like limp noodles een my soup!”

Good naturedly, and also in some part fear, the brash males complied, not willing to make a challenge of her statement. Punk’n had a strong reputation as a fighter and even bested some of the Wolverines onboard the Caveat Noir in wrestling matches. Her short bobbed tail and many scars were proof of the scraps and boardings she’d been a part of.

Rosa came forward with a smile and daintily held her paw while leading her around the deck. Ap an appropriate slow march on his squeeze box that well matched the Cat’s movements. When the plump orange striped Cat came abreast of her Captain, a paw was

placed upon her arm and her ear whispered into. As she listened, her smile grew even larger. When Hiss stood straight again, Punk'n's only response was a wink.

Rosa looked suspiciously at her mother, whereupon Hiss declared loudly, "Ewe R steel on m'eye shiit list daughter. Best ewe stay thee fuk away fr'm mee."

"You didn't have to take the bet," Rosa countered in Cat.

"You know I had no choice," her mother responded. "I'm thinking you were in on this with Black Dog... the final leg was all downwind. With the sail he used, I am finding this very conspicuous."

The younger Hiss shrugged her shoulders. "The wind does what it wants to do... as do I."

With that, she continued leading Punk'n around the deck, her thinness highlighting the other Cat's thickness. When they arrived at the main mast the march stopped with a wheezing screech of the concertina. This announced the arrival of the second party to the makeshift 'dance to a loss of innocence'.

Balls and Duroc, standing on the larboard side near the entrance to the Captain's cabin began a chant, which was quickly picked up by the entire crew.

"VEESSAA... VEESSAA...VEESSAA... VEESSAA... VEESSAA...VEESSAA..."

The young Wolverine, dressed in a simple sailor's outfit, stood as straight as he could, fear making his body appear stiff as if he were dead and already set with rigor mortis. Governor Gulo, his paw on the youth's shoulder, advised him in his role as favorite uncle that what the youth was about to experience would be the same as facing an enemy on the battlefield; and he should be brave. With this misinformation in mind, Vesa had not expected to see so many happy drunken faces.

The music began again, this time accompanied by a fiddle played by one of the Cats... a thump and grind which left nothing to the imagination. As soon as this music began, the sailors all formed a pathway for the Wolverine to walk, directing him first towards the starboard side and then turning him back to the larboard... snaking him back and forth so that his actual walk of a hundred feet turned into about four times the distance. To his further distress, Governor Gulo, his only source of strength at this point, remained behind. During the entire distance of the walk, he was given back slaps and congratulations (the news of his virginity mysteriously having spread- like a wild fire) to the point that his skin was sore by the time he rounded the final turn and stood facing the Cat who would be the instrument of his introduction to sex.

Punk'n smiled at him, exposing a mouthful of crooked teeth.

In a moment of panic he turned and attempted to flee without even a thought that there was nowhere to run to. He was quickly grabbed by more arms than a monster octopus could have conjured and turned about to face his sea angel.

As Tabor emerged from his cabin, he heard a loud cheer as Vesa was lifted bodily up by the crew and floated overhead by a multitude of paws. First he was moved to the starboard with an 'OOOOOooooooo', and then back to the larboard with an 'AAAHHHHHhhhhhhh', and then back to the fore with a 'YYYYEEEAHHHHhhh', and plunked down directly in front of Punk'n Cat.

"HEAR NOW!" the Captain roared, feigning anger with the crew. "THAT AIN'T NO WAY TO TREAT A FELLOW SAILOR; ESPECIALLY ONE SO TENDER AS OUR NEW NAVIGATOR!"

There was a sudden hush and the music ground to a stop. As Tabor walked forward, the crew opened like the sea pushing back in the presence of a god.

"I do declare," he said, loudly addressing the hoard, "You're all acting like a rag tag bunch of pirates!" He stopped in front of Vesa and Punk'n and then winked at them. "Oh yes," he said softly, "I guess that's what we are, ain't it?"

There was a chorus of laughter from the crowd gathered on the deck.

Taking the full bottle of Port wine proffered by Captain Hiss, he held it aloft for everyone to see. "Hissy and I have agreed," he decried in a loud voice, "That we should present these children with the best bottle of wine we had between us." Turning to the pair again, he continued in an even louder voice, **BY THIS BOTTLE OF WINE SO DO WE EACH DEDICATE ONE OF OUR CREW MEMBERS TO APPEASE THE SEXUAL GODS OF THIS HERE OCEAN. THAT BY THE JOINING OF THEIR TWO DELICATELY DELICIOUS BODIES AND APPENDAGES WE SHOULD HAVE FAVORABLE WINDS AND A CALM SEA ALL THE WAY TO OUR DESTINATION."**

The crew cheered loudly, many of them waving rum bottles over their heads in agreement. When they calmed again, Tabor continued.

"VESA DUFVA... DO YOU PROMISE TO TAKE THIS CAT AND SERVICE HER UNTIL SHE IS FULFILLED AND TIRED 'O' YOUR COMPANY?"

Vesa looked at the plump Cat before him all decked out in gold and jewels. Her breasts moved up and down with her breathing; both nipples were rock hard and sticking out like the tips of his pinky fingers. Her broad hips wore a large gold chain with an equally large red stone hanging down in front of her nethers. The wind flickered and the flower like scent of her perfume wafted to his nose as if teasing him.

As scared as he was, she was the most exotic and erotic creature he had ever met in his entire life.

He tried to speak but could not... and so nodded his ascent.

The crew cheered loud and long. When their voices died down, Captain Hiss stepped forward.

“PUNK’N CAT,” she cried out in her screechy voice, “DEW EWE PR’MISE NOT TEW MAIME OR OTHERWISE INJURE THEES POOR SPECIMAN OF MALE KIND,” *and here she spat upon the deck* “NO OFFENSE MEANT TO ANYONE PRESENT,” she quickly offered, “IN YOUR ATTEMPTS TO SUCK FROM HIS BODY THAT WHICH MAKES HIM A MALE?” *and again she spat upon the deck*

“AYE CAPTAIN,” Punk’n yelled out, “EYE DEW!”

With that, and to the drunken roar of shouting voices, Punk’n came forward and physically picked poor Vesa up in a massive bear hug, kissing him full on the lips.

As the little band, consisting of one concertina, a fiddle, and a penny whistle, played ‘The Seafarer’s Waltz’, the Cat and the Wolverine danced about the main deck, to the well wishes of the many. Though they embraced in wrestling like holds and chewed upon each other’s necks; they were a true match made upon the briny sea.

As this took place, and with Punk’n’s assistance by dancing a little longer than she might have, the two Captains stole away into the closet without anyone even noticing they were gone.

Shipboard Routine

Eight bells to a watch;
One added ever turn o' the glass.

Thirty minutes ta empty the sand
And begin again.

Four hours of work'n 'er personal like,
Tend 'n to the ship as a liv'n thing.

Eight bells o' hearing her
N' the ocean talk'n their babble.

Mostly ya's feel it...
Know'n it's there...
Mind'n it none...
Cuz it's a part of yur existance...

Thud Thump of the bow
As it hits the swell not quite head on.

N' hissss... as the wave sprays upwards
O're the bows ta splash across the deck.

In the rig'n the wind hums
Try'n ta blow through;
But it can't cuz it's caught,
N' it's pissed about that.

Ya feels the strength of it
In the sails as ya lays your paws on
Just ta feel the tautness of the canvas;
Tight like a drum head.

N' 'Hey there! Ho there!'
Shouted up from the deck.
'Reef up the Fore'tops'l by one!'"

Ya hears four bells rung
As the sun peeks o're the horizon
And ya climb into the rig'n
Ta fight with 'ol demon wind.

Six bells struck.

Breakfast comes and goes
But ya finishes the job first;
You n' your mates bent o're the yard
Use'n muscle n' grit ta reduce 'er sail.

The relief watch comes on deck
N'it's below ya go for a cuppa tea
N' a boiled egg with bread.

Bloody cold for a nice morn
But the cuppa's hot
N' the breads fresh.

Eight bells chimed.

Back on deck for muster,
Off watch but ya gotta work;
Tighten a line...
Stow one that ain't used...
Splice another...

Waste not, want not
Cuz it takes a lot of cordage
Ta harness the wind.

The clouds 'r danc'n
Like hooves a pranc'n
N' ya know the wind's a right huge horse
Ya can never trust.

Eyes on the sail bellies,
Hands on the yard stays
Ta feel how she rides in the tension;
Yor senses can nev'r rest.

Eight bells again.

N' tis the noon meal of
Boiled cabbage, corn n' carrots;
Served with chuckles
Amongst good natured farting.

The watch again changes
N' ya get some time off

But not a'fore a head count
N' ya muster with your watch group.

If'n yor short a man
Ya might turn about; or ya might not...
Warm water... sure.
Cold water... no point.

Rest then...
Till the bells count eight again.

With a grumblin' sigh,
Ya swings out'n yor hammock
As the watch changes once more;
Four hours goes quick.

Two bells o' the evening watch,
Dinner comes n' goes.

Salt cod n' hard tack,
Strong black tea,
N' merry me muffins;
Hot n' toasty with molasses.

If'n the cook's happy it's good.
If'n he ain't; not so much.
If'n there's seas; even less so,
N' ya only gets the hard tack.

Three bells n' back on watch.
Four bells, haul in the main t' gallant...
Five bells, reef the spanker...
Six bells, n' Capt'n Tabor says tack,

“Com'n across the wind m'lads...
All hands stand'n by!”

Seven bells

The yards 'r swung
The sails 'er set
The stays again taut.

Eyes on the sail bellies,
Hands on the yard stays,
Yor senses can nev'r rest.

Eight bells... relief,
N' sleep, gentle sleep.

But keep yor clothes on
Cuz ya jest never knows...
She's a liv'n thing The Queen is;
As you snore so she sails.

Aye, n' so she sails.

Ball's Rabbit

Captive

Lady Taverness sat in the dank cell shivering. She'd been stripped of all clothing, severely beaten and then doused with icy water. Even her eye patch was taken from her least it hold some secret weapon or tool. Dragged to the cell, the Rabbit had been given a single small blanket. This was now wrapped around her shoulders as she sat in a moldy pile of hay; her only small measure of comfort. Ominously there were scattered piles of bones indicating the cell had been previously occupied many times over. She could see them in the dim light; though their meaning did not quite register in her battered mind.

Her departure from Blueportdoggie had gone smoothly until her means of transport was spotted by Rosa's sloop. The fisherman had instantly demanded more money claiming that he could now never return home.

"Can you out run them?" she asked the Dog.

"If paid, I will," he countered. "If not, you'll find my boat to be very slow."

She'd considered killing him and tossing his body over to lighten the load, but a sail on the horizon had turned the trick. Tossing him a small bag of coins, she instructed he make for it. When they were close, signals were made and protection given. As soon as she was aboard, fast transport to the island prison of Masadune (Māh-sāh-dū-nā) was freely offered. In the native tongue of those who had once lived there, the name meant 'Death's Grotto' in honor of its spirit filled swamp. From the beginning, those who became lost there seldom came back; and so it was with the prison.

The Captain of the frigate, examining the spy's forged papers took her word that she had pressing information for the Warden. Travel there had been swift and direct. This turned out to be the most promising part of her journey.

Landing at the fishing village on the island's only harbor, she found 'The Thorny Rose' and waited there for transport which came in the form of the prison coach making its mail rounds. Though the inside was Spartan and its sides stoutly barred, it was still transport.

Not so oddly, after she climbed aboard, the door was locked from the outside. When she'd complained, the coachman just sighed and mumbled softly, 'They always bemoan their lot in life.' To her, he said, "It is simply a method of transportation M'Lady, please... some patience. If I do not lock the door in place, it will bang about and cause damage to m' cart. We shall be to the prison in but half an hour as we will travel there directly rather than complete the circuit."

Agreeing to this went against her sense of freedom but when the Labradorean sailors opened the door and threw her trunk in with her, she had little choice. It turned out to be the wrong choice all the same.

Arriving at the prison the wagon, pulled by a pair of hefty horses, crossed onto a draw bridge and stopped before the prison's portcullis. The water of the moat was stagnant and smelled of sewage.

"What Ho?" called out the entry guard, looking through the bars of the portcullis. "Ya brung us a new prisoner John? I don't recall a prison ship due for yet a month?"

"Not a prisoner, Barry, a passenger brought by the Bitch Whippet's captain. She's got urgent business with the Warden. I had a look at her papers and it would seem it is so."

"He'll be pleased," replied the guard. "He's about bored out of his mind. He's even gave up on the torture as entertainment; and you know how he likes hearing them scream. That by itself says plenty."

The guard signaled his mate to come over and the pair manned the gate's lifting mechanism, pulling it up just far enough for the wagon to pass through.

Passing into the main courtyard, the driver stopped the horses, telling them to take a break before they headed back out to complete their rounds. Setting his brake, the skinny Dog climbed down from his seat and came back around to unlock the door. Taking the Rabbit's paw, he helped her down with a bow.

"You see Mum," he told her, "No harm done and I delivered ya as promised."

As soon as she stepped down and was standing upon the cobblestones, strong paws reached out and pinioned her arms from behind; holding her fast.

"WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS..." she began, but a voice cut her off; one that turned her guts to ice.

"So nice of you to join me here in my exile Lady Taverness, especially since it was you who so upset His Majesty by escaping the last cell I had you in."

Turning to the voice, the white Rabbit locked eyes with the Warden. His sick smile left nothing to the imagination. It seemed that the fates were finally against her.

Nodding to the guards holding her, he told them, "Make no mistake gentlemen; she killed two of your brethren at King's Tower Prison. Quite a feat considering they were the best I had. One of them had his jugular bitten clean through." He moved his paw in the air slightly. "You may beat her now... and then strip her. I want no hidden surprises. We shall see to her information on the morrow when she has had time to consider her fate."

Her treatment had been cruel and severe. When it was discovered she was male in her nethers it had gone even harder. By the time she'd been thrown into her cell, she was unconscious and barely alive. Waking an unknown time later, she found herself naked and lying in the moldy straw. The blanket was hanging on the door of the cell. Though

she was shivering uncontrollably, she sat staring at it for a long time before forcing herself to move.

Regardless of the bad luck, she was on a mission... she would focus on this fact and nothing else. If she could not directly help, she could at least give misinformation. Without a doubt, doing so convincingly would be very painful.

The spy had then cried until there were no more tears to shed. Eventually she looked up to the two small barred windows and found the sun was beginning to set.

At least her cell was not underground... there was that.

Tabor looked at the map spread upon the table in his cabin. The Queen had been chosen for this meeting strictly for comfort. Her Captain's cabin was at least double the size of the Caveat Noir's and triple again that of the Gabriel's Sara.

"It's a small island," Gulo said to everyone present. "The prison is located exactly in the middle. This is where our King Ludwig D'Gulo and his wife are being held. The plan is simple," he said pointing to the single small harbor, "We land here after dark. We then take and hold the road, and proceed inland. As the sun comes up we shall storm the gates. The prison is lightly guarded and resistance should be minor."

"It's obvious yor not a pirate," Tabor told him, circling the table. His eyes never left the map.

"And it is obvious you are not a soldier," Gulo retorted. "Force of arms is called for, and force of arms we will give them."

"Then yor stupid as well," Tabor replied flatly without looking at him.

The Governor colored perceptively, but he controlled his anger. His jaws worked up and down as if his mouth was looking for words to use, but he made no noise. Finally he managed to say, "You have no say so in this Captain Tabor, it is a military decision."

"I would like to hear his thoughts," Prince Uric, said softly, placing a paw on the older Wolverine's arm.

"Certainly My Prince," the Governor said with a small bow.

"Ee ees saying that eef you charge eento thee prison ewe weel all be keeled," Captain Hiss interjected. She was seated at the stern windows where she could see her ship.

"Certainly some will..." began Gulo, but Prince Uric gently tugged on his sleeve and he was again silent.

“A pirate understands risk,” Tabor said, still examining the map. “But he also knows that surprise greatly reduces that risk.” Placing a finger on the map, he furthered, “We can take this harbor and hold it without a problem... that’s true; but we will have to make harbor after dark, and that’s dangerous. I’m think’n it would be best to put a group ashore during daylight off’n Rosa’s sloop while the rest of us stay hull down on the horizon. We’ll keep the top’sl’s down so we won’t show. That would be day one. Day two, we off load and prepare. You go anywhere near to that prison before this and you’ll defeat the very reason you’re heading there. They’ll just hunker down inside and then threaten to kill your King.

Tabor looked up from the map, directly at Gulo. “What will you do then?”

“We would bring up the howitzer and tell them quite plainly there will be no quarter if the King is harmed.”

“Oh yes... the mystery cargo on the Gabriel’s Sara,” the Rabbit retorted, “I forgot all about that.” There was the slightest hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Gulo nodded. “Keeping the secret from you was not meant as a slight, old friend. Lord Pugwash was a very strong ally of King Gaspar the Black. I’m sure there were spies, and we did not wish to give them opportunity.”

The mention of spies was like an arrow through the Rabbit’s heart and he found himself wondering how much of the truth everyone in his cabin knew.

“I’m sure she is fine,” Babacomb voiced from across the compartment, obviously reading his thoughts. “That one is far craftier than any other person I have met in my life. He’s a good match for you. When this is done, I look forward to dancing at your wedding.”

There was vocal agreement from everyone in the small room.

“The howitzer should turn the trick, don’t you think?” Gulo asked after a moment, turning their thoughts back to the task at paw.

“No; I don’t,” the Rabbit replied. He again began studying the map, a sour look upon his features.

“Why not?”

“Because death versus death is still a stalemate,” Commander Pablo told him from his place next to Babacomb. He was holding his sheathed saber, and tapped its end on the deck in punctuation of the word ‘stalemate’. “My ability to crush the walls of a stone prison will not be sway enough against a madman’s martyrs. Your King will be the first to die. Be sure that the garrison of such a place would be handpicked for this very reason.”

“Eef,” Captain Hiss said, holding up a finger, “They do not know we are coming, we would have a chance. We need to be on the inside before they are so surprised by your beeg gun. That one would then ‘hold their attention while we keep them one at a time from the inside.”

“Or you lure them out to do battle,” the Prince said.

All eyes went to him.

“To lure a fish you need bait,” Tabor told him.

“I think you would have no better bait than the Crown Prince Uric Graypaw Wolverine, Lord of The North Edge, Grand Duke of the Rustian Ocean,” he replied levelly. Capturing me would certainly put the prison’s commander in a very good light.

“My Prince, I cannot allow...” began Governor Gulo, but the Prince cut him off, sounding now every inch of his father.

“You do not have a choice Governor. If you have reservations as to what I will decide concerning my own safety, then you will remain with the ships. A brave Wolverine once told me, ‘A leader leads, and in battle you will see the back of his head more than you will see his face.’ That Wolverine, Governor, was my father.”

Gulo clicked his heels together as he came to full attention. “I apologize, My Prince. My only request is that I be allowed to stay at your side during the conflict.”

“And so you shall,” he replied with a nod. “Now... let us put our thoughts together and plan. Stealth and cunning... I like the ideas equally. We must do both; gain access before the attack and also lure them out. Put the two together and there are less troops within to defend. Defeat them soundly in the field and those left behind the walls will be very fearful. It would give us a good advantage.”

Garlock the Dog hobbled slowly down the stone corridor with his bucket of corn meal slop and basket of bread. He would stop occasionally to dish out a single ladle into the bowls pushed out from the slots cut under the heavy doors. This was accompanied with two thin slices of bread. He always marveled that the prisoners would so closely listen for his approach. He was a Labrador Bulldog mix and so considered inferior. He’d arrived at the prison near the same time as the Warden. He’d been kicked, abused, and considered almost too ugly to look upon. He sometimes felt compassion for the prisoners he fed, though he was careful not to give extra rations as this was watched. Better to be the one feeding, than thrown in with them to be fed. If the bowls and the paws did not appear, he would mumble a prayer, but he did not ask questions. The stink of death was always present. It had become as perfume to his nose though to the guards it was retched.

Rounding the corner of the passage, he came to one of the doors and showed surprise to find a guard standing in front of it.

“What’s by the by,” he growled. “I ain’t never seen a guard on a door afore, asides from the doors to the Royals in any case. What’s so special about this one?”

“He’s a spy,” the guard growled back. He didn’t have much love for the prison’s ugly food bearer. The Bulldog was a bastard mixed breed and little better than a slave; not even worth of the emotion of contempt. “Just feed ‘im and be about your business. The Warden’s got special plans for this one. He won’t be around long...”

The Labradorean never had the opportunity to finish his thoughts as a small dagger was expertly slipped through his ribcage and up into his heart. He made no more than a small grunt before collapsing. Caught in Garlock’s arms, he was quietly lowered to the floor.

Taking the guard’s keys the food server quietly unlocked the door and pushed it open. Dragging the body inside, he dropped it to the floor and moved to the Rabbit who sat staring at him.

Seeing her wide eyes, he asked softly, “Are you in there? We’ve not much time and it would help if you were cognizant. I’m a friend of old Ludwig; he told me to watch for you.”

When she didn’t respond, he turned back to the guard’s body. Stripping it of clothing, he passed them over to the Rabbit. “It’s a bit bloody on the chest, M’Lady, but it will have to do. See if you can get your ears up under the hat... those’re a dead giveaway around this place.”

Gently taking her small blanket, he turned back to the body again and with but little effort cut off its head with his little blade. Wrapping it in the blanket, he placed it into the bread basket. Turning back to her, he winked and said simply, “You’ve quite the reputation; no sense in wasting it with a simple stab wound. A headless corpse and you gone from your cell will give the guards the heebie jeebbees good and proper; that’s something we want if we’re to survive.”

Wiping his paws in the hay, he took charge, dressing her and then gently pulling her to a standing position.

“You follow me now,” he instructed, “And we’ll get ya stashed away good ‘n proper. The Warden will be shit’n himself and seeing you in every shadow. When the time comes, I’ll help ya with that one; I promise. I’ve seen too many of our friends perish in this place and nothing I could do about it. Most by his paw, too.”

Taking the basket and his pot of gruel, he carefully opened the cell door and peeked out. “Time to go,” he whispered to her.

The white Rabbit managed to nod, and he smiled at her. “That’s m’ girl... you follow close now.”

When they were out of the cell, he closed and locked the door, and then led the way down deeper into the labyrinth.

Battle

Face, fur down on the cold steel gun barrel, cheek to metal; Mr. Flopears looked out over the six pound field piece's bell mouth and into the dawn's morning fog. It hovered over the coming battlefield like death's shroud; covering the living in its funeral livery. Ten company guideons of the Labradorean Army poked up through the mist. The sound of heavily armed soldiers floated within the grayish white cloud. Disembodied voices shouted commands which were replied to by other disembodied voices; soon to be no longer of the living.

"There's about a thousand of them out there," he whispered to himself. "Fuk me but it's gonna be a bad'un. Cap'n Tabor done bit off more than he could chew this time."

Through the gun's eye, the Rabbit gunner could see the soldiers dressed and formed up as if marching in a parade; muskets bayoneted and raised up like pikes, officers with their swords drawn.

"Standby," he voiced to the gun crew softly without taking his cheek from the gun's side. When there was no reply he stood and looked back to where the gun's handmaidens would be. They should have been standing by with glowing punk and more ammunition but he found only the dead sprawled about on the cold ground; their blood pooling into red puddles.

The sound of the Bosun whistle's shrill screech caused his eyes to open.

"ALL HANDS STAND BY TO MAKE SAIL!" the deck master's voice bellowed in accompaniment to the whistle's tune. "DROP YOUR COCKS AND GRAB YOUR SOCKS... LAN'FALL IS A COM'N!"

The initial landing of the raiding party went without incident. Rosa's sloop, loaded with as many of the Ferrets as she could safely carry, ran up on a smuggler's beachhead to the south of the small harbor that serviced the island's huge prison. Marching up the path and then overland, they quickly found the only road, and secured its right of way. Half stayed to guard, while the other half moved down the road towards the village proper. Once there, they quickly found and held any of the citizenry that looked as if they might belong to the Labradorean governing body. Commander Pablo, fully experienced in such things knew exactly what to watch for and the soldiers he'd left to guard the road quickly subdued six of the locals trying to escape. Each, in turn, was tied, gagged, and kept separately for interrogation. The very first was quick to name names and point a finger at who to trust and who not to trust.

A red flag was run up the harbor's flag pole as a signal to Rosa who was standing by just off shore. She, in turn, raced off toward the small armada until she was close enough that

her similar signal could be seen. With stealth in mind, the use of her signal gun was strictly forbidden.

By that afternoon, The Queen had off loaded her Wolverines and was quietly floating at anchor in the harbor while the Caveat Noir took her turn and tied off to the small pier in order to do the same.

Troops were sent on the double along with their one six pounder field piece to relieve the Ferrets and guard the main road. Others quickly swept through the village taking the time to carefully search each of the homes. All of the local inhabitants were taken into custody and herded down to the town's small public house.

While all of this commotion was going on, Tabor, accompanied by Balls, Duroc, and Vesa, made his way to the village's only tavern. Everyone in the landing party had their part to play, and Lady Taverness' instructions to him had been quite clear; find the tavern owner as he would have information.

Passing under the ornate sign proclaiming this was indeed 'The Thorny Rose', they pushed through the double swinging doors, fanning out and looking for possible trouble. Only the Captain did not have a weapon drawn. Balls' brandished his two pistols, while Duroc hefted his heavy whaling harpoon. Even Vesa carried a cutlass that appeared too heavy for his young frame.

The tavern was empty but for one person standing defiantly behind the tavern's bar; an old hag Dog of apparent mixed breeding. "Rum will cost ya," she snarled, looking at the four of them, "And if you break anything you pay for it. I only serve gentlemen in this establishment so prove to me you are such or no service."

"We're pirates ya dingy old bat," Balls growled at her. "We take what we want and the last gentleman I seen, I shot dead."

"And I'm the Queen Bitch of King Gaspar the Black," the hag growled right back at him. "I'll see your gentleman and up you his lady friend whose dainty throat I cut." If the pair had been standing side by side, they would have looked to be an old married couple. She thumped her fist on the bar. "It'll still cost ya for my rum."

"I'm not after rum," Tabor told her civilly. Removing his bandana, he tossed it to the table next to him. "But if you have some, I am rather parched."

She thumped her closed fist on the bar again and then held it out palm open, refusing to yield even an inch. "Pay first."

The Rabbit smiled and then taking a gold coin from his money pouch, tossed it to her. She deftly caught it and in turn, bit down upon the metal disk with the few teeth she had left. She then checked it to see if it was soft enough for her teeth to leave a mark, indicating it was real gold. The mark was there and she smiled.

“Ain’t you the generous one for being a pirate?”

“I am,” he replied, “And there’ll be another of those if you fetch me the proprietor of this fine establishment.”

“Sit,” she retorted, indicating the table he tossed his bandana to. “Take a load off your feet and have a drink or two while we converse with civility. I’m sure you have the time.”

Tabor nodded to Duroc and Vesa indicating they should wait outside. “Keep an eye out,” he instructed, “And let me know if anyone comes about and heads in this direction.”

The Pig snorted, not wanting to leave his friend’s side, but Balls winked at him indicating he would be fine. That was at least reassuring. Nodding to him, the whaler turned and stalked back outside. Vesa, looking at Tabor, knuckled his brow obediently and without comment followed the huge Swine.

As the double doors swung back and forth, the hag came to the table with three glasses and a dusty bottle. “For one as generous as you, sur,” she said filling two of the glasses, “I brought out a bottle of the reserved stock.”

“Much obliged,” Tabor responded, “But I would be more interested in seeing the owner. I have business with the gentleman.”

“The gentleman ain’t no gentleman I’m a’feared,” she said merrily with a near toothless smile and a wink. “I was but a dainty cabin boy to a Captain’s delight, foully thrown overboard by a jealous First Mate and then plucked from the seas by the hand of God and a fat East Indiaman. I served aboard her for a time and a few others after, nigh on to twenty years afore I washed up in this God forsaken place. We struck a shoal just offshore and I used what cash I grabbed prior to the ship going down to buy this place. Am I to understand you are The Dread Pirate Tabor?”

“I am,” he told her. Looking to Balls, he nodded and said, “Check’er.”

In a quick movement, the old pirate reached up under the crone’s skirts and gave a grope.

“Ball sack and cod sure enough Captain,” he reported with a nod as he removed his paw.

The hag turned to him and stroked his cheek. “You’re pretty cute there yourself sailor.”

“Save the effort,” he told her flatly. “Mine got shot off many a year ago.”

A true look of pity crossed her face. Turning back to Tabor, she said, “You’re here about the lady?”

“Aye,” he replied softly. “What can you tell me? Is she well?”

The hag filled the third glass, and then setting the bottle on the table held her glass up in salute. Tabor and Balls followed suite. "To the death of Gaspar," she intoned, and then they all swallowed their rum down. "Good things and bad things, I can tell you," she replied as the glasses were refilled.

"Bad first," Tabor instructed, feeling a lump forming in his throat.

"Lady Taverness arrived at the prison and had the misfortune of being met by the same warden she escaped from all that time ago. She took an awful beating because of it."

Tabor nodded. "And the good news?"

"She's alive and healing; hidden securely away. Five guards are dead, and they're frantic to find her. Scared to death, they are, and already two desertions... both caught and hung by the Warden." She chuckled. "The head of one of the guards was found boiling in the guardroom stewpot. Don't think that didn't cause some retching."

"You say hidden away?" Balls asked. Holding his glass up, he waited for her to refill it a third time and then winked at his captain before taking a sip. "That would indicate there are friends on the inside."

"Dozens and dozens," she told him, "But only two not behind the bars. Both are good lads and haters of what's happened. King Gaspar was a good king once, and Queen Fran was such a lovely lady. Now he's mad as a hatter and she's locked away; nigh unto death. It would be a good thing for the empire if she might be rescued and returned to power after the black hearted bastard is dead."

"How long has the lady been at the prison?" Tabor inquired after taking a drink of his rum. It was very good stock.

"Two weeks tomorrow," the hag told him.

"Any ships due?" Balls asked.

"The prison ship's not due for a month yet," she replied, "Though the packet is due in a week. It's but a small sloop and lightly armed... but she's quick as a Rabbit." The old Dog smiled at Balls and he smiled back.

"Is there a way into the prison?" Tabor asked softly. He felt a sudden urge to rush to Taverness but he controlled his feelings and his expression.

Turning back to him, the tavern keeper asked, "Aside from the front gate?"

"Aye," he growled, "Aside from the front gate."

“Of course there is.” She gave him a smile and a wink. “I’ve been waiting for this for a long time. I’ve discretely planned things against this moment don’t cha know. My Dickie was hanged for being what he was. I’ll have his revenge soon and mine too.” She sighed. “I ain’t had a good toss since he’s been gone ten years past. I still cry when I think about it. Drink up now, and we’ll talk more. There’s things you’ll need to know before you go running off to save your love.”

“My dickie was pretty well hanged too,” Balls muttered in reflection as he drank, “Until the fucker got shot off.”

Rosa stalked up the single muddy road leading into the village from dockside. She made directly for the tavern knowing this would be where Tabor was. She’d left word that she wished to meet with him only to find he’d slipped off without her. All the work she’d been doing for their ‘adventure’ and him treating her like some... some... mere lookout.

“Where ees ‘E!” she yelled at Vesa and Duroc. Her approach was anything but friendly in demeanor. “Eye ‘ave sum words to speak at h’eem.”

“Who is H’eem?” the Swine shouted back. His smile bore witness to the fact he was oblivious to her bad mood. To his mind it would be great fun to have a good wrestle with the little Cat. “You got new crew boy that run off? H’eem who?”

He giggled, but Vesa looked stern. “You cannot go in,” the young Wolverine instructed her; moving to bar her path. “The Captain requires privacy.”

“N’ hoo we’el stop me, eh? Eye am a Capitain. Eye go where Eye please and no piss assed Wolverine we’el stop me.”

She made to pass him, but Duroc scooped her up into a bear hug and held her kicking and screaming until Vesa could disarm her. She was wearing three pistols, two knives, a cutlass and a bomb.

“You wait out here with us Capitan Rosa,” the Swine giggled, but stopped when she bit him on the ear; his eyes growing large with the sudden pain. Squealing loudly, he dropped her. As soon as her feet touched the rough planks of the tavern’s porch she pushed the Wolverine into the muddy street and then ducked under the double swinging doors. When she was in, she stood staring at the threesome sitting in conversation.

“I believe you were not invited to this party!” the hag said loudly.

“N’d Eye say Eye am!” the Cat shouted back. “We’ve unfinished business, Capitan Tabor,” she claimed, boldly pointing the one finger on her right paw at him. “Eye am ’ear to claim ewe for m’eye own self.”

Balls almost fell out of his chair he laughed so hard. Tabor too almost choked trying to smother his laughter in the glass of rum he held. When he could, he looked at the little Cat with an almost deadpan expression and told her, "No offence meant Rosa, but what you have I don't care for and you know that."

"Eye we'el change your mind eef you give me a chance," she countered. "Eye am flat chest like a boy... what difference, eh?"

Crossing to the table, she pulled up a chair and sat. The legs loudly scraping across the rough hewn planks of the floor as she pulled in. She winked at the rabbit and he winked back liking her spunk.

"Where's your crew?" he asked her, giving the nod for the tavern keeper to bring another glass.

"As you wish," the Dog told him, obviously not approving. "Far be it to me to interfere in a love triangle the likes of this one."

"Eye leaf them to take care of my sheep," she told the pirate, sticking her tongue out at the old Dog.

Balls, just managing to get back into his chair, let out with a 'baaing' sound and then burst into another fit of laughter.

Rosa gave him an evil look and launched a kick at him under the table. "Ewe are not funny old sexless Rabbit," she told him.

"I'd butt heads with ya Rosa," he choked, "But that would make me Ram to yur Ewe." He then broke into mirthful howling complete with tears. "Maybe we could sail away on the back of your 'sheep' ... that is if it didn't drown."

She kicked him again and this made him laugh even louder if that was possible. By now Tabor had joined in, tearfully beside himself. After all that had happened, it was good to feel laughter again.

As the older Rabbit was finally getting himself under control, the tavern keeper arrived back with another glass, and Tabor poured the six fingered Cat three fingers of the Rum. When she picked it up he clinked his glass to hers and winked. "Tell me the truth," he said smiling, "Babacomb told you about his flying sail, didn't he?"

"You theenk I cheat? No," she replied adamantly, sipping at her rum, "Eye swear... Eye know nothing about that. Eet was a good trick though, no? Eye tell my crew to get busy and make one just like eet for thee sloop. Now 'Tabor's Leetle Mistress' will fly like thee wind." She grinned at him and then asked, "De'ed ewe like sexing with m'eye mother after losing thee race?"

A paw slapped her on the back of the head.

Hissing, the little Cat spun and rose from her chair so quickly it tipped backwards with a clatter. Ears back and flattened, claws extended, she came face to face with the very Cat she'd referred to.

"Eye am glad to see ewe ste'el 'ave the reflects uf a Cat, my daughter," Captain Hiss told her. "For yur eenformation, wee two deed 'ave a good time een thee closet; thank you very much."

Rosa quickly looked at the Rabbit, her expression flashing from anger, to hurt, to anger again. "Een thee closet?" she snarled. "Een thee closet!"

Tabor held up a paw. "It's not what you think," he told her. "Twarn't no spewing... least not between us."

Rosa made a strangled sound, looked at her mother, and then ran from the tavern.

"Now what thee 'ell was that all about?" Hiss asked as she picked up the toppled chair and sat down. Snatching up the rum bottle, she took a long drink and then placed it back upon the table. "Glasses are such a waste uff time," she said wiping her mouth on her coat sleeve. "So why was thee leetle Cat so upset, eh?"

When no one answered, she looked at Tabor suspiciously. "Well?"

"Deep subject," Balls told her, and then started laughing all over again.

When the Caveat Noir completed her off loading, Gabriel's Sara was warped alongside the peer and the Ferret's on board streamed ashore. Some of them kissed the ground as they arrived again on terra firma. Soldiers were forever soldiers, it would seem, and though many had easily adapted to shipboard life, all were happy to be back in their own environment.

Babacomb surveyed his ship liking her smuggler's trim features. She wasn't as portly as The Queen, though her hold was large. On top of this, he had no doubt she would be even faster than the Caveat Noir given the right conditions. The captain knew she would handle much better after their heavy cargo was off loaded and looked forward to properly trimming her out. The off loading, however, would have to wait until after dark. He and Pablo had discussed this at length and if the plans they'd made as a group were to work they could not risk having their secret revealed before they wanted it revealed.

As the lines were being tied off to the small pier, he noticed someone running back from the direction of the village. His attention, however, was drawn by the demands of his ship as one of the dockside lines snapped, knocking down the three sailors handling it.

“Are you all right?” he yelled in concern as the three picked themselves up. All waved, and quickly went back to work. He was relieved, as he’d seen snapped lines remove complete limbs to the point of death.

“Get another line over!” he commanded the deck crew. “You there in the tops! Let go the tops’l... let’er flap if you have to, we’ve too much strain on the lines!”

With a whoosh of loosed canvas, his command was obeyed, to an immediate flapping sound as if the freed sail was trying to fly away.

With a bang of a wooden door slamming shut, he turned and asked, “What was that?”

“Cap’n Rosa Cat jest ducked into your cabin, sur,” responded Scatter Brained Bob. The black Dog was standing to at the helm, his eyes keenly watching the ship in likeness of his Captain. “She look to be a might bit upset, sur.”

“Crap on a soggy biscuit,” the other Dog muttered. “I don’t have time for this.” Checking to see everything was as it should be, he left Bob in charge and went below. As he entered his small cabin, he removed his tricorne cover and placed it upon a peg set into the bulkhead. Rosa was standing at the stern windows with her back to him. She was looking out over the small harbor and did not turn to greet him.

“Last I recall seeing you, missy,” he said softly, “You were armed to the teeth and heading towards the tavern. Now here you are disarmed and hiding in my cabin. Two things strike me as odd with this. First: you are hiding in my cabin and not your own. Second: that you would give up your arms so easily. You’re more of a fighter than that.”

“The Peeg held me while his munch nugget Wolverine took them away.”

Babacomb chuckled. “Munch nugget. I’m guessing Punk’n Cat gave him that misnomer? I like it.” The Dog removed his sword and hung it still mounted in its baldric on another peg. He then turned to look at the Cat’s back. “And the fact that you are here?”

“Beecuz I weesh to be ‘ere. Ees that alright weeth ewe?”

Babacomb moved to his small desk and sat. Pulling out a log book, he inked his pen and began an entry. “What time is it, please?” he asked.

“One bell of the evening watch.”

“Thank you. ‘One Bell of the evening watch, tied alongside the pier in...’” he paused, “What is this place called?”

“Eye don’t know.”

“ ‘Tied alongside the pier of Eye Don’t Know...’ ” He said slowly as he wrote. “That is indeed a strange name.”

“Ewe played me,” she said without turning.

“How so?” he asked, looking up.

“W’en we deed thee boat race. Ewe set up thee course. Ewe say eet wood be best eef the last leg was down wind; that eet wood make for a good race.”

Wiping his quill on a rag, he placed it back on the desk and then sprinkled powder upon the page to dry the ink. “I was right was I not? A simple downwind leg leaves little to the imagination. I even remained five lengths behind before raising the kite. That is fair, is it not?”

“For ewe... maybee.”

“You’re angry because I won?”

“Tabor sexed my mother,” she muttered, finally turning around. “I thought eet a beeg joke, but ‘e make like thee carpenter and bang in thee peg.”

“You thought he would win,” the Dog remarked softly, understanding coming to him. “You thought I would have to have sex with your mother and that would have been a bigger joke, yes? I was to be the tool of your little war, wasn’t I?”

She looked at him, her eyes telling the truth, but she admitted to nothing.

“Get out of my cabin,” he told her.

“Eye love heem,” she said pitifully. She was on the brink of crying and had no one else to turn to.

Babacomb sighed and then held his arms open for her.

Without hesitation she ran to him, pressing into his body and the embrace she so desperately needed. For that moment she was a kitten again and her heart was a broken thing of glass shards.

“It would seem that we both chose unwisely,” The Dog whispered in her ear, “You with Tabor... me with Lady Taverness. A heart is like a penis, I’m afraid. When it pumps up it listens to little reason.”

“What... what...” she tried to speak, but the sobs prevented it.

“Shhhshhhhh... it’s all right Rosa,” Babacomb reassured. “What shall you do? Is that what you wish to ask?”

“Aye,” she managed.

“You’ll continue to love him of course; the same as I still love Lady Taverness.”

Rosa pressed back in his arms and looked at him. “She tried to ke’el ewe.”

“She tried to ke’el Tabor too,” he said, imitating her accent. “In fact, I tried to ke’el Tabor several times. I did my damnest to ke’el him... but I missed, and now he is my ally... and he is in love with the same Lady Taverness that tried to kill him several times over. More importantly, she is in love with him as well. You should have seen the look on her face that very first evening when she thought she had him. No less than ten swords were stabbing up and down; and nothing in the bed but straw. She was such an angry Rabbit; and she wears her anger so very well.”

“Why deed she want to ke’el heem?” Rosa asked, rubbing a forearm under her running nose.

“As I recall, it was something about his stealing plans from her that she’d stolen for King Gustav the Black. This caused the King to throw her into prison as a lying spy... that sort of thing. Looking at it now, Tabor ruined her plans to get close to the old boy so she could do exactly what she’s doing now.”

“What ees she dewing?” the little captain asked him.

“Trying to save King Ludwig and his wife,” he told her.

“What plans deed Tabor steel from ‘er?” Using a paw she wiped the tears away from her face, finally gaining a little bit of control over her raw emotions.

“I think for the harbor light at Saylavee,” he replied. Shrugging his shoulders he asked, “Does it really matter at this point?”

“W’at should I dew?” she asked.

“Do as I do kitten... protect them if you can. Take what crumbs are thrown your way and enjoy the little life gives you. Certainly Lady Taverness does not mind sharing if she is in the mood to do so. If you can do the same then there is a little bit of hope, yes? As I recall, Tabor does not like females in any case.”

“E says that, but Eye think e ees confused.”

The black Dog smoothed back the fur on her forehead. "He is not confused, dear one, but I am thinking you are."

He gently moved her back, and stood. "Now then, let me check my ship a last time and then we will go and see Governor Gulo and the Prince. Things are going to get dicey in short order. If we do not stick together and act as we must, we won't be needing to worry about who loves whom."

Gabby stealthily swam ashore, pulling himself up on the rocks near the pier. He wasn't so much deserting ship as he was trying to find Captain Tabor. With luck, he could maybe kinda possibly join up with The Queen's crew. As unhappy as he was, he was convinced that putting up with the likes and dislikes of a crew that didn't like females wouldn't be half again as bad as having to put up with Rosa for one more minute. He'd been her whipping boy sex toy ever since he got stuck on the sloop. At first it was kind of fun, but after a while it began to grate on his nerves. Enough was enough and a swim in the cold water was worth it just to escape.

All through puberty, he'd never ever thought it would be like this.

Pausing under the pier, he looked back at the bow of Gabriel's Sara. It occurred to him somewhere in the back of his mind that this had been his father's ship, but the present kept his mind occupied. Booted marching feet of at least ten soldiers went past him over head, heading towards the village. He was just about to climb the rocks when running feet came back in the opposite direction. With a muffled thumping they continued to the brigantine and with a slam of wood on wood disappeared. The little Raccoon watched in that direction, knowing the noise somehow had something to do with him, but not exactly knowing how he knew this.

Crawling up the rocks, he shook himself and then stood dripping; looking back at the cacophony of shipboard life on the Gabriel's Sara. It was as if he was totally invisible.

On the ship, sailors of all description were finishing up securing what had to be secured. Two were opening the hold in preparation to off loading the cargo, while three others were rigging the pulley system to the main yard that would be used to haul things out in a cargo net. He also noticed a group of sailors preparing a far heavier loading system. This peaked his curiosity, but not enough to get him to sneak aboard. He had a mission to see to, and finding Captain Tabor might take him some doing.

He heard running feet again and turned to find a Ferret jogging towards what would be the Harbor Master's residence. He had no weapons and was obviously a messenger. Without thought Gabby began to jog after the soldier. The fellow's pace was not that fast, so it was a good bet he'd come some distance. As he trailed him, the soldier turned into a home that was prominently placed near the small wharf.

When he came to a halt, the little Raccoon ducked down behind the small white picket fence and watched through the slats.

Stopping at the entrance, the soldier bent double in an effort to catch his breath. When he'd recovered slightly, he stood again and pounded on the front door. As it swung open Governor Gulo appeared and the fellow snapped to attention, saying something the Raccoon didn't catch. After this he was admitted to the domicile and the door again closed.

The young sailor quickly hopped the fence and went directly to a window and peeked in. Prince Uric was being served tea by a lady who would have been the Harbor Master's wife. She was well dressed and more refined looking of a Dog than one would expect to find in a fishing village. It was obvious to him she was pure Labradorean and he wondered that the Prince would trust her to serve his tea and not poison him. Commander Pablo sat in one corner of the room in a very plush chair, smoking a clay pipe while Governor Gulo showed the soldier in.

The soldier, holding his tall hat in the crook of one arm, snapped to attention and saluted the Prince. "Word, sir," he said plainly.

"You may speak," the Prince told him.

The soldier's eyes shifted to the lady who was present and then came back to the Prince.

"It's all right, Sergeant," Commander Pablo said softly. "The Lady is without reproach. You may give us your news."

"The road is secure sir, and scouts have been sent forward to reconnoiter the battlefield."

"They were given exact orders?" Gulo asked.

"Yes sir. They will stay invisible and not engage."

"There is but one road in and out of the prison," the Harbor Master's wife offered, "I'm truly not sure what exactly you might do in order to take the facility; it is a veritable fortress complete with a moat and drawbridge. I'm sure they will simply shut themselves in and wait you out."

"Thank you for your insight madam," the Prince told the Dog, "But if I might speak with my staff in private?"

She curtsied without comment and left the room in a swish of skirts. Commander Pablo, about to say something, saw Gabby peeking in through the window and quickly made a hand motion shooing him away.

When the others in the room looked to the window, it was empty. Looking back to the Commander of the Ferrets, he told them, "I was just shooin' a fly."

Governor Gulo coughed, and whispered something to the soldier.

"As you wish, sir," he said in a not so quiet voice. "I'll have the guards promptly posted."

"Report first, please," the Prince told him softly. "You have details?"

"Yes, sir," the Sergeant replied in an equally soft voice. "We've a place equal to our needs and perfectly defensible. It is a nicely elevated position with a gentle rising slope moving up to it."

The Prince smiled, and sipped his tea.

Tabor was leaning back in his chair, feeling quite good with the rum. "This is excellent grog," he remarked jovially. Tipping forward again, he took the bottle and refilled the glasses on the table. Shaking it to feel what was left, he then handed it to Hiss. She, in turn, tipped it up and drank the remnants down.

"If we all live through this," the crone cackled as she rose, "You can have all I got. Tis the truth that it's good; 'n dang near as old as m'self." Moving to the bar, she made her way around its end and grabbed another bottle.

"What is it then," Balls called to her good naturedly, "Over a hundred years old?"

"Aren't you the gentleman," she replied with a smile. "Should you fancy a tumble later I might still be able to chink yor old sprung seams with putty."

He snorted in humor and then as she walked back to them, gave her a serious look. "Tell us now how we're to get into the prison without being seen."

"We're gonna bugger the place," she replied. Setting the bottle on the table with a thump for emphasis she burst into a fit of crude laughter.

"Crap," Tabor muttered, "No pun intended. Up the sewer it is then. I don't like the thought but I dun it before. Ain't nothing that makes a body more ill than squishing through a field of ripe turds."

Hiss made a face. "Th'at ees disgusting," she said loudly and then reached down and scratched her leg. At the same time she gave Balls a sidewise look.

"What?" he asked her.

“Keep yur feelthy paws to yur’self,” she growled. “Eef I want fleas, Eye’ll get them from a Cat.”

“Yur drunk bitch,” he replied, looking at her through squinted eyes. “Why in the name of Donnygall would I stroke your thigh?” He stopped and looked at the crone. “And what are you massaging there hag? I told ya I gots noth’n ta touch so leaves m’nethers be.”

She blanched and then snarled back, “How dare you blame a fem fatale the likes of me of trying to touch yor vermin infested crotch! If I wanted ta touch you, I’d straight give ya a grope like ya done me earlier... only better.”

Tabor let out a yelp and jumped straight up. Dancing backwards he knocked his chair over and almost fell. “WHAT IN THEE HELL IS GOING ON HERE!” he bellowed.

“IT’S ME DICKIE!” yelled the crone. Jumping up from her own chair she bunched up her skirt by holding onto her cod with both paws. “HE’S ANGRY THAT I WAS LOOKING AT THE BALLESS ONE FOR A TOSS!”

Balls began laughing at her outburst, an ‘I knew it’ look on his face, but shrieked in a like tone as something apparently bit him on the leg. Jumping up, his chair shot back across the room but he never lost his glass of rum.

Hiss, calmly standing, grabbed the edge of the table with one paw and flipped it over while drawing out a pistol with the other.

“Don’t shoot!” Gabby yelled, raising his arms above his head. “I’m on your side!”

For a moment no one spoke; then Tabor yelled out, “DUROC, VESA... GET IN HERE ON THE DOUBLE!”

With a clatter of the double swinging doors squeaking in and out, the Pig and the Wolverine ran into the room, both braced for a fight.

“WHOWHOWHO...” the Polynesian sang while pointing his huge harpoon at various points of the room.

Vesa kept turning around and around looking for the trouble he expected. That got him dizzy and he stopped finally having to lean against the wall. “Captain?” he finally asked, letting the heavy cutlass dangle. “Are you all right?”

“NO I’M NOT FUK’N ALL RIGHT!” he yelled. Pointing at the little Raccoon he demanded, “HOW DID HE GET IN HERE?”

Hiss lowered her pistol. “R ewe not supposed to bee on m’eye daughter’s sheep?” she asked the Raccoon.

Balls made a baaing sound again and began to laugh, the sound of it sticking in his throat when Hiss raised her pistol and aimed it at him.

“Eye dew not take kindly tew eensults,” she said coldly. The old Rabbit saw murder in her slitted feline eyes and softly muttered a ‘fuk’.

“NO SHOOTING IN THE TAVERN!” the crone yelled. “You want to kill each other do it in the street. You’re not going to wing me in the process.” Pointing to the door, she ordered them out.

“SILENCE ON DECK!” Tabor commanded in his loudest sea voice. When he had everyone’s attention, he asked softly, “Did anyone see the Raccoon come in here?”

There was a chorus of no’s, after which he looked directly at Gabby. “How’d you do it?” he growled.

The little Raccoon shrugged his shoulders. “I snuck in the back and then hid behind the bar until the old lady came to fetch another bottle. When she walked back out I hid behind her skirts and then ducked between her legs to get under the table.”

“N why ewe tickle m’eye leg?” Hiss questioned, her eyes narrowing. “Ahhh yes... Eye forget ewe like thee Cats.”

“Don’t neither!” he near shouted back at her. “I’m tired of Cats! I don’t want to see another Cat so long as I live! All she wants to do is...” he stopped, suddenly realizing the Cat in front of him was the mother of the Cat he was trying to flee from.

“Shee,” the sea captain repeated. “Ewe mean m’eye Rosa? What ees eet shee wants to dew, eh?”

“Wait,” Balls near shouted as his brain struggled with the cloud of rum it was mushing through, “Yur say’n ya didn’t pinch my leg neither?”

“No sir, I didn’t touch you. Why would I? I was perfectly hidden.”

“MY GOD IT’S DICKIE!” shouted the crone. “IT’S A SIGN... THE BOY MOVES INVISIBLE WHEN HE WANTS TA BE! MY DICKIE IS POINT’N IT OUT TO US!”

“Ask’im if my dickies over there with’im,” Balls snickered with a sick smile. He then fell out of his chair and was snoring before he hit the floor.

Duroc made a grunting noise and began dancing a shuffling two step, while jabbing his massive harpoon randomly in the air.

“N what are you doing?” Tabor asked him harshly.

“Chas’n Dickie,” he replied, never slowing his strange dance. “Spirit’s... Invisible boys... not good palalulu chalalalupa.”

“Ewe know we don’t speak yur mumbo jumbo,” Hiss said nastily, turning her attention to the Pig. Stuffing the pistol back into her sash, she bent down to fetch the rum bottle from the floor. Fortunately it hadn’t been opened before the table was tipped.

“It means, signs of the gods,” Vesa told them softly. He blinked, and then continued, “Specifically he refers to the Polynesian ‘god of death’.”

At that very moment, Mr. Flop Ears burst through the swinging doors. “Captain,” he said loudly, “I’ve been looking high and low for ya. Before we landed I had a terrible dream. I need to talk to you about it, sur... I think the guns’er trying to tell me something. There’s gonna be more than a thousand of them Labbies march’n on us... I knows it sure as I’m standing here.”

“Whale farts,” the pirate captain cursed. “Just fuk’n whale farts!”

Lady Taverness huddled under her dirty blanket watching the sunlight crawl across the wall of her cell. The thick door was locked and the peep hole closed, but she was not a prisoner. Garlock, her smallish and ugly guardian angel, had wisely thought to hide her in the one place the prison guards would not look... right under their noses. She came and went as she wished, but mostly after dark when she could do the most damage. Death was her companion and with every jailer she killed she acquired weapons which were hidden for the times she would need them.

In the beginning she had only an iron spike.

“Tis a good weapon if used properly,” Garlock advised her. “It opens a hole that can’t be plugged. Plunge it into the chest right here,” he’d told her fingering a spot between her breasts, “And they drop without making a sound. I can’t stress the importance of that near enough; jest be ready to catch them.”

Holding on to her arm, he’d helped her ease down to the straw. “They won’t bother ya none in here. The cell door is marked for leprosy. The person in the cell before you died, but little do the guards care, they just had me taking care of him, so nothing’ll change in the routine. None ever suspected I disposed of the poor bloke’s body.”

“Why?” she’d asked. This actually was the one word the Rabbit was capable of since her face was swollen so badly.

“Same as you, I s’pose. Discussion for later, right? For now you rest and grow strong. I’ll bring what food I can.”

She nodded.

“All right then,” he replied and then pressed a key into her paw. “This is so you know you’re free ta go whenever ya wants... but it would be wise to wait for me. I knows the secret places.”

She nodded her head, forcing the words, “Job.. to.. do.”

He winked at her. “Understood. Oh yes... if I kill a few more of the bleeders, you won’t mind if I blame you for it would you? You’ve such a marvelous reputation.”

She shook her head again.

“Any ya want done first?” he asked softly. There was joviality in his voice.

She made a motion down her cheek indicating a large scar.

“That would be Oscar,” he told her. “He’s a bad’n all right. Very well... first on my list.”

She shook her head again and placed the finger on her own chest.

“Ahhhh... so you want the honor of that one then.”

The spy nodded.

“Done then. I’ll be leaving now. Don’t fret when you hear the lock turn and be sure to keep your head covered like ya really were a leper, jest in case they look in. He was a Rabbit, but black furred, not that they would notice that none. Better days a’com’n luv.”

He left then, careful to peek out into the passage first. And then she was alone.

Watching the sun light on the wall, she found herself wondering if Tabor would come for her. He seemed almost a dream now.

When the sun was down, she would go hunting again. With luck, she would find Oscar.

Prince Uric looked up at the pirate in front of him. The Rabbit was swaying slightly and reeked of rum but he didn’t seem too worse for the wear. From the aroma the Prince was surprised he was standing at all. Equally as smelly in both the body and the spirits, and crowded in behind the Rabbit, was the huge Swine with another passed out drunken pirate carried over his shoulder. Next to the Pig stood Captain Hiss, looking murderously evil, while behind her was a filthy old hag wringing her paws worriedly. Out in hallway he’d also seen a smallish Raccoon and Vesa Dufva looking more the sailor than a soldier this day.

“So you’re telling me, Captain,” he asked, “That because of a dream your gunner had we will need to adjust our plans?”

“And cuz of my Dickie’s spirit,” whined the hag. “It was ‘im that show’d us the Raccoon child is invisible like.”

“The guns talk to Mr. Flopears,” Tabor explained once again in exasperation. Glancing at the crone he gave her a look that left nothing to doubt about how she should let him do the talking. “I sent ‘im to Black Dog’s ship,” he continued, “To see if the Ferret’s fuk’n big howitzer might shed some new light on things. The gun’s’r always talk to ‘im. I can’t explain it but I’ve never known him to be wrong.”

Turning to look at Gulo who was not so calmly sitting next Commander Pablo, he ordered, “Tell him about the shot Flopears made when Taverness was trying to kill us.”

“I’d love to,” Gulo replied with more than a small bit of acid to his voice, “But someone jumped on me and rendered me unconscious for the latter part of that battle. I heard it was a miraculous shot made with the Caveat Noir’s stern twelve pounder. I do seem to recall hearing the gun go off. This was the gun you told her to shift forward, as I recall. I also was told that Captain Hiss made an equally incredible shot with a six pounder using double powder. Do the guns speak to her as well?”

“Eye spee’k with m’eye guns,” Hiss snarled at him, “N’d Eye say lees’n to the Rabbeet. E ees trying to save yur worthless hide.”

Gulo bristled, but Pablo quietly laid a paw on his leg and whispered, “I have seen stranger things my friend.”

“Did you really use double powder?” asked the Prince.

“Eet was old powder and not v’ry good.”

“Yor missing the point!” Tabor near shouted. “There’s gonna be over a thousand seasoned troops facing your pitiful hundred and something.”

He looked around the room at the assembled military leaders. “Can you spell ‘bloodbath’ in Labradorean?” he added in a very slow way, insinuating they were not being very intelligent in their acceptance of his information.

Sighing, he took a deep breath to calm himself and then said in a softer tone, “One little six pounder field gun is not going to stop that kind of an attacking force. Sound the charge, swarm the gun, and it’s over. If we’re going to be inside the prison trying to get the doors open for you, we’ll only be opening them to the same soldiers that just put your head on a pike. I’m saying...” he looked back at Pablo and Gulo, “That if we don’t change out plans now while we can, you can count The Queen’s crew out.”

“And the Caveat Noir’s,” added Hiss.

“A pirate weighs the odds,” Tabor told them evenly, “It does ya no good ta own gold if you’re too dead ta spend it.”

“I see,” the Prince replied, pausing to take a sip of his tea. “And you have alternate plans should I disagree?”

“If I have to; I do.”

The Prince placed his cup back upon its saucer with a small clinking sound. “Lady Taverness will not come with you I’m afraid.”

“And why the hell not?” the pirate asked, his sudden feeling of helplessness spiking his anger.

“She’s my brother.”

The Prince let his words hang in the air for a moment and then added, “Adopted brother, but brother none the less. Our mother, Queen Ludvika rescued him from the slums of our fair capital. He is but two years my senior. My mother, God bless her, knew he would not survive if she did not intervene.”

There was a very quiet moment in the room and then Balls hacked out a really loud hair ball sort of sound. This caused Duroc to pat him on the back like a baby and he promptly belched.

“Now that is just disgusting,” Gulo remarked.

“He’s family,” Tabor growled at the Wolverine, “That makes up for a lot and buys him a parcel of forgiveness.”

“That old coot?” the Governor snorted. “What family could he possibly be? Shipmate I can understand... friend to be certain... but...”

“He’s my father.”

This time it was Tabor’s turn to let the silence hang in the air. Finally he looked back to the Prince. “That means he’s gonna be your family too when this is all over with, adopted or otherwise. I have an idea if you want to hear it. If not I’m shoving off and doing things my way.”

The Prince rose and extended his paw. “It is my honor to be the first to welcome you to the family Captain Tabor. Lady Taverness has told me such wonderful things about you,

and might I add that the tattoo you gave her is quite the piece of art. It's no wonder she wanted to kill you so badly. Now then, tell me what you have in mind?"

Mr. Flopears looked down into the hold of Gabriel's Sara and wondered at the huge size of the cannon hidden in the gloom.

"Holy Mother of Rabbit kind," he remarked, "But ain't you a beauty. I'm willing to bet you could spit my bony arse quite some distance."

Babacomb and Rosa watching over his shoulder exchanged a glance and a smile, but said nothing.

"Oh never mind those two," Flopears said loudly, "It's obvious they're nonbelievers. What's that? All right... I'll tell'em."

Looking back over his shoulder at the pair he said, "She wants to come out of the hold now."

"We are preparing to do exactly that," the Black Dog told him, "As soon as night comes."

"She also wants a rubdown with oil, and there's rust inside her barrel from the salt. That'll take the edge off'n her accuracy. That thought don't please her none."

Babacomb sighed. "I'll see that it's taken care of."

"What's that?" Flopears asked, turning back to the opening of the hold. "You sunk how many?" After a moment, he whistled softly. "That's remarkable... and a Labradorian three decker? Good for you!"

In the next moment he disappeared down into the hold and was quickly crawling all over the howitzer. Taking his knife out, he cut her securing lines, the entire time talking to it in hushed tones. One by one, the Ferrets who comprised the gun's crew came and huddled around the hold's open hatchway watching the strange Rabbit playing with their huge field piece.

"Ask what it likes to eat," one of them called down jovially.

"It's a 'her' he called back and she eats anything she pleases; though flesh and blood are her main treats."

"It sounds like a demon," called another with a shiver. "I'm almost sorry now to serve her."

“Not a demon,” Flopears called back, “But surely doing a demon’s work. She’s soulless and can work both ways... protect or destroy makes no difference to her. That parts up to who uses’er.” Sliding off the barrel, he ran his paws around the inside of her mouth. “She’s seen a lot of use,” he called back. “Got a lot of wear in her maw.”

One of the Ferrets made to reply, but the gunner shushed him, raising one paw. “Oh really? Um hummm... I see. That is a good idea considering the coming battle.”

Looking up to the cargo hold’s opening, he called out, “Captain Babacomb, do you have a competent cooper on board?”

“I do, sir, but what do you need with a cooper?” he called back.

“This monster gun knows of our coming battle, same as the battery on board The Queen,” the Rabbit called back. “She’s made a right good suggestion, meaning to keep us alive; she’s protecting still, same as she did for the harbor at Blueportdoggie. We need the Cooper to make us kegs that’ll fit her throat. I never seen it done before, but I think it might just work.”

Rosa looked at Babacomb and he shrugged his shoulders. “Certainly he is a talented gunner,” he offered. To one of the Ferrets, he said, “Find the cooper please and then call for the Carpenter and his mates. My gut tells me this is important.”

From the journal of Private Vesa Dufva; The Queen’s Navigator.

‘It is evening of the third Day after our landing upon Masadune. Events are quickly unfolding towards the rescue of Our Monarch Ludwig though I fear it will mean the death of many others. As I write this, my shipmates are preparing for their role in the battle. Under the leadership of Captain Tabor, we mean to gain access to the inside of the prison and effect the escape of the Royal Family while attention is drawn to the battle Prince Urick intends to draw down upon himself. I have played many a game of chess with my Wolverine mess mates, and while on The Queen, checkers, cards and bones; but I have never seen planning for anything such as we are about to undertake.’

Vesa looked up from his Navigator’s table on The Queen’s quarterdeck, drawing in a deep breath while relishing the fact that this area was all his. He’d been told by Balls that traditionally he needn’t share it with anyone other than the Captain, and the crew seemed to understand and abide by this custom. Looking back to the journal, he gently blew upon the page he’d just inscribed and then dusted it with powder before turning it over and beginning on the fresh side.

Dipping his quill, he penned; ‘The ships have been completely off loaded with the exception of what treasure remains. Off loaded stores consist of:

Commander Pablo's huge howitzer with one hundred exploding balls and fifty casks of powder. Each ball weighs forty five pounds. All have been loaded with powder and fused. The stubby looking cannon has a land carriage but it will take almost all of the soldiers to pull it. Fortunately, the battle field is but a short distance of three miles and most of the way to this destination there is a road.

The number of our soldiers comes to a total of seventy five Wolverines, and thirty five Ferrets. Each carries his own personal gear which comes to thirty pounds, and an additional twenty pounds in spare muskets, shot and powder.

Of the ships crews, there are twenty Rabbits, (leaving three aboard The Queen), the same amount of Cats with three remaining on the Caveat Noir, and fifteen of the mixed fishermen and smugglers from Gabriel's Sara, with three of those remaining on board.

One Cat, by the name of Ellen is to remain on Tabor's Little Mistress. She has a hook in place of her right paw and this is perhaps the reason she will stay behind. I have not, of late, seen Captain Rosa. She disappeared after the first day and her visit to the tavern. Captain Hiss is frantic, but tries not to show it.'

He paused to accept a cup of tea from Balls, who looking no worse for the wear of the tremendous drunk he'd thrown upon coming ashore, was kind enough to bring it up from the galley where there was always a pot of tea on, hot in the good weather, cold if the seas were rough and the fire unlit.

Walking with the old Rabbit was a Black Dog sailor. It took Vesa a moment to recognize him as the hag tavern owner. He now looked very masculine in appearance though he was obviously as old as Balls. The Navigator and the pirate nodded to each other before the pair left; moving forward and inspecting the ship. Smiling to himself, Vesa sat the cup down upon his large chart table and went back to his journal. Shortly he would be leaving it behind in the safety of his Navigator's station.

'Two hundred spare muskets, which I am told will be invaluable when it comes to the battle.

Two carronades from The Queen's battery, though they do not have land carriage and are to be carried in a wagon procured from somewhere.

One hundred pocket bombs; empty and to be loaded upon arrival at Prince Uric's soon to be fortified position.

Fireworks and rockets that were left after our departure from Blueportdoggie that I understand are for both signally and to cause confusion about the battlefield.

All the powder from the magazines and all of the grape shot. (He thought about this for a moment and then penned,) Oddly there was no ball shot taken for the carronades.

Food and water for three days.’

Taking his small rag, he cleaned the quill and then drank from his cup of tea before sharpening it with his pocket knife and then continuing.

The second day here ten Labradorean soldiers were captured walking into the village for a rest. They were taken without a shot fired as we simply surrounded them and demanded they give up. Since they were not armed, they had little choice. Having freely given their parole they have been locked in The Queen’s forecastle. (properly pronounced ‘folk-sul’). They have been interrogated, but not roughly. Being simple soldiers, they gave up information without realizing its value. For instance; they have been here for six months, stranded when their two troop ships separated from the Black King’s flotilla in a storm and ran aground. Most of their equipment was lost and food is in short supply. This last report was a great relief to Prince Uric and Governor Gulo, though they take nothing for granted. These soldiers were actually very grateful when the cook brought them dinner.

This morning the Ferret scouts came back and verified much of what the soldiers told us. The Labradoreans are in camp outside the prison, but they are in a relaxed state of things. No military drills were seen being practiced.

During the course of the day Gabriel the Raccoon was discreetly dispatched to the prison with instructions to find Lady Taverness. He was lead by the hag, and carried with him her rapier, a fresh eye patch prepared by Balls, and a letter from Captain Tabor. He also carries the well wishes of her brother Prince Uric. I still find this and the fact that Balls is Captain Tabor’s father, such an unexpected disclosure. I am reminded of an old expression; ‘In time all things are revealed’.

He was about to finish, but as an after thought, added. ‘On a personal note, I think I have fallen in love with Punk’n Cat. We have been intimate several times now.’

“Ya have huh?” growled a voice near his ear.

Vesa, seemed not disturbed at all. Reaching out, he took his small rag and cleaned off the tip of his quill. “Aye, Captain, it is a truth,” he replied softly.

“You heard me coming,” the pirate accused grumpily. He’d done his best to sneak up on the young soldier turned sailor.

“No,sur, but what good does it do to allow things to startle you?”

“You must have had an extraordinary childhood. To a Rabbit, any unexpected noise is a threat come ta get ya. You kind of get used to being jumpy.”

“My mother was a force to be reckoned with, sur. My father had been a Sergeant and died in a war. I was told he fought well. When I was little, she taught me to fear nothing.”

“You never got into a fight?”

“Once.”

“And?”

“I won.”

“And your opponent?” Tabor asked him.

“Lost,” the smallish Wolverine replied softly with just a hint of a smile.

His captain ‘harumphed’ and then was quiet for a brief amount of time as he watched his Navigator carefully take care of his journal; tucking it away into the table and locking the drawer.

“Vesa,” Tabor began, and then stopped. He seemed to carefully choose his words before continuing. “This is what I want of you... you have turned out to be a right fine navigator, and I’m happy for that. If anything happens to me, I want you to up anchor and take the Pig home. If you like it there, stay with him. If not, sail away home. Balls will take care of handling the crew on the trip out. He’ll be a ‘want’n to stay with Duroc most likely, so if there’s dispute, beach and burn the ship before anyone can kill anyone else. If not, let them sail away after you get home.”

“Aye, sur,” the Wolverine said without so much as a question. It was an order and he would see to carrying it out if he was able. “And what of The Lady Taverness?”

“If I’m gone,” Tabor told him softly, “Then chances are she will be too. If she’s here, offer her your condolences and a ride to wherever she wants to go.”

“Aye, sur.”

Hearing a hiss in the near darkness from shore side, the Rabbit blew out the navigator’s lantern. “Time to leave,” he said. “Take no shooters, only edged weapons; shooters won’t do us no good after the bath we’ll be taking.” In the dim light of the moon, the pirate smiled in a strange way and then quietly left the quarterdeck, heading for the gang plank.

“Tell me again how he looks,” Lady Taverness whispered to the little Raccoon as she tied her eye patch in place.

“Just like you left him,” he whispered back happily. “I don’t think there’s much that would change him, though he’s looked kinda sad most of the time. I can’t say more than that, though, because I’ve been on Rosa’s boat.”

“How is she?” the white Rabbit asked him as she took out her rapier and cleaned its blade with a dirty rag. It was wet from the trip up the prison’s sewer system even though the Raccoon had wrapped it tightly in oiled paper.

“Horny,” he grumbled. “She’s about rubbed me raw.”

The bunny stopped working on her blade and looked at him. “Rubbed you raw?”

“Well... yeah... she’s always wanting me to poke her and after a while things feel kinda gritty like the sand in a finishing rag you rub wood with.”

She nodded in understanding. “Takes the varnish off quite handily doesn’t it?”

“Real quick,” he agreed. “I finally jumped ship to go and look for Captain Tabor. It’s not like I signed on to Rosa’s boat... more like I was shanghaied. I was going to throw myself at his mercy and ask to become a Queen’s man.”

Lady Taverness smiled, as she went back to work on the sword. “You do know Tabor and his crew don’t like girls?” she whispered to him without looking.

“Works for me,” he replied honestly, “Lately I’m not so fond of them myself.” Changing the subject, he queried, “How many have you killed?”

“Five,” she replied, “And wounded two.”

“Only wounded?”

She nodded. “The object is to make them as afraid as possible. You hideously wound a few, and they spread the word about how wicked you are. Pretty soon they’ll believe you’re the Devil himself.”

“I see,” he told her reflectively. “What do you know of Captain Babacomb?” he finally asked.

The white Rabbit stopped cleaning her blade and gave the youngster a very hard look. “You steer clear of that one Gabby. I mis-judged him badly and ended up paying the price. He’d got no heart and a very black soul.”

“I’ve heard that said about you too,” he argued. “He saved us back at Blueportdoggie. That boarding party would have taken both ships. I would sail with him except he threw me off his ship and told me never come back. It used to be my father’s ship,” he added sadly.

“I will admit to misjudging him a second time back at Blueportdoggie,” she replied, “But ask yourself what he gained by doing what he did.”

The little Raccoon thought for a moment and then said, “Gabriel’s Sara?”

“Very good.” She looked at him, kindness in her one eye. “Now... Trust me when I say I’m pretty good at reading people, but I will admit to not having a clue to his motives for any of what he’s done. I do believe he’d as soon kill me as make love... maybe both, but at this point I have no idea which would come first. Goodness knows I almost killed him a few times as it were. Perhaps he seeks retribution... that doesn’t matter at this point however, as I need his services more than I need him dead.”

“You were lovers?”

“Yes, but I played that card just to get something. It’s not something you should ever do except in the case of extreme emergency. I needed, I gave, he followed, and it’s almost killed me more than once. Let that be another lesson for you.” She resumed polishing the blade, “You just never know about how something like that will turn out. Now tell me all of what you know.”

“I know Captain Tabor loves you,” Gabby whispered, “And I know the Prince is your brother, and I know Balls is Tabor’s father...”

“He’s what?” she hissed at him.

“Tabor’s father,” he hissed back. “The Captain said so when he was having a discussion with the Prince. That’s when the Prince told him you were his brother. He says you’re all going to be one big happy family.”

Lady Taverness smothered her laughter, and then asked, “What discussion?”

The youth quickly related what happened in a matter of detail that left her with no doubt to the little Raccoon’s usefulness.

“You’re a natural for the spy game,” she told him when he’d finished, “Though it would definitely be a stealth spy, meaning you’re apparently best at remaining unseen. You’ve a great mind for the details and a damned fine memory.”

“A spy like you?” he asked, his jaw dropping open slightly.

“Yes, just like me, but unseen rather than hiding who you are openly. Both will get you killed quickly but the chances of that just make the game so much the better,” she winked her one good eye at him, “Don’t you agree?”

“Have you found the King yet?” he asked her without answering.

“I found where he was, but not where they moved him to. That should be rectified shortly if all goes well with my...”

There was the sound of someone trying the cell's door. In a flash both the Rabbit and the Raccoon had scrambled to the blind side of the entrance. The Rabbit indicated he should climb onto her shoulders, and when he'd done so, she passed him up her iron spike which he held firmly in his paw.

Readying her blade, she heard the lock click and watched the door slowly swing open.

Sergeant Urhea, his uniform as impeccable as ever, walked up to Prince Uric's camp table and saluted, "We are almost prepared, sirs," he reported quietly to the Prince and Governor Gulo. "Commander Pablo's respects and he asks that you might come and inspect his gun emplacement."

Gulo looked to the pre-dawn sky, judging the weather as accurately as any sailor at sea. "It's going to be a hot day Sergeant. You and your men must be exhausted; perhaps you should get some breakfast and a nap while we inspect things?"

"That would be most welcome, Governor, but I doubt if any of the troops would sleep; least of all myself. I've much yet to accomplish in order to be properly ready."

"The veterans would," Gulo replied earnestly, "And after this we all will all sleep in one form or another; no more untried soldiers among us then." He rose from the table and placed his hat upon his head. "Waiting is the hardest part, the rest comes easily enough."

No question was raised as to the intentions of his remark about 'sleep' since it was bad luck to call Death before his duties were required.

"Too true," spoke the Prince as he also rose from the table, "Waiting does tear at the guts. I've been to the bushes several times already."

He and the Governor had been studying the map under a shrouded lamp brought with them from the ship. It clearly showed where the prison was and there were now penciled in lines with notations scribbled all over the paper. "As it is," he paused to yawn and stretch, "I think we will come off rather admirably. If all goes to plan, we could defend against two thousand if necessary. The trick will be getting them to attack us."

Both the Sergeant and the Governor would have openly disagreed with the Prince's assessment of their strength, but both were soldiers and soldiers followed their leaders. There lot in life was to do as best they could under the circumstances and then die a brave death. Or at least that was the theory.

As they walked, the Sergeant briefed his superiors on the steps taken towards their preparedness. "We've set up firing redoubts along the first ridge line on the flanks, and again along the second and final ridge leaving room between both to present our firing lines in good target."

“Target?” The Prince asked.

“If we present the enemy with a visual body to charge,” Gulo explained, “Theoretically they will do so. If they see our lines as a regulation style battle formation, they will be less likely to realize the fact we wish to lure them into a trap. Each soldier in the line will have three loaded muskets for a quick fire. That will triple their strength factor when the enemy closes ranks with us.”

“But they will be in the open, no?” The Prince pondered aloud. “Perhaps we should build up firing mounds along the entire ridgeline?”

“Never fear, sir,” the Sergeant responded. “I will be with the men. Three quick volleys, and a fourth if we can reload quickly enough; then we retreat in good order up to the escarpment on the next level. This will encourage those of the enemy left to follow, and when they are close,” He pointed to two mounds on either side of the firing line. The Prince followed his finger and saw the cleverly disguised carronades. “They will flip over because of their shipboard carriage,” the veteran Wolverine explained, “But they’re double loaded with grape and should do the trick nicely. I gave instructions to spike the touch holes after they’ve shot their load. Mr. Flopears agreed, but instructed we use wooden pegs so he can repair them easily later.”

They stopped walking as the Prince paused to take in the area without comment.

“If we build up the firing mounds you ask of,” Gulo said softly, reading his thoughts, “The enemy will also have a place to hide when they gain the first ridge.”

“Bloody hell,” the Prince muttered.

“We hope so, My Prince,” Gulo agreed just as the tip of the sun broached the horizon. In the distance, a whippoorwill sang a haunting melody.

“If I was the opposing commander,” the Sergeant added, “And knew of our weak strength, I would forego an exchange of fire all together and charge right in with fixed bayonet. To counter this, we are preparing another surprise.” He pointed to the area in front of the first ridge and in the shadowy first light they could see forms bent over and working. “The men are digging trip holes; not big enough to lose the balls in when we roll them down the hill, but big enough that a charging soldier’s leg will sink in and probably break.”

“Roll the balls?” Uric asked turning to him.

“Yes, sir,” Gulo replied. “While you were previously indisposed, Commander Pablo paid us a visit and suggested the idea. He gave us about twenty of the howitzer’s exploding munitions and we have them stacked to the rear. They’re heavy, but we can light the fuse

and simply roll them down the hill. We timed it out, and they'll make a good two hundred feet before exploding."

Uric nodded, but said nothing. He found the idea of wanton killing not to his taste, but what must be done to rescue his family, must be done. He began walking again and in a moment the trio came to the center of the firing area where they found a multitude of muskets neatly stacked and ready.

"These are the extras?" Gulo asked the sergeant.

"Yes, sir; all checked and ready. The first few volleys fired will be at range and at will with the troops reloading normally," he explained. "This might knock out a few of the approaching soldiers and our troops will feel better for it. As a tactic, it will also make us look afraid in the eyes of the enemy. This will give them heart and keep them coming."

"I see," replied the Prince softly. "What will happen then?"

When they close," the Sergeant continued, "Our troops will, on my command, reposition in quick order, firing in two ranks using the three muskets. That will give us six rapid shots at forty count per volley. If the men are steady, we'll give a good account of ourselves."

"That is still only 240 bullets," Uric thought aloud, doing the simple math. "The enemy numbers close to a thousand.

They stopped and looked out over the coming battlefield. It was broad and flankable.

"You're sure they'll come directly at us, sir?" the Sergeant asked his Prince. Normally he would not have been so bold, but if there was a hole in the plan he needed to be ready.

"I hope to be able to encourage them," the Prince replied. "So far we're lucky they haven't a clue. Has Commander Pablo fixed an exact range to the prison?"

"Estimated, mathematically contrived, and confirmed by the scouts at two miles exactly," Gulo told him. "The howitzer will reach that accurately without a problem. I'm thinking, however, that the prison will have better firing position than we will. I'm sure they must have a few cannon on the ramparts. To use them as their army attacks, however, would be folly."

The Prince turned to him. "I've seen King Gaspar in action Governor. If his minions are anything like their leader, pity the poor soldiers who will be attacking us as they will be nothing more than cannon fodder for the guns of both sides." Turning back to the Sergeant, he asked, "Where did we place the six?"

"Top of the hill where it will have the best elevation and field of fire, sir. That way we can effectively cover the howitzer."

“Very good.” Holding his paw out, he said, “Shall we proceed then?”

When they arrived at the howitzer, both Commander Pablo and Mr. Flopears were climbing on it looking things over and trying to judge the battle before it happened. Behind the huge cannon were ten casks out in the open along with a myriad of heavy looking round balls. Each of the balls had a bottle like wooden nib on one end, and two lifting handles for loading. Further back and more isolated, were the kegs of gunpowder required to give the stubby weapon life.

For a moment, the trio simply stood and watched the two cannoneers at work. After a moment, Prince Uric said in a loud voice, “Commander Pablo, I shall ever be grateful for your help. You may load when ready. I think shortly we will give the enemy a wakeup call.”

Rosa opened her eyes and found herself staring into the face of a very ugly Dog. Her nose burned and her head pounded. Apparently he’s just tossed water into her face as she’d inhaled.

“Gor... I was afraid you was dead,” he told her, sounding concerned. “That would have ruined my fun to be sure. Sorry I bashed ya so hard, but it was that or you’d upset the apple cart trying ta sneak in on the Rabbit.” He looked close at her and then backed up a pace. “Interesting, that... how’d you know what cell she was in, eh? Ain’t nobody knows that but me. Sides... She don’t need no company. Luckily, she warn’t there in any case. I know cuz I checked. She must be out and about; which is a good thing for the two of us as we won’t be bothered none. Nowwww,” he paused after dragging the word out and checking her chains, “We can have our little chat without her none the wiser.”

He refilled the water dipper and held it out for her so she could sip at it. Her legs and arms were securely restrained and she was lying stretched out on some sort of a table.

“Slow now and don’t try to talk none yet,” he told her pulling the dipper back. “Save yor voice, cuz you’ll be a need’n it for the screaming.”

“Wher... wher...” She tried to speak, but the words were somewhere just out of her mind’s grasp. Her head hurt very badly and her eyes weren’t focusing very well.

“Where are you?” the Dog asked for her. “Why... yor in the torture chamber of His Right and High Royal Majesty Gaspar the Black,” he said with a smile. “Mind you, there won’t be anyone here cept me’n you. It’s nar quite the dawning of day and everyone is still asleep, including the guards.” He smiled a lecher’s smile. “I’m supposed to be preparing breakfast, but you and me are going to have us some fun instead... and then you’re going to die and I’ll stuff yor body down the hole.” He paused to help her drink again. “It’s a pity really, but I can only keep you alive for so long. Time is the enemy here, but after

our little conversation, if I did leave you alive it'd be a real curse for ya being that you'll be so badly broken up and all."

He grabbed the rack's wheel and gave it a turn, tightening the chains attached to her limbs. "The game works like this; I can make it less painful for ya provided you give me the information I need." He chuckled at her obvious discomfort. Grabbing one of her leg chains, he jerked it around a bit in demonstration that she was not going to escape her bonds. "Let's begin with an easy question. My name is Garlock, what's yours?"

She spat at him and he laughed. "How many many times 'as old Garlock had that done to 'im? Spit wipes off, blood ya has to wash away. I like the smell of it though and by the time I'm done, yours'll be running down the sewer hole just like it did for all those here before ya."

He ran his paw up her leg, stopping at her nethers. "Nice spot this. It can give such pleasure and yet can also do just the opposite. It's a right delicate spot no matter what species ya might be." He pinched her hard as he said this, causing her to howl. His lunatic smile left no doubt to the pleasure he derived from her screams.

"Cry out all you want love," he told her, "Ain't no one around to hear you that'll give a damn. Your voice is just one more to join Old Gaspar's choir. Now you tell old Garlock what the plans are so I can poison the bitch Rabbit and then go to the Warden. I'll become the hero, eh? Maybe then he'll see my value and give me the position as 'Torture Master'. I know there has to be plans little kitten. Ludwig's still alive and the Rabbit's here. As they say, 'where there's life, there's hope'." His eyes took on a distant look and he whispered, "No better torture than to dash hope to pieces right there in front of their faces, eh?"

"That's enough," said a hard voice from the distance of the stairs. "Step back from the Cat, and I might let you live."

The Dog looked up, startled from his enjoyment with no less force than if he'd been suddenly slapped.

"Taverness!" he hissed, and then smiled happily. "This is one of the Warden's favorite guards. I caught 'er trying to sneak into your cell and smacked her on the noggin. Why would you have me stop? Sure she meant to take ya as ya slept. What harm if the old Dog takes 'is pleasures in the killing, eh? In the end dead is dead and we leave her here to rattle the others."

Mutely standing beside the White Rabbit was a smallish Raccoon. Strong emotion was plain on his face. In his paw was clutched the iron spike the Dog had given to the spy for her protection. Garlock saw this but did not see it, as his mind was locked upon the Rabbit and the gleaming rapier she now carried. Her reputation with this weapon was legend even on Masadune. The jailer might be crazy, but he was not a fool. His eyes darted about the room seeking a safe exit, but there was only the one door and the hole to

the sewer. One was life... the other death; though for a moment the Dog contemplated his chances there.

“I see’s ya gots yourself a pleasure boy,” he told her affably, changing tact. “Leave with ‘im and go enjoy. Let the Dog ‘ave ‘is fun and we’ll all go back to killing guards and freeing the King. Ya got’s the word of the one who saved your sorry arse when you were teetering on Death’s door.”

“The one who said he was going to poison the ‘bitch Rabbit’?” she asked coldly. “You’ve had your pleasure Garlock. Step back now and we’ll talk friendly. Otherwise I shall spill your blood.” Taverness began moving slowly down the stairs, the tip of her blade hanging off to the side, just clearing each step as she moved. “Leave off now and I’ll forget what I’ve seen. You can go back to serving the prisoner’s their food; that is, the ones you haven’t starved to death or poisoned. This is your chance to run Garlock; live to torture and maim another day.”

Leaping back to the table, the Dog drew out his small knife and held it to the Cat’s throat without taking his eyes off of the spy. “Best you drop that sticker,” he snarled, “Or I’ll cut her throat and run anyhow. I’ll yell my bloody lungs out that we’re under attack.”

He misjudged badly and Rosa bit into his exposed wrist. Screaming, he whirled and taking the knife in his other paw was about to thrust it into her torso. At the same moment there was a flash of fur and a smaller body landed dead on top of him, both bouncing once on the stone floor and then remaining silently still.

Rosa began screaming and flailed about on the table trying to break free of the chains that held her so tightly.

“GABBYYYY!!!”

Lady Taverness was but one second behind. Thrusting her blade into the chest of the dog she grabbed the little Raccoon by the collar and pulled him off of the body. The thrust had not been required as the iron spike was deeply buried in the Jailer’s head. His open eyes registered a great amount of surprise; as if he had seen Death’s black robe and his soul was already in torment.

Checking Gabby for a pulse, she found none. Standing, she took the leather eye patch from her head and stuffed it into Rosa’s mouth wishing it were ten times bigger. “Bite down on it!” she commanded. “He’s dead; don’t waste his sacrifice with stupidity.”

Rosa, almost choking on her own spittle, did as she’d been ordered, doing her best to stop the screams... but she could not stop the sobs.

Releasing the rack’s tension lock, Taverness began undoing the chains on the Cat’s extremities. When this was done, Rosa attempted to rise but fainted dead away and would have fallen to the floor had Taverness not been ready. Catching the young captain on her

shoulder, she grabbed her rapier and hastily retreated back up the stairs. Pausing at the doorway, she checked the corridor and then turned left, going now to a different part of the prison.

Tabor silently waded into the mucky water among the reeds on the bank of the prison's moat. He wrinkled his nose to the stench, and tried not to think what he was immersing himself in. Hiss was to his left, wearing a determined look. With the disappearance of her daughter, she'd been not so surprisingly sullen. The tavern owner led the way, staying slightly to the right. Balls and Duroc followed close behind, the one with a cutlass, and the other with his huge spear. Vesa and Punk'n Cat came next, while Babacomb was left behind to watch the port and safeguard the ships. Following further, and with surprisingly little complaint, came the rest of the crew.

The pirate captain looked grimly at the foreboding darkness of the prison's imposing bulk. This was insanity at its finest hour; fifty some odd pirates hoping to take a fully garrisoned fortress. In his wildest dreams he never would have imagined taking such a suicidal risk. It didn't pay... there was no treasure... the odds were insurmountable... it was just insane.

And yet, here they were.

The hag pointed to his nose and then at the shadows to their front. Using his two fingers, he indicated a walking motion and then moved further out into the moat, slowly wading up to his chin in the stagnant water. He'd warned them to stay directly behind his lead as over the years the flow from the prison's sewer system had built up a ridge of silt. It was mucky, and they would sink to their ankles; but they would be able to slowly walk to the prison walls with no danger of splashing. Treading too far to the left or right would put someone in very deep water.

With luck, and as planned, they would all be inside before the sun came up.

Reaching the outer wall, the Hag turned and looked directly at Tabor. Making a kissing motion with his lips, he sunk out of sight and disappeared from view. This was the part the Rabbit had been dreading. The sewer's opening was three feet below the water, and they had to swim totally blind for a good ten feet before there was an air pocket. If the information was good, they would all be inside. If it was bad, they would all drown thinking the one before them had made it through. He was sure his crew would rather stare down a two decker's guns than swim blindly up the filthy sewer like this.

Feeling something under his foot, he fished it up with his toes, only to find he was staring eye to eye with a skull. Though the lower jaw was missing, most of the hair on its head remained, along with one unidentifiable ear. Without comment, he let it slide back under the water and made a silent oath to not check anything else his foot might find.

Holding his breath, and tucking his cutlass in close, he sunk below the water and began to swim.

In the predawn darkness of Masadune,
The notes of a single bugle
Crisply call out across the valley;
Commanding all within hearing
To rise up and greet the day.

With an explosion,
The first signs of daybreak emerge,
The sun rising in its flaming glory;
Illuminating the fog shrouded earth.

Cheering erupts as an officer,
Staring through a huge double telescope,
Reports; "Dead on the right tower!"

"GOD SAVE THE KING!"
Is shouted in one voice
By the soldiers bearing witness
To the start of the battle.

Seemingly unhurried,
The gun's crew follows
Their loading protocol:

Sponge out to kill the sparks.

A silk powder bag stuffed into her maw,
Feeds 'The Beast'.

Tamp down as the Commander
Measures and cuts the wooden fuse.

"BALL READY TO LOAD!"

Two gunners and a third under to lift,
Two more hard on to the ram.

"LOADED!"

"TARGET?" the Commander questions
As he climbs to the breach.

Deftly he pricks the powder bag
And then primes the pan.

The officer hearing a distant bugle's
'Call To Order'
Stares into the duel telescopes.

His eyes observe battalion guidons
Hastily rising above the fog;
Assembly's pre-thought functionaries
Now become targets of opportunity.

"There!" he shouts pointing,
"The Command Guidon has shown."

Checking his compass, he marks the bearing
And the gun crew adjusts.

"RANGE?" the Commander requests.

Two thousand yards!" the officer estimates.

A flop eared Rabbit with a turn of the screw
Adjusts the huge howitzer's elevation
While speaking to it in a whisper.

"Set!" he calls softly.

Placing a paw on the
Warm steel of the breech
He looks up at his
'Brother Of The Gun'

The Commander in immaculate uniform
Looks down, winks at him
And then cocks back the weapon's flint
Bearing hammer with an audible 'click'.

"CLEAR THE GUN!"

Jumping off of the steel Bull,
The Ferret plays out the firing lanyard,
Standing to the side;
Left arm behind, right arm before.

“READY!” he yells to the officer.

“FIRE!”

The lanyard is briskly pulled.

With a snap, pop, KAWHOOMP,
The monster gun rises up
And falls back again;
Sending death hurling towards the enemy.

The officer tracks the ball’s flight
And with a curse reports,
“Short by one hundred!”

Again and again the gun speaks
As the adversary within the fog
Mills about in panic; unseen
Death raining down upon them.

Military order slowly returns
With the sounds of fife and drum,
Marching feet, and shouted orders.

“We’re found,” the officer yells,
“Sound ‘Battle Ready’!”

As the bugle calls out,
Behind those who’s hopes lie
In the justification of retribution,
Their colors are unleashed,
Boldly declaring who they are
And why they have come.

Bleeding and hurt,
The enemy cares not.

Gathered, they continue forward
In a determined march towards death.

Attacker and defender
Will now give up their last breath.

For: Country, Comrad, and King.

For: Family, Love, and Honor.

Because they must.

Balls and Duroc were the first to make their way up the sewer hole and into the torture chamber.

The rough stone was slick with fresh blood making the climb nearly impossible. For this reason, the huge swine got under his partner and, hoisting him up, pushed upon the soles of the old Rabbit's feet just managing to get him head and shoulders above the cold floor. When he'd hoisted himself free, the pirate leaned back down and gripped the Pigs huge paw and pulled for all he was worth while those behind the Swine pushed.

The beefy Polynesian got stuck.

For a moment, there was only the sound of whispered oaths going back and forth between the pair. Balls, threatening to find a torture device among the rooms equipment that might motivate his friend, moved further into the chamber looking for anything that would help. Spying the chains on the rack, he moved towards it but stopped when he saw the two bodies lying next to it. The fresh blood was flowing from them.

"Fuc sakes and bugger me bloody," he muttered, forgetting to whisper.

"Later," the Hog hissed at him, "Now have to get out." He made a soft squealing sound as multiple paws continued to push on his backside, while others paws began pulling on his legs in obvious confusion.

Balls didn't even respond as a heavy feeling settled into his chest. Moving forward, he knelt beside the Raccoon he knew all too well. Reaching down, he placed his fingers on the side of Gabby's neck and gently felt for a pulse.

"Ah lad, what did we get ya inta?" he questioned softly. "You was supposed ta only deliver Tabor's message."

Not finding the signs of life he'd hoped for, the old pirate picked him up and held him to his chest. "I liked ya," he muttered, "I truly liked ya. Bad luck is what it is and not a good way to begin a board'n."

"Balls!" Duroc hissed in a less than quiet voice. "Cum help."

The old Rabbit seemed not to hear as he caught sight of three shadowy figures standing in the corner of the room. The one on the right looked a bit like the Dog lying dead on the stone floor... and then that one just winked out, disappearing without a sound. That left

the one in the middle who looked like some sort of robed monk, and a smaller one kinda like...

“Wait!” Balls hissed at the dark apparition. “I knows ya well enough... take me instead. God knows ya been tying to long enough. When I made my deal with yor boss for a long life, I never know’d I’d get my privates shot off. I’m tired now... and I’m giv’n th’wink and th’nod.”

“Take you where?” asked the Pig. He then made a choking noise as a paw slipped off of his rump and a finger inadvertently got inserted. Placing his arms to both sides, he strained mightily.

Balls felt a strangeness overtake the left side of his body and his arm on that side flopped down as if disconnecting from the rest of him. He tried to talk, but his speech slurred. He turned then to face his friend and for a moment Duroc stopped struggling. His mouth opened as if to say something and then he saw his friend stagger, struggling to hold onto what was held by his one good arm.

“Pahayamanatolata,” the pig cursed in his native language. Struggling harder, he felt his hips pull free.

Balls staggered and fell, his eyes never leaving those of his friend.

A second later, the Pig was out of the hole and reaching down to help the next person up. This was accomplished with a pull that sent the poor Cat airborne. After three such quick entries, he snatched his spear which was thrust up through the hole for him and then left the hauling up to those who followed in order to attend to his friend.

Gasping in a deep breath, Gabby shuddered violently for a moment and then sat up in the same moment that Balls’ rolled back to the floor and released his ‘death rattle’.

As the little Raccoon began to cry, the huge Polynesian knelt next to his friend. Pressing his face close to the Rabbit’s he checked for life but found none. Sitting back on his haunches, he reached out and closed his friend’s eyes, whispering, “No more Ugg Bugga for you Balls... ever again.”

Removing his knife from its sheath, he deftly cut off the pirate’s left pinky finger and slipped it into the small pouch he always carried. Glancing over to Gabby, their eyes met, and there was an instant understanding of what happened. Duroc nodded and then gathered the youngster into one huge arm as easily as if he had been a baby. Taking his spear with the other, he quickly climbed the stairs; channeling his grief into what must be done.

As the tattooed Swine reached the doorway, a hapless guard stuck his head through the opening and instantly found himself in the wrong place at the absolute wrong moment; impaled on the harpoon that had always been meant for a much larger beast.

With a flick of the Islander's wrist, the guard was pulled in and toppled over the edge of the stone stairway. The harpoon tore free of his body and Duroc disappeared down the passageway.

His job was to find the prison's magazine, but that thought had died with his friend. For now he was simply running blind.

Through the stone of the cell floor Taverness felt the jar of the impacting howitzer ball followed close on by the explosion; understanding full well what it meant. She would now have to hurry. Death for her Monarch would be only moments behind such an attack.

"Are you able to do this?" she asked Rosa, while tying the eye patch back into place.

Rosa glanced down upon the sword she now held in her left paw. Held by her belt were two daggers, a large pistol, and its cartridge pouch; weapons the spy had retrieved from hiding and given her. Taverness carried a brace of pistols, a longish dagger at her back and a buckler strapped to left forearm to compliment the rapier.

"Aye... Eye am yors t'ill Eye die," the Cat replied softly.

The white Rabbit placed a finger under the youth's chin and lifted her face so they were eye to eye. "With that attitude, young lady, you won't make it past the first turn of the corridor. Tell me now why you came."

"Eye cum to protect ewe for Tabor," she said in the same quiet voice. "Eye follow Gabby, 'n sneak in behind. 'E left thee wet footprints."

The Rabbit nodded, her ears picking up the shouts of the garrison, rudely aroused from sleep by Commander Pablo's well aimed shot. Things would heat up very quickly now.

Releasing Rosa's chin, she told her, "Follow me. We need to find a guard and take his keys. When we reach the King's cell, I will need you to cold bloodedly kill... can you do this?"

Rosa nodded. "Eye will think of thee Dog... and... and..."

"Push him from your thoughts," Taverness told her gently, "The same as I will not think of Tabor, you must not think of Gabby. There will be time later for grief. He did what he had to do to save you. He was your shipmate; honor that."

Rosa nodded again.

A bugle began playing in the distance and was picked up by another somewhere within the prison walls.

“It begins,” she said, and then led the way.

“The Battalion will spread out, leaving the Guidon forward or to the rear,” Pablo advised Gulo as the leaders conversed softly. “I have advised the gun’s crew to work both flanks as well as the middle so as to keep them guessing.”

“That won’t matter much soon,” Prince Uric added, as he regarded the sun. “The fog will burn off quickly and I expect them to begin their march. One gun, no matter how large, will not stop them.” Looking to Gulo, he said, you will take the right flank Governor. You have the six pounder to use as you see fit. For now I simply instructed the gunners to open fire on whatever target presented itself.”

Turning to the Ferret, the young Wolverine extended his paw and said, “Commander Pablo, I cannot thank you enough, but will at least make mention now as we will be busy later.”

The cannoneer gripped the proffered paw firmly. “It is my pleasure, sir.”

“You now have charge of the left flank,” Prince Uric added. “I will take the middle.”

“Sir,” the Governor began, but stopped as the Prince turned to him. Extending his paw, he said instead, “God preserve us, and I am happy to be able to say I served under you.”

“Say instead, ‘we served together’,” the Wolverine told him with a wink. Turning then to the hill behind them, he doffed his tall cap to the trumpeter standing ready. He, in turn, lifted his bugle and commenced playing the folk song embraced by the Wolverine as the embodiment of who they were as a people.

“To your stations then,” the Prince told them, “And may God indeed preserve us.”

Tabor knelt next to his father, a wave of emotion pouring over him. No one he questioned knew what happened; only that the huge Pig had scooped up the body of a Raccoon that had been in the room and charged up the steps like someone possessed. At the top of the stairs he’d killed a guard and tossed his body to the stony floor, after which he simply kept going.

Obviously that had saved them all, and obviously the Pig was upset. He and Balls had been closer than a pair could possibly be... an early summer and late autumn relationship, with autumn slipping away into winter too quickly. Tabor understood this

was bound to happen eventually. The Rabbit sighed, understanding that his father had at least not suffered.

Standing, he looked at the hag, who was hovering over a second body. “This’unz Garlock” the Dog snarled. “He was a twisted bastard; but I thought sure he would help. Maybe they was on to ‘im about the missing prisoners and brought ‘m ‘ere for questioning.”

“If that was the case,” the pirate replied, “We’d be knee deep in constabulary by now.”

There was a noticeable shiver to the stone floor, and bits of dust floated down from the overhead, followed by a distant sounding thunderous boom.

“That’s it,” the captain said softly looking upwards, “Time to be about what we need to do.”

Turning to the assembled group, he instructed, “Hiss, you and y’urn get the guns on the parapets. Hag, you and y’urn gets the gates. Vesa, you and y’urn comes behind the hag and kills what guards tries to interfere. Also, any keys found, start releasing the prisoners. If they’re fit enough, press them to service.”

He looked at them appraisingly and then said, “No finer bunch a bastards and bitches has I ever sailed with.”

Hiss met his eye and smiled.

“I’ll go find the Pig and see what we can do about releasing the Royals,” the Rabbit furthered. “If we manage that I’ll get them out the same way we came in and then come back.”

He paused, looking at all of them. They were a good lot; honest sailors all of them.

“Remember...” he finally told them, “King and country and a full pardon if we pull this off. That means yor own land and never a need to pirate again... less o’course ya wants to.”

They all chuckled, minding to keep things quiet.

As they began to quietly move up the stairs, Captain Hiss lay a paw on the Rabbit’s shoulder, and simply nodded. There was nothing to say about Balls’ death. They might all be dead shortly in any case. Tabor nodded back in a way that told her he was grateful.

“Wind to your back and a following sea,” he told her softly.

“N’d ewe,” she replied in the same tone. Turning then, she made her way up the stairs with the rest of the crew, her cutlass in paw and ready.

Kneeling again, Tabor rolled Balls onto his back and arranged his arms across his chest as if he were lying quietly asleep. As he did this, he spotted the missing finger. At first he was angry but then he sighed and said, "He loves you that much Da, I won't interfere."

Picking up the old pirates floppy hat, he lay it over his father's paws, covering the small mutilation. Standing, he then headed up the stairs behind the last of his crew. He had a Pig to find.

The first guard fell quietly to Rosa's knife as Taverness engaged him sword to sword. She made a passing attack he easily parried but which turned his back to the little Cat. Pistol, keys, ball and powder were quickly liberated.

"Dew ewe know where ees the King?" Rosa whispered as they searched the body.

"Three floors up on the back side of the prison," the Rabbit whispered back. "The Royal Family might be prisoners here, but they are still Royal. There are rules concerning such things."

"R'ules R brok'en," the Cat replied.

"Not these rules, Kitten," Taverness replied. "If the King were dead, the Labradorean throne would have no sway over the Wolverine people. They would rightfully revolt."

"What about the Prince?"

"They were told he was dead, which for all intents and purposes he was, since his fleet was sunk and the few survivors stayed quiet. Smart move on his part; Pugwash would have sold him out in a heartbeat."

Standing, she motioned with her chin that they should proceed, making sure the keys were loose to jingle. If anyone were to hear, they would expect another guard and remain quiet. That little bit of advantage would quickly be used.

Duroc had killed no less than five guards in his rampage through the corridors, but now he was hopelessly lost. Prisoners, hearing the carnage being wrought, hung off of their bars begging for the gates to be opened; and yet when he came close the anger in his face pressed them back against the far wall in fear of an obvious demon.

Stopping finally, he lowered the small Raccoon to the floor leaned against the stone wall and began sobbing his heart out.

"Look at you ya big sissy Pig! I'm the one missing my manhood... best you grab yor

ball sack and give it a squeeze cuz yor giv'n one hell of a pathetic show for yourself!"

The Swine stood straight and whirled around, holding his spear out like a talisman. "YOU DEAD!" he yelled loudly. "NO MORE UGGA BUGGA!"

"Who says so!" retorted the voice taunting him.

Gabby, still trying to get a handle on what was happening, watched Duroc spin around and around making grunting sounds while he thrust his spear into the air in a fearsome display of ferocity. Blinking, the little Raccoon slowly got to his feet and walked to the huge Polynesian. Patting him on the leg, he stood watching patiently while the whaler's actions began to slow as if he were a boat in a slowly dying wind.

When he finally stopped, he sniffed once and used the back of an arm to wipe his nose. Looking at Gabby, he said, "Pig lost."

"I know where we are," the youth told him, "I've always had a nose for dead reckoning. Even my father said so."

"Dead reckoning," howled the voice in the Swine's head. "Now ain't that one hell of a bad pun. Listen to him Pig... he knows."

Gabby reached out and touched Duroc's little pouch. "He's in here," he said without further explanation. Taking the Swine's paw he said, "We need to go up one more level, and make our way towards the back. Taverness told me the King would be there. That's where she'll be, and she'll need our help."

There was the bark of a cannon, followed by another, and another, and another.

The big Polynesian nodded his head once, and followed.

Prince Uric moved to the back of the lines and found four serviceable muskets. These he loaded being very careful that the load was good. Strapping on an ammunition pouch, he slung three of the muskets over his two shoulders, and carried the forth, moving up to the firing line. The opposing force was rapidly closing, their lines stretching out over a thousand yards in length and moving in regulation style. Blocks of one hundred marched in rows of ten, a guidon gaily waving at the head of each and the fife and drum playing near the commander's position. The fog had dissipated enough now to show the sheer number they faced, though it was now much less than it had been. Where the howitzer's exploding balls had scored a direct hit, there were large gaps in the flesh and blood formations.

To his right, and more towards the rear, the six pounder was wreaking terrible havoc for its small size. For some thirty minutes it had been lashing out at any target the gunners

chose to aim at. Presently this was anything towards the right flank, meaning to reduce the number that would charge this side. Its bark, distinctly lighter than that of the throaty howitzer, was also more frequent as it had a double crew of seasoned soldiers working it.

Walking to the firing line the Prince addressed himself to Sergeant Urhea. "I will join our soldiers now Sergeant."

The Sergeant, startled from his thoughts, saluted briskly and asked, "Sir?"

"You will treat me the same as you would one of the Privates," he informed the old soldier. "There will be no 'sir' used and if you need to put your boot up my arse, then you do it."

The Sergeant's mouth opened as if to argue and the Prince said calmly, "That's an order; you do not have a choice."

"I would be pleased, Sergeant," said another voice just behind the Prince, "If you would position me in the firing line next to this green recruit I see before me."

The Prince turned to find Captain Henry Babacomb smiling at him. He wore his black tricorne and equally black sea coat. The Dog had an equal number of muskets slung over his shoulders. "I even took the liberty of bringing my own weapons," he said jovially. "You really didn't think you could keep me away from the party did you?"

"But King Gaspar..." began the Sergeant.

"Was my liege 'once upon a time'," Babacomb finished for him. "Now I have a better reason for living. I am asking... please."

Prince Uric extended his paw and Captain Babacomb gripped it firmly. "I am honored you chose to join me Captain, but if you are killed I will have no one to sail us back to Saylavee."

"And if I'm killed I'll hardly give a good sh..." he stopped, and looking at the ground for a second, he said, "I'll hardly have a care, now will I sir?"

Releasing his paw, the Prince clapped him on the shoulder and laughed. "My name is Uric Captain Babacomb and best you remember it from now on."

"And mine is Henry," the Dog replied, "Minus the 'Captain'."

"Mine's Sergeant," Sergeant Urhea said with a smile; and then seemed to realize he might be barging in on a private moment.

Both Babacomb and the Prince looked at him and the old Wolverine blushed deeply.

“My father was a Sergeant under your father, sir,” he explained quickly. “Though my mother was not much more than a camp follower he wanted to be sure everyone knew whose son I was.”

“And so he named you ‘Sergeant’, Henry finished for him. It was not a question. “Your father was a genius!” he exclaimed. “I never in a hundred years would have thought of that.”

“And neither would I,” the Prince added.

Saluting briskly, the young Wolverine then called out, “Privates Uric and Henry reporting for duty, sir.”

“I AIN’T NO FUK’N SIR AND BEST YOU REMEMBER THAT YA FUK’N BULLET WAD BRAINLESS PRIVATE!” the Sergeant screamed at the pair, his face turning a mottled purple.

With a whistling sound, three cannon balls flew overhead, and the trio ducked their heads slightly, after which they were laughing so hard the soldiers in the lines had a hard time not turning to see what was happening. A moment later, the two Privates exactly in the middle of the line were moved to the rear and told to prepare the ‘rolling balls’, while to everyone’s amazement, Prince Uric and Captain Babacomb were moved into their places.

A bugler positioned in the central courtyard of the prison loudly played ‘To Arms’. The noise was incessant and blaring.

Captain Hiss paused, holding up a finger indicating her Cats should be very quiet as two of the prison’s constabulary loudly approached the side passage in which they stood. As the pirates stood perfectly still, the pair rushed past, their arms full and their boots hammering on the stone flooring. Neither soldier seemed to so much as glance to the left or right in their haste, but a moment later the fading footfalls were replaced with one set quietly coming back in their direction.

A Dog’s curious face peered carefully around the corner and his tall Shako soldier’s cover was immediately plucked from his head, where upon he was promptly struck with the belaying pin belonging to Hiss’ Boatswain’s mate; a Cat of sizable girth and strength.

The limp body was caught as it fell and dragged back in the shadows where it was promptly stripped of its uniform, and weapons. The two small kegs of gunpowder he’d been carrying for the parapet guns were snatched away as he fell and carefully set aside.

Hiss, wrinkling her nose in disgust at having to don the uniform stripped from a Dog, (albeit her own clothing smelled of excrement), calmly walked out onto the third level main passage which was open to the courtyard. Here she regarded her location and the

prison's sudden flourish of activity. Her group was two floors down from the parapets, and on the backside of the prison, away from where Prince Uric's battle was taking shape. There was the sound of rumbling gun trucks above the gates and a resulting cannon blast only a moment later.

In the courtyard, people were running in all directions under the shouted commands of a pompous looking Dog dressed in a fine outfit and powdered wig. With a good musket, she could have potted him easily.

She heard more rumbling as the prison's portcullis was lowered. They could raise the drawbridge if needed, but this was something always left to the last minute as it was very heavy and took a lot of work. In any case, that would be the Hag's responsibility. Her first priority was silencing the guns. Then she would see about holding the high ground of the parapets and doing whatever damage could be done.

Hearing the pounding of more feet, she calmly looked up and saw two more of the constabularies running towards her. Both were carrying the same type powder kegs for the guns.

"THEES WAY! She yelled at them, and pointed down the side path. "THERE 'AS BEEN BATTLE DA'MAGE!"

With nodded thanks, the pair turned the corner, following her directions. This was followed by two quiet yelps, two soft thuds, and then the sound of rustling cloth.

"YOU THERE!" called a voice from the parapets.

Turning, Hiss placed her paws above her eyes looking for whoever had called out. An officer waved with both arms, trying to get her attention. She pantomimed for him, pointing to herself in a questioning way.

Cupping his paws around his snout, the Dog barked back, "YES YOU! WE NEED POWDER! NOW! BRING IT!"

The Cat Captain smiled, waved back to him, and then calmly moved back to her crew, leaving the officer grumbling about the quality of the conscripts they were getting.

"Ow much powder deed they 'ave?" she asked.

"Two kegs each Cap'n," the Bosun replied in a surprising feminine voice, " 'Nd cannon fuse. T'pical lubbers, mum. Scared of th'gun they be, and won't use a hot punk. No accur'cy in that."

Hiss smiled having a thought that tickled her evil side.

There was another boom as one of the guns found its voice. It was obvious by the slow rate of fire how desperate the gunners were for powder. Not expecting an attack, there'd been no preparation. Steel shot could be stored in the open with no ill effect, stacked prettily next to the weapon; but powder had to be kept in the magazine where it was nice and dry and away from any sort of ignition source.

“Eye ‘av ‘ad an explosive idea,” she told her Cats, “But eye will need two volunteers to go with me.”

All fifteen of her crew held up their paws.

The Hag led the way to where his group would wait for an appropriate moment to swarm the gates. The object was not to disable, but to take and hold. Depending on the outcome of their foray, they might have to exit this way, and if not, they might have to prevent entry to the prison to those who might try affecting a rescue. He had no illusions about what the job entailed; take and hold was suicidal; opening yourself to being shot at from two sides at once.

His one hope, and the only reason he'd volunteered, was to come face to face with the Warden so he could split his middle open and then spit on him as he died. He would do that much for his Dickie, and now old Balls had been added to his list as well. The Pig may have the old Rabbit's special squeeze, but in the short time they had known each other, the Rabbit and the Dog had become close friends.

As in medieval castles, the prison's open courtyard was surrounded with wooden buildings at the ground level, most of which were accessible through passages in the stone structure. The place he'd led his ten pirates to was the garrison's mess hall since it was the structure closest to the gate. The passage they used was meant for the servers bringing food in from the kitchen. Garlock had shown him once and had also told him of his plans to poison the entire garrison. The Hag had passed this off as crazy talk. The Dog was twisted and the Hag had not trusted him any more than he would have a snake, but they had the hatred for the Labradoreans in common; in particular that of the Warden. The Hag hated him for hanging of his Dickie and Garlock for some other unknown reason; though the Warden had brought him to this place when he'd been exiled.

The mess hall was now empty. Though there was a pot of boiled eggs in one corner, food was the last thing on the garrison's mind. As the old Dog peeked from a shuttered window, his crew helped themselves. One of them peeled an egg and brought it to him.

“Thanks luv,” he whispered, and then slowly ate it as he watched out the window. Soldiers were running in every which direction; confusion totally controlled the day. This was a good thing.

One of these soldiers, running across the courtyard on some unknown mission, made for the mess hall.

“Ready there,” the Hag called softly to his crew and cutlass’s were positioned on cocked arms. When the unfortunate soldier burst into the mess area, he was immediately cut down without an alarm being sounded. Within seconds, his bloody weaponry was stripped and in the paws of the group.

“Maybe we’ll get lucky,” growled the Hag, “And a few more will come this way.” Nodding to the one who brought him the egg, he calmly said, “Bring me another two would ya hun? My stomach is pitch’n a fit.”

A single cannon boomed like thunder, and as he glanced aloft, towards the back of the prison, he spied a Cat dressed in the Royal Blue of a constabulary. He knew the constabulary had no Cats among their number.

Taking the eggs proffered to him, he popped one into his mouth and slowly chewed on it while continuing to watch the courtyard; but he also kept an eye on Hiss knowing she was up to something. Timing was everything.

“ALL RIGHT LADS,” Sergeant Urhea bellowed. “KEEP YOUR MUSKETS AT FORTY FIVE DEGREES FOR MAXIMUM DISTANCE, AND WE’RE GOING TO PRACTICE VOLLEY FIRE!”

Among the ranks rippled an electric feeling. The line was currently at parade rest, looking as smart, (mind the extra shouldered weapons), as if they were on the parade ground. The solitary unlimbered musket was fully charged and ready.

“TENHUT!” the old Wolverine yelled.

BAWHOOMP, blasted out the howitzer. Though they were not supposed to, those that could tracked the flight of the ball which burst with deadly effect right over top of the third platoon to the right of center. Where living and breathing soldiers had stood a moment before, there was now a large hole in the ranks.

Among the troops the stubby gun had taken on the name of ‘BallyBoy’ and it had so far taken a frightful toll on the advancing enemy. Between Commander Pablo, and Mr. Flopears, Prince Uric had the best of the best when it came to gunners. It was seldom they were not on target.

Sergeant Urhea saw a black puff of smoke from the prison’s parapet. A full six seconds later a ball landed a hundred yards in front of them, took a frightful bounce and then careened into the firing line. Most of the soldiers were able to track its progress and simply sidestepped, but on landing it again bounced and flew over their heads, taking the

sergeant's Shako from his head and then careening into the crew manning the six pounder. It killed one of the gunners in a garish splash of blood and entrails.

"Steady lads," came Governor Gulo's measured voice, "Be sure of your target, and give it back to them. I can see their commanding officer cowering a good hundred feet behind his flag. When you're ready."

CRACKKKKK... and the six pounder punched an angry hole in the air, sending its smaller ball hurling towards the command Guidon in reply. Three times the Guidon had fallen and been picked back up by one or another of the brave soldier approaching. So far, even with the shelling, their well disciplined ranks had not broken.

The Guidon again fell to the cheers of Sergeant Urhea's firing line.

"ORDER IN THE LINE!" the old Wolverine bellowed; showing his true colors as a King's Sergeant. They were now down to the business of conducting a battle, and cheering would be saved for when they saw the enemy's back as he ran away.

"DRESS RIIIIIGHT DRESS!"

It took a moment, but the firing line quickly straightened themselves while the sergeant retrieved what was left of his Shako. Snorting, he examined the remnants of torn silk and then threw it aside.

Drawing out his sword, he faced his soldiers and yelled out, "YOU WILL AIM STRAIGHT AHEAD! ON MY COMMAND YOU WILL FIRE AS A UNIT!" He paused, regarding each and every one of them. "STAY CALM... STAY PACED... BE SOLDIERS OF GOOD KING LUDWIG! FIRING LINE... SHOULDER YOUR WEAPONS!"

The first row of soldiers, thirty in total, shouldered their muskets, coming to a firing stance.

"READY!"

As a unit, they all reached up with their right paws and cocked back their hammers. To their left they could hear Commander Pablo's commands to his own men, repositioning the gun to a fresh target.

"FIRE!"

The volley was ragged and had little chance of causing damage but it ripped out in defiance at the advancing Battalion.

The firing line, as soon as their weapons were discharged, brought their weapon to 'port arms' spun about on their heels and marched to the rear where they spun about again, and

without looking left or right, began the reloading procedure. As each of the soldiers finished, they assumed a stance of attention, indicating they were ready.

As they reloaded, Sergeant Urhea, watching everything closely, punctuated their movements with a well measured firing command for those now in the front line; making the entire sequence tic along like clockwork.

Tabor, moving quietly down the prison's passage ways, had left a very bloody trail. He was now armed with a musket, three pistols, their loading gear, three daggers and a jailers keys jangling at his waste.

“DOWN HERE, SIR!” yelled a voice that carried above the din that had quickly set in among the prisoners. “THE KING’S FORTH GRENADIERS HERE... THE KING’S FORTH!”

The Rabbit moved down the side passage, coming to an overcrowded common cell stinking of illness and death. It contained a group of bone thin Wolverines clad in the remnants of military uniform.

“What ho?” Tabor asked them as he inserted the key and twisted. The door swung open and he was immediately surrounded by soldiers, all slapping him on the back and trying to talk at once.

“SILENCE ON DECK!” the Rabbit bellowed.

The soldiers immediately quieted, their discipline quickly coming back to them.

“Now one of yuz talk, and do it quick cuz I got things ta do.”

“You’re here to save the King?” asked the most senior of the group. He was an older Wolverine with faded sergeant’s stripes on his sleeve.”

Tabor was about to reply with something sarcastic, but the look on their faces told him this would not be appropriate.

“Aye, we are. If you want to help, it would be much appreciated.”

The Wolverines smiled and he was promptly relieved of his arms save his cutlass.

“Do you know the way, sir?” asked the sergeant, checking the charge in the musket’s ignition pan.

“I was hoping you would,” Tabor replied as he watched them closely.

His eyes immediately became huge as the soldier cocked shouldered and fired the musket. The muzzle blast was deafening in their close confinements and gut reflex sent him to the floor where he rolled away, bringing the heavy cutlass up in defense.

“Got the bastard!” the Wolverine shouted joyfully as two of his fellows raced down the passage to the fallen jailer. “As I live and breathe, that one shot has made my stay here worth it.” Nodding to the soldier to his right, he said, “Poz, help the gentleman up from the floor. Once I reload we’re off.”

“YA COULD’A WARNED ME!” Tabor yelled as the other soldier helped him up.

“No time, sir,” was the sergeant’s merry reply, his movements fluid as he quickly reloaded. “And the bastard had a dead on bead to your noggin. I don’t suppose there’d be a bag’net I could plug onto the end of the muzzle? Shooting them is good, but gutting them is better.”

“No... there isn’t,” the pirate smiled, liking the fellow’s cheekiness, “I was in a bit of a hurry when I stole it... but I’m betting we can find one.”

Vesa found himself with some fifty ex-prisoners on his paws. A few could hardly walk, and were helped by their mates. Most looked no more than bones, and all were of one species or another, proving the King was ruthless when it came to getting what he wanted. More importantly, each had one dying wish to return to their keeper what had been unfairly dealt to them. They had made it quite clear that dying to do this was but little payment... and then they had quietly and determinedly followed. No less than ten jailers had so far fallen to the ragged mob. Some had been hacked to death. Some had been strangled with the very chains used to bind their wards. Others had simply been beaten and kicked to death. Surprisingly this had also been accomplished with little noise, though noise was now hardly an issue. With panic sounding out in the courtyard, staying quiet hardly mattered.

The young Wolverine now stood peering out of a small viewing port on a stout wooden door leading onto the courtyard. The scene before him was almost nightmarish. Unkempt soldiers ran hither and yon, hastily assembling with their muskets; kicking up dust in the dry earth and trying not to choke from it.

The bugler stood in the middle of the area playing his heart out until a command from a well dressed and wigged officer silenced him.

“WHY HAVE YOU STOPPED FIRING?” this officer yelled up at the guns in the parapets of the front wall. Where the left tower had been struck with the opening round of the battle, one gun had been knocked from its mount and stonework partially blocked the runway. Apparently, as was the case in most attacks on fortified positions, the guns pointed away from the fight were simply unmanned.

“WE’RE OUT OF POWDER, SIR!” the gunnery officer yelled back.

As he yelled this, three individuals in blue uniforms ran quickly along the flanking wall, each carrying two powder kegs. The gun crews cheered them as they ran, and Vesa, thinking of his comrades who would be on the receiving end of the once again loaded weapons, almost burst onto the courtyard in an attempt to storm the fifty some soldiers massing there; until he recognized the blue uniformed Cat leading the way.

“M’ine Got it is Captain Hiss,” he whispered, “She’s making for the guns.”

Punk’n Cat pushed her head next to his and looked upwards for her captain. She smiled, quickly understanding what was happening when her keen lookout’s eyes noticed a lit fuse dangling behind one of the kegs. “Thee cap’i’tan ees blow them up,” she whispered in her whiny Cat accent. “Beeg bang soon Vesa. We wait... charge after.”

Moving back, she allowed him the viewing port again.

He looked at her and for a moment almost forgot himself as something stirred below his belt. Grinning, she reached out and roughly cupped his manhood. “Wee dew later,” she promised, with a wink.

He swallowed, and then nodded. “Pass the word down the line to be ready,” he added softly.

The young Wolverine then pressed his face back to the small viewing port, just in time to hear the officer cried out, “YOU, YOU, AND YOU THERE! BRING ME THE BLOODY GRAYBACK KING. WE’LL HANG THE BASTARD FROM THE FLAGPOLE AND THAT WILL PUT AN END TO THIS NONSENSE! NO KING... NO RESCUE!

Lady Taverness, working in pair with Rosa, fought her way to King Ludwig’s level of the prison; the fifth floor on the very back side of the prison. Rosa, struggling to reload her two pistols was caught unawares by the Sergeant of the Guard and would have been killed if not for the spy’s intervening blade.

The Cat, knocked to the floor, watched wide eyed as one blade was thrust at her and the other efficiently turned it aside. Both pistols had skittered away with a metal on stone noise along with her loading kit. All now lay just out of her reach.

“RELOAD DAMMIT!” the Rabbit yelled after punching the guard in the face. The blow had almost no effect on the old Dog other than to anger him. Gaining distance, he took on a defensive stance and again attacked.

To the sound of steel on steel, Rosa scrambled to recover her weapons and then pushed herself back into the recess of a cell door where she carefully measured powder, tamped, pushed in a tight fitting ball and then primed first one pistol and then the other.

“BITCH!” yelled the old veteran as he again withdrew half a body space to keep from being run through. Their fight had gone back and forth for a full minute with the Dog slowly giving ground but never giving up. Reinforcements were but a breath or two away. He was good and thought to hold her until they arrived; though he could not find a way through her defense. In frustration he made a round house cut aimed at her head.

The Rabbit tilted back just enough and his blade came within a whisker of her nose. It struck sparks as it connected with the stone of the wall. Following the blade up with her own, she pinioned it just enough to where she could step forward with a pivot which swung her blade around in a back hand stroke. The flowing motion brought her blade to the Dog’s neck where it cut deeply into his flesh... but not deeply enough.

Yelping, he fell back, one paw to where blood now ran freely. He was no coward however and as he held his wound with a free paw, he moved back into the attack with the other, deftly beating Taverness’ blade aside. Advancing, he found it again with his blade and forced down and forwards in a taking action that placed his blade’s middle to her weak; attempting to force his entry to her torso.

With a quick and simple raise of her elbow, the rabbit’s blade changed from the Dog’s inside line and being controlled to his outside line; now placing her strong on his middle and her tip right where he ran upon it with his chest. His body stopped functioning even as his brain attempted to make it react. With a frightening quiver he fell to the floor, sliding neatly from her steel.

Rosa, now rearmed, stepped around the spy and ran to the turn in the passageway where she could hear more guards loudly approaching. Jumping around the corner she aimed one pistol and fired it. There were four Dogs, quickly minus one as the closest of them fell dead. The other three had a sudden change of heart and disappeared back around the corner.

The little Cat, dropping the discharged weapon, pulled the second from her waist band with her good left paw and cocked back the hammer. With her damaged right paw, she withdrew one of her daggers, and then sprinted towards the place where the guards waited just out of sight. Finding the one door they sought, she stopped just on the other side and waited. One of the guards peeked around the corner and she threw the dagger. It pranged off of the stone wall, the sparks from its contact spraying his face.

He reflexively ducked back.

Squaring her stance and holding out the pistol in both paws, she now waited for the next face to appear. Keys jangled behind her and though she wanted to scream at Taverness to hurry, she said nothing.

There was a creak of a door opening and a suddenly husky voice said, "Inside, now!"

A face appeared around the corner followed close on by its body. The Cat fired and then ducked back through the open door... right into a prison cell.

Lady Taverness pushed the wooden door closed, and stood holding it, wondering what she should do next. The guards would have pistols. She had nothing but her rapier and Rosa's sole pistol was now discharged.

"Reload," she hissed at the Cat.

"Eye 'ave no more powder," the little captain hissed back.

Behind them, a voice said, "Robert?"

Duroc, born of warm open places and the sea, would have been totally lost within the prison's cold vastness if Gabby hadn't been there to guide him. Though they spoke no words there seemed to be a communication between the pair as if they were seasoned mates.

The prison was now in a total uproar with as many voices yelling as were imprisoned behind the walls. Inside of this noise were the occasional pistol shot and dead bodies sprawled upon the floor.

As they made to round a corner, Gabby held up one paw and peeked first. Three guards were standing with their backs to them. As he watched, a dagger cracked off of stone and clattered onto the floor. The trio immediately made to rush whoever was in the adjoining passage. As the first of them stepped out; his sword and pistol extending towards his foe, there was a 'bang' and he crumpled to the floor. His comrades quickly stepped over him in their haste to attack.

Gabby grabbing the Pig's huge paw, pulled him along behind and a second later they were again peeking around the corner without even noticing their feet were standing in a growing puddle of blood. They saw the guards banging their shoulders against the sole cell door breaching the wall and shouting curses. Backing up, one of them held up his pistol, took aim and fired.

The Raccoon, pushing the Pig back out of the way, whispered, "Stay right there and make ready with your harpoon."

Duroc scowled, but before he could protest his counterpart had moved quickly to the fallen guard and taken up his pistol. Cocking back the hammer, he took careful aim and pulled the trigger to a resulting shower of sparks and nothing else. Not even bothering to curse, he gripped the weapon by its barrel and threw it as hard as he could. Though it did

no damage, it got the guard's attention and one of them swiveled, aiming the pistol in his paw. He pulled the trigger and it too only sparked. With a loud curse, he ran in Gabby's direction brandishing his sword while his partner looked on.

The Raccoon, taking the fallen guard's sword, stuck his tongue out at him and disappeared around the corner. The Dog, arriving to a place he should not have been, found himself instantly impaled on the end of a huge whaling impliment. With a jerking motion, he was pulled from sight.

The guard at the cell door watching in horror, made to react, but the door he was next to was jerked open from the inside and a white furred arm shot out; gripping his shirt. With a yelp, he was pulled inside where he was stabbed to death by a waiting Cat and the door again slammed shut.

By the time Gabby and Duroc arrived down the passage, they heard more guards hurrying from the other direction. The little Raccoon pounded upon the door.

“Lady Taverness, Lady Taverness, open the door... it's me, Gabby!”

From the other side of the door came a voice husky with disgust and sorrow. “That one is dead!” it shouted. “As you will be if you force the door!”

On the enemy's side of the field, a bugler began playing a repeating tune, first to one side of the line and then to the other. In a cloud of dust, soldiers began marching to their preset positions.

“STEADY LADS!” Sergeant Urhea shouted out. “THE BLIGHTER'S FORM'N HIS RANKS, BUT HE'S NOT AS STRONG AS HE WAS!”

The old veteran was walking among the soldiers of his firing line as the back line went through their loading procedures. They'd just fired and the whole body had shifted around. The front line now stood at parade rest, indicating their readiness.

“FRONT LINE SHOULDER!” he commanded.

With a now practiced grace, the line shouldered their muskets.

“READY!”

There was the simultaneous noise of musket locks being cocked back.

“FIRE!”

The front line rippled with the flash and bang of death's drumbeat. At a count, ten of the enemy fell from their positions. On the heels of the volley, and as the front line moved to the rear, the Labradoreans finally responded. Their own line, until now, had only taken the abuse. Black smoke plumed, followed close on by the buzz of inward bound lead balls. Three of the Sergeant's soldiers fell to the accompaniment of the popping gunfire as this part of the volley traveled the distance at a slightly slower speed.

The advancing back line of Wolverines stepped around their fallen comrades and took their place in the firing line.

"NOT TIME YET FOR THE RAPID FIRE LADS!" the sergeant yelled. "SOON ENOUGH THOUGH... SOON ENOUGH!"

Walking in front of his soldiers, he pointed with his sword as if he was an instructor in a classroom and not a dealer in death. "SEE HOW HE HAS THE FORTH, FIFTH, AND SIXTH ECHELONS MOVING BEHIND THE FIRST THREE? THOSE ARE THE ONES TO WATCH M'LADS!"

An errant musket ball whizzed past his head close enough that it grooved his cheek; and yet the old soldier didn't so much as flinch.

"THE FIRST THREE ARE THE FIRING LINES... THEY'LL NEXT DRESS OUT AND ON COMMAND WILL FIRE TWO QUICK VOLLEYS. THEY'LL THEN SPREAD APART SO THE BACK LINES CAN SPRINT FOR'ARD WITH THE BAYONET! MIND YOUR GUTS THEN BECAUSE THEY'LL WANT TO SPIT'EM!"

Turning, he yelled, "SHOULDER!"

Commander Pablo came next to Mr. Flopears and asked, "What do you think? Is it time?"

The Rabbit climbed the large wheels of the howitzer and peered above the firing mound piled in front of them. The Labradoreans were indeed within range and at the rate they were maneuvering they would be ready for their charge in no more than fifteen minutes.

That was time enough for only five rounds fired.

Stepping down from the wheel, he nodded to the Ferret. "Give'er an extra half pound of powder. I'm think'n we'll have to hurry though. I saw the ends moving to flank us; best to decimate the middle and then concentrate on staying alive."

The Wolverine firing line ripped out another ragged volley and a few more of the Black King's men fell.

Pablo nodded, and then gave the command his men had been waiting for... load the first barrel.

“We shall aim the first round directly at the middle,” he told them. “At this angle, we should take down a maximum number. Half pound extra in the powder load and I want everyone to stay well back in case she splits.”

“She won’t split,” Mr. Flopears assured him, “And best we hurry.”

It took six of the gun crew to get the first heavy wooden barrel up to the mouth of the howitzer. By design, it fit snugly and had been greased for an easier load. It was packed solid with musket balls, as Mr. Flopears had instructed it should be, and then tightly capped by the cooper. The fellow, hired on by Babacomb, had grouched that he’d never done such a thing in his life, but that was all for show... if his shot barrels helped kill Labradorean soldiers then he would have made a hundred of them if he’d had the time.

The next volley of fire came from the Black Dog side, and five more of the Wolverine soldiers fell. Three of them didn’t move again, but two, cursing loudly against the pain, regained their feet and again joined the firing line.

Sergeant Urhea was about to order another volley, but Commander Pablo caught his attention and he held off. Behind them the six pounder cracked, and then a second later the howitzer sounded out and half of the Labradorean second echelon disappeared, mowed down by the hail of shot put out by just the one fired round.

The soldiers in King Ludwig’s lines cheered as loudly as they could.

“That’s gonna piss’em off,” Sergeant Urhea said to no one in particular. He then again bellowed his orders, returning the line to disciplined order.

Though he had been commanded to treat his Prince as a mere private, he smiled approvingly when he found the young Wolverine cheering right along with the others. Babacomb, whose eye he’d caught, simply nodded, and the sergeant was reassured that the Prince had at least one body guard.

Duroc snorted loudly when he heard the approaching guards. Turning, he thrust his huge harpoon out in front of himself and bellowed, “NO MORE UGGA BUGGA!”

With that he charged down the passage way. The pain and anguish in his apparent battle cry would have been legendary if written about in a hero’s story.

Two voices behind the thick door simultaneously shouted “OH MY GOD!” It was immediately pulled open and Gabby found himself staring at Taverness, Rosa, and two very old Wolverines.

“Gotta go,” he told them with a bit of a shocked look. He then ran down the hall after the Pig yelling his name; demanding he come back.

“This way!” the formerly imprisoned sergeant yelled over his shoulders. He was obviously used to leading soldiers in a fight and was hardly about to slow down. “My guts tell me we’re very close now!”

“What’s yor name?” Tabor called from a pace behind the grayback. Though he was not comfortable with following in any way shape or form, the pirate had little choice at this point in time.

“ ‘Fraid it would be unpronounceable in Rabbit, Captain,” the Wolverine called back without looking, “Just call me Blue,” he laughed, “And I’ll call you Captain. We’ll rescue the King and then dance upon yur capstan.”

The Rabbit smiled at the fellow’s good sense of humor and ability at the rhyming game even in this hell hole of a prison. It peaked his curiosity, however, that the Wolverine knew he was a captain. With the sound of a distant shot and a long drawn out yelp, he set curiosity aside and concentrated on the task at paw.

Rounding a turn, they came to the Sergeant of the Guards Taverness had bested. They stopped for a breather while the body was quickly searched for weapons. All that was found was the fellow’s sword and that was snapped up by one of the soldiers. Their respite did not last long however, as with a clatter of boot leather on stone, three guards rounded the corner.

The Hag had just placed an egg in his mouth when Vesa pushed open the door from across the courtyard. Though he stood a good three hundred feet away, the Dog recognized him instantly; and also the expression he wore. He’d known the emotion of rage intimately; but had never been in a position to do anything other than cry, get drunk... or both.

The Wolverine was followed close on by a cutlass bearing orange colored Cat and the rest of the crew who had been assigned his lead. These were then followed by a whole stream of raggedy prisoners in a procession reminiscent of puss dribbling down from a lanced boil.

The tavern owner smiled an evil smile. Prisoners, crew, or a pissed off Wolverine, it made no difference... all eyes would be on them and nowhere else.

“YOU WILL LEAVE MY KING ALONE!” Vesa commanded, pointing his finger at the officer. Distant cannon fire punctuated his words.

“Fuk’n time boys,” the Hag cursed quietly, getting everyone’s attention. “It’s done lads, but things’re in our favor. Change of plans; we file out quietly while all eyes are on the Wolverine and get behind the soldiers. When I give’s the nod you kill as many as ya can. That done, we fight our way to the gate.

The wigged dandy of an officer, turning at the shout, regarded the one who had yelled at him with obvious disdain. He was a blue blood Labradorean, but looked more the Poodle with his wig and powdered face. Seeing the Wolverine was not armed, he remarked in humor, “And how in blazes did you get out?” Pointing at three of the soldiers, he snapped, “Shoot him and then go and get the grayback!”

Vesa, head down, charged across the smallish open area.

Before anyone could even react, the officer was tackled and both bodies crashed to the ground. With claw and tooth the Wolverine began to maul the Dog to the tune of his frightened yelping. This caused hilarity among the soldiers as they truly didn’t like the Dog. They mistakenly let it continue unhindered.

On the parapets, the gunners waiting for their powder, turned to see what was happening. Captain Hiss, instantly changing her plans to take advantage, handed the first Dog she came to, her fused keg. She then pushed him over the waist high wall. In his surprise, the soldier held on to the small barrel all the way down to the ground where it remained intact; the fuse merrily sputtering away.

“Oops,” she giggled, and then commenced pushing as many of the others over as surprise allowed for. Her two crewmembers, tossing the lit kegs down onto the assembled soldiers, followed suit. In a moment they’d cleared the entire gun deck with but three remaining gunners retreating to the stairwell.

The first keg blew up as three of the Labradorean soldiers rushed to help their fallen comrade. The second and third followed, exploding almost at the same moment the assembled troopers decided to take aim at Vesa; watching for a clear shot.

As the Hag’s group streamed from the mess area, plans changed again because of the explosions and the killing commenced immediately. Surprise on their side, they began hacking the soldiers down as they milled about or attempted to fire upon the crowd of rescued prisoners now rushing them from the front.

The battle cry echoing over the area became, ‘LUDWIG’!

The second round from ‘Ballyboy’ swept through the first (middle) echelon like a hailstorm through a cornfield. This time there was an audible cry of grief and despair at

the punishment meted out to the Dogs in the firing lines. A bugler began a call, encouraging the flankers to redouble their efforts.

As the huge gun was reloaded with another of the casks, the six pounder cracked out again; slightly muffled now that it was aimed away at the flank on that side. The gun could reach out and find a target well enough, but the damage was not as massive and so would only slow the enemy's advance.

Commander Pablo, his face and uniform now smudged with the black of gunpowder residue, climbed the howitzer's carriage to prime the pan once again. No less than ten bullets immediately sought him out, humming past his body like angry bees. A red stripe appeared on his left arm and his shako was punctured by four of the balls.

"It's getting a might hot up here," he called out, just as a volley of muskets let go from those of his crew not otherwise occupied.

"They're getting close, sir!" called one of his gunners. The information insinuated that perhaps the howitzer should be used next for their defense.

"The farthest echelon first!" he called back. "We must weaken them offensively or our middle won't stand a chance. Fire off one of the buried balls!"

With a hiss, and a trail of smoke, the line of gunpowder running to one of the exploding balls was ignited.

"SHOULDER!" Sergeant Urhea, bellowed, watching his comrades bring their muskets up.

"WE HAVE TO TAKE TWO VOLLEY'S MY GOOD LADS! STAND TOO AND NEVER FALTER! YOUR KING DEPENDS UPON THE STRENGTH OF YOUR FORTITUDE!"

CRUMP... and Pablo's buried ball blew up, sending ten Dogs flying in states of dismemberment.

The sergeant looked at his troops, immensely proud of all of them. A quarter had fallen already; but those who remained stood ramrod straight, Babacomb and Prince Uric right there in the middle of them.

With a whiz, again sounding like swarming bees, the enemy's first volley found them; some with a wet swatting sound of death, some with a puff of dirt as it struck the earth and bounded back up again with a sting that said their skin was yet unbroken.

With better luck there was the nothingness of a miss.

The sergeant, feeling the sensation of something wet and warm, looked down to find blood soaking his uniform just above the belt line. He snarled a curse, but there simply was no time to explore for its source.

“READY!” he cried out.

FAWHOOMP... and the huge howitzer bellowed again. Full half of the far echelon fell to Death’s scythe.

“FIRE!”

As the sergeant called the command, his voice cracked slightly. This had never happened to him before. The volley, raggedly fired off, oddly failed to please him. He looked again at his waist where the redness now freely flowed. There was too much of it not to be his.

“Fuk,” he muttered. Looking to the line, he called out, “Private Uric!” Placing his left paw over the wound he pressed on it. The pain was suddenly incredible.

“Here Sergeant!” the Prince replied, turning to look at him.

“You are here by promoted to Corporal,” the old Wolverine managed, “You will take over the firing line!”

With that he sunk to his knees and fell over as the six pounder cracked out again, punctuating his collision with the earth.

Governor Gulo, musket to his shoulder, sighted at the nearest enemy soldier heading in from the right flank. Closing his eyes against the pan flash, he pulled the trigger. With a fizz-pop-bang the weapon bucked and the soldier disappeared into the deep grass. The Wolverine had no idea if he’d hit his target or not, nor did he worry about it as he began his reloading drill.

“More water!” The gun’s sponger cried out, “The bucket’s dry!”

Without water to mop out the bore after firing, a left over spark might ignite the powder as they reloaded. In this, water was as critical as the powder itself.

One of the other gunners upended the last canteen, pouring what he had into the bucket. “That’s the lot of it!” he cried out.

Without even slowing his load, Gulo yelled at them, “PISS IN THE DAMNED THING THEN AND QUICKLY! CHANGE THE LOAD TO GRAPE. I COUNT FIFTY OF THE BASTARDS YET BEARING IN ON US!”

Finishing his load, he reached down and plucked the bayonet from the sheath of a dead soldier and plugged it onto the end of his weapon. Pulling the musket to his shoulder again he let fly with another round. This time he pegged his target square on. A second later, he received a ball in the same shoulder he'd wounded aboard the Caveat Noir. Though he reeled and dropped the musket, he did not fall. Roaring he unsheathed his sword.

“COME AND FACE ME YOU BASTARDS!” he screamed. “FACE ME AND MEET YOUR DEATH!”

Hiss' exploding kegs sounded no more than a dull echo in the dim passage as the three frightened guards threw down their weapons and fell to their knees begging to be saved.

Tabor and the Wolverine Grenadiers were dumb struck. For a moment they only stared at the trio as they blubbered away; fear totally taking them. The small group continued to stare as a huge form charged around the corner with a clatter of hooves, and speared one of the Dogs in the back. With a blood curdling scream the guard was physically lifted from the floor as if he were nothing more than meat on a stick.

“DEAR MOTHER OF OUR MONARCH!” yelled the sergeant raising his musket to fire.

“NO!” bellowed Tabor, pushing the weapon's barrel into the air. It went off, spitting the ball at the ceiling. With a flash and explosion everyone ducked as, with a resounding 'ping ping ping whirrr', the lead rebounded again and again and again causing a multitude of sparks in the dim light; luckily missing everyone present.

“AVAST DUROC! the Rabbit commanded. “HEAVE TOO YA BLOODY ARSSED CANABAL!”

With a squeal, the huge Swine slammed the Dog on his spear against the wall and then jerked the harpoon several times to clear it from the body.

Tabor rushed him as he did this, wrapping his arms tightly around his body, trying to talk the crazed being back to sanity. “Easy there Duroc... back yor sails... stop now... it's all right... what would old Balls say? What would my Da say to ya, eh?”

“I'D TELL YA TA ACT LIKE A FUK'N RABBIT!” rebounded a familiar raspy voice from the cold stone walls; but only Duroc heard it. His sorrowful eyes searched the darkness.

“And then I'd tell ya how much I love ya,” the voice added in a softer tone. “Let me go Duroc,” it sighed like a dying wind, “It's time I set sail. Th' tide's outbound and th' wind's an offshore breeze. Let me go.”

Suddenly there was a smallish Raccoon wrapped around one of the Pig's legs hugging for all he was worth. He called his friend's name over and over and over... and then, almost magically, there was a small Cat latched onto the Raccoon. She was crying her eyes out and meowing the little fellow's name over and over and over.

In the pirates peripheral vision, he saw a blur of white, and then white Rabbit arms equally wrapped around the Swine's shoulders and yet also overlapped his own... and then she was there, softly calling the Pig's name; her snout gently next to the giant's ear.

The huge Polynesian began to sob, softly at first, and then hard enough that his shoulders were shaking; as did the pirate, as did the spy, as did the Raccoon and Cat.

"YOUR MAJESTIES!" exclaimed Sergeant Blue as he saw the pair of old Wolverine's round the corner. Even in the passage's dim light and dressed in the rags they were, the couple bore themselves with a regal grace.

The soldiers knocked the two guards to the floor and then bowed low. They then quickly moved around the pair forming a defensive ring. One of them, peeking around the passage corner to make sure they were not being pressed by more guards gave a thumbs up for 'all clear'.

"Who is in charge here, please?" King Ludwig asked the group in general.

The Sergeant pointed at Tabor and smiled. "That would be him, sir. At least from where I stand he is. Unless I'm missing the mark, I'd say he was The Dread Pirate Tabor his'self, and glad I am he's here; 'E sprung us from one of the Black's cells. Tomorrow we was to be hung."

"I believe I've heard that name," the King remarked. "Rather notorious and cut throat as I recall."

By now Tabor and the Lady Taverness had let go of Duroc; and were tightly embraced and kissing.

Rosa also held a struggling Gabby and was pressing her lips to his whether he wanted her to or not.

Duroc simply stood statue like, apparently too numb to move.

"I see," the King responded, as cheering broke out somewhere nearby... and yet it seemed so far away. "If you would, Sergeant, I think we should make our way to the ramparts. If this is a rescue, as I surmise it is, then by the cheering I hear it would appear we have won. Perhaps we can place the guards in a cell along the way?"

The sergeant snapped to attention and saluted. "At the double, sir," he near shouted.

Looking back to the lovers, the King cleared his throat. "Robert, dear, perhaps we should hurry?"

"Yes Father," the Lady Taverness replied with a smile; slowly breaking away from the pirate.

Turning, the King next regarded the huge Pig. "I believe I am in your debt, sir," he said softly. "Would you kindly accompany me to the daylight? It has been a long time since my wife and I have seen the sky."

Duroc nodded and together the pair proceeded down the passageway. The Queen following slightly behind so she might speak with her son. As they walked, Ludwig said, "I have never seen one of your kind before, my friend." He paused for a moment, and then asked, "May I call you friend?"

"Aye," Duroc managed, holding his harpoon loosely in his right paw.

"You come from the Southern Islands then?"

"Aye," he said again. With a snuffle, he rubbed his nose on his left arm.

King Ludwig reached over and upwards, placing a paw on the Pig's shoulder. "There has been much death," he said softly, "And from what my ears and nose tell me, there is still death going on. Let us see if we can stop it, eh? What is your name, friend?"

"Oompahalahala Duroc," the Pig replied.

"What an interesting word... oomp...oomp..."

"Oompahalahala," the huge Swine replied softly. "Mean's King. Long time not been home. Got hit in head and end up here."

"Then we are the same," Ludwig told him with an understanding nod. "I too was struck in the head and ended up here. It has indeed also been a long time since I have been home."

35 Pictures

click... like a sandbox playing field possessed of a child's toys, formations of flag flying white on blue uniformed soldiers form three large squares behind three much smaller and ragged squares. Two more squares on each of the sides lose their shape as they spread out in a horse shoe maneuver to encompass as much of the field as possible. Behind these, their placement suggestive of forgotten footprints, are more of the white on blue uniforms. They lay about like the broken toys they are; in clusters reminiscent of open flowers... death reaching out from the epicenter of a killing blast. Other lifeless forms lay strewn about in a more solitary repose; victims of musket fire.

click... there is a cheer... and then the many voices join in one long guttural rolling noise symbolic of the charge.

click... there is the smell of gunpowder, blood, vomit, gore, raw earth... urine... as white on blue uniforms run forward en masse; bayonets fixed on voiceless muskets.

click... two rows of twenty... gray, red trimmed uniforms at the ready... firing on command... "FIRST LINE FIRE... SECOND LINE FIRE... FIRST LINE FIRE... SECOND LINE FIRE... there is no tomorrow, there was no yesterday, there is only the flash bang and smoke of twenty muskets over and over and...

click... "FIRING LINE FALL BACK TO THE BLUFF... FALL BACK NOW... CARONADES AND BALLS!"

click... one and two blasts; flipping heavy guns backwards... death now dealt with lead shot and rolling explosive balls...

click... Ballyboy finally wheeled to face the flank... five explosions from buried balls... an old Ferret struck six times at once; his fall backwards in slow motion from the steel mount's back... earth met with the anguished cry of his gun belching a last hurrah as the firing lanyard is pulled taut from the fall... both die together...

click... Governor Gulo, dress uniform filthy with blood, dirt, and gunpowder residue... his left arm dangles useless. Sword, point low, the old warrior parries a bayonet thrust to his midsection... alone, facing the many, he snarls valiantly... and then the six pounder cracks out again killing those who would kill him...

click... a wheel maneuver to the right flank... bayonets fixed the Wolverines charge to the cry of 'LUDWIG!'... the enemy cannot face them... the blue and white uniforms turn away... the enemy runs...

click... in the sudden stillness the quiet is too silent... two long notes of a distant trumpet... two very long and sweet ascending notes drawing all eyes to the Dog's command position...

click... Two Kings looking out over the ramparts at the smoky field... old eyes understanding... young eyes still numb see only a final firework's display... it would be pretty if not for the sadness felt...

click... a frightened bugler standing near his commanding officer calling 'Order to Retreat' over and over and over... the officer shoots him for acting without his order...

click... Corporal and Crown Prince Uric Graypaw Wolverine, Lord of the Northern Forrest, Grand Duke of the Rustian Ocean calling to his soldiers... ordering them to 'cease fire'... he runs to the side of Sergeant Urhea... the old Wolverine is alive but gravely wounded...

click... two Rabbits holding paws... standing near the two Kings and the Queen; but apart... watching the battle's final throws... silently praying for their friends...

click... Vesa Dufva, never again to be called Tuvva by his friends; stands in the courtyard with a Dog's dirty white wig on his head... the Dog's blood is upon his clothing... the youth bends over and vomits while a large orange Cat rubs his back, speaking softly in his ear...

click... the hag... sitting alone in the mess area, slowly peels an egg... tears stream down his face... finishing the egg, he throws it against the wall and then buries his face in his paws sobbing loudly...

click... the Labradorean flag descends the flagstaff of the prison and is tossed over the wall into the moat... cheering mixes with the moans of the wounded...

click... King Ludwig and Queen Ludvika hold paws as they watch the Royal Wolverine rise upon the prison's flag staff... the flag, the King notices, is still wet from its trip up the sewer... he understands that it will dry soon enough...

click... a heated argument between a pristinely dressed commander and his subordinate officer who is covered in blood and dirt... the one pulls his sword, the other a pistol... the commander dies in battle... the new commander suffers but a slash across his snout...

click... a white flag held up on the end of a fancy sword... three marching forward met halfway by three others... quarter is asked for and granted...

click... a thousand muskets are stacked like cord wood and bodies collected... on both sides the dead are separated from the dying who are separated from the lesser wounded...

click... a black Dog stands in the field naked and crying, having stripped the uniform from his body... a Wolverine walking by numbly gazes at the Dog; and then strips off his own uniform and joins him; the two holding each other close...

click... Captain Henry Babacomb, standing alone on the second bluff... to his right is the silent six pounder and to his left and down the slope what is left of the howitzer pit...

Gazing out upon the battlefield...

Watching the soldiers milling about...

The dark Captain quietly recites a sailor's prayer...

“Mistress Ocean I am not your friend,
You seek to pull me to your briny depths
Where you would keep me forever...”

“Father Sky I am not your friend,
You send winds to break my masts
Or none at all; leaving my sails impotent...”

“Mother Earth, you are not my friend,
You wish to wreck my ship and
Bleach my bones upon your beaches...”

“I would be to myself; my only existence...”

“I would be to myself; my only salvation...”

“But I am also a poor liar; too proud to be called friend...”

“I ask your collective forgiveness that my shipmates might live...”

“Though I have never told them, they are my friends...”

“I am nothing but for them...”

“Nothing at all...”

click... an old flop eared Rabbit sitting propped against the huge wheel of a now silent howitzer... cradled on his lap is the body of his fellow gunner; dress uniform riddled with bullets... the Rabbit gently caresses the Ferret's ear and speaks to no one... oblivious of the blood and carnage he has wrought... his friend is dead; that's all that matters...

click... Prince Uric Wolverine proudly wearing corporal stripes hastily attached to his uniform... accompanies Governor Gulo as they make the long walk to the prison... the old Wolverine refuses a litter and they must stop to rest several times on the way...

click... two Rabbits finding the Warden's quarters empty, quietly close and bar the door... two Rabbits melting into each other's embrace... both crying, both laughing... both loving... two become one twice...

click... Captain Merdue De Hiss Cat, looking out over the ramparts, frowns... there is no joy in the victory for her not knowing what is of her daughter... hearing a commotion she turns to find the one of her thoughts running along the ramparts passing her crew who now rest; dragging her cabin boy by the paw... emotions flood the Cat's being... joy... love... happiness... sadness... anger... remorse... again love... and then surrender... Rosa reaches her and is enveloped in a hug that threatens to take them both over the wall... the little Raccoon keeps them from falling...

click... a moment of uncertainty as those in the prison's courtyard look about themselves and see the extent of their wrath...

click... a King returns to the living... his address is from the heart and his voice calls from the soul... calm is restored...

click... Vesa is pushed forward when the King summons the leader of the courtyard army... he bows low and the Dog's wig falls off of his head... even the King laughs...

click... son greets father and mother... King greets brother to the surprise of his nephew... a family reunion and explanations occur; and then medical attention is sought...

click... soldier's mess converted to a makeshift hospital... blue back and gray back, under Ludwig's orders it makes no difference, all are treated the same...

click... Sergeant Urhea manages to joke with a Dog lying next to him... they have like wounds... both wager a gold coin who will live... in the morning Urhea is a coin richer...

click... bodies carried out for burial... Garlock is placed among the dead and yet no one notices that he is also the Warden... two people sharing one body... the one is dead and the other thought to have run away... the secret is buried with him...

click... there is no moon and the night is very black... but the stars shine brightly...

At Sea

From the sailing log of The Queen: Vesa Dufva navigator on duty, Captain Tabor Rabbit commanding.

It is The Seventh Day away from Masadune en route to Saylavee. Three bells of the morning watch. The day is overcast. The wind is of medium strength and steady from the East Northeast. The weather sails are set with one reef. Captain Tabor has the quarterdeck.

Tabor adjusted his spectacles and then looked down at the journal Vesa had left on the navigator's table. "What's this?" he asked the Wolverine.

"My personal history Captain," he replied, checking his mathematical figures. "When I have a moment, I write a line or two." Looking up at the sails he checked their bellies with a now practiced eye. Turning to the helm, he said, "Come up a quarter point to the wind please Mr. Bobbin."

The Helmsbunny did as commanded and the almost unheard flapping noise within the brig's rigging went away.

"You're getting right good at this," Tabor told him absently. "How are the other ships standing?"

"The Black Packet leads, Gabriel's Sara follows, Tabor's Little Mistress goes third, The Caveat Noir is next, and we bring up the hind," the Wolverine replied evenly.

Looking up to the mast head, he saw Toby's ample buttocks draped over the highest crosstrees. Cupping his paws, he called to the lookout for a report. Toby cried back that the horizon was as clear as shaved ball sack.

"Would you mind if I read some of your journal?" the Captain asked his Navigator. His fingers absently touched the book's cover. Everything now seemed so far in the past, and yet such a short period of time had only passed. He missed Balls terribly, but admitted this to no one but Taverness. To her he'd held back with nothing; finding himself pouring his heart out as he had never done before.

So many of those he loved were now gone... sewn into their hammocks and slipped over the side.

"Not at all my Captain," Vesa replied softly. None of the crew seemed the same lately, and the pirate's somber mood was reflected in all the faces aboard. "I hope someday it will be included in the official history of our nation; so it would please me greatly should you give me comment on my verse."

Tabor actually smiled. “National history minus anything about you and Punk’n Cat I’m guessing.”

“Aye,” the navigator replied with a shy smile, “And perhaps more than that, sir. There is a good deal recorded in those pages that is quite personal.”

“And still you would allow me to read it?”

“I keep no secrets from my Captain,” he replied earnestly.

The ship’s bows snugged down into a wave and he automatically eyed the spray as it came up and over the bow wetting the decks. His brain automatically pulled in information about the sea and how his ship was sailing from this simple happening. What sailors standing watch with him had long ago moved to an area where the spray would not find them; all but the two sitting alone on the bows.

“I wish I could keep the spray away from the bows, sur,” Vesa said honestly, “But I cannot. I estimate Saylavee to be a week off,” he added, “With but a small storm to impede our progress.”

“Eight and a half days,” Tabor countered absently as he opened the journal; thumbing to the point describing the rescue of the King, “We’ll get a short gale day after tomorrow. It’ll be a steady blow and best to strip the masts save a jib for steerage... move before the wind for an easier ride.”

“But the Black King...”

“Will wait,” the Rabbit gently interrupted. “He’s blockaded Saylavee and going nowhere. There’s no hurry to do anything else since he’s waiting for reinforcements. We’ll need to be thinking our approach out carefully. There’s bound to be frigates. We may have to wait for a smuggler’s moon and go in during the night.”

As they spoke, Sergeant Blue carefully climbed to the quarterdeck balancing two mugs of tea. His uniform, once faded and tattered, was now new material; fresh and clean though it was an undress everyday garb of gray. Broad red stripes adorned his arm, though the material of the stripes was borrowed from captured supplies and not quite regulation. On board a ship or in the field, a soldier or sailor is always limited to what is available.

“Brought ya both a mug,” he said with a smile as he approached, “Good strong black tea. Ya don’t know how much I craved a cup when I was in that awful place. I swear it was going to be my last request before they fitted the rope to my neck.”

The pair accepted gratefully, though neither pulled their senses totally back from the sailing ship. Tabor had taught Vesa early on that the sea was a cruel mistress, demanding one’s full attention lest your ship’s hull find a hidden rock in the middle of nowhere.

“How’s the Royal Family?” the sergeant asked.

“Rest’n,” Tabor told him from over the mug. “Lady Taverness ‘n the Prince ‘ur attend’n their parents; that’s proper enough. I shudder at the thought that Governor Gulo is going to be my uncle. He’s a good’un, though he’s a bit hard to take at times.”

“He’s a Wolverine,” the sergeant grinned. “What did ya expect? Good manners and dainty stuff is for the Poodles of the world; not us.”

Tabor nodded, liking the fellow. “How are the rest of our passengers?”

“The same, for the most part,” the soldier responded. “I’ve got most bedded down. Rest with a lot of food is the best medicine. Tomorrow I’ll go through the ranks and find out who has a talent for what and perhaps we can occupy their minds with some good old fashioned work. I’ll begin the soldiers drilling.”

“We’ll need sailors,” the Rabbit said absently, “Especially since we’ll be get’n a blow in a day or so. I’m a bit short pawed at the moment. If nothing else, we’ll need bodies to man the pumps.” Picking up the journal, he nodded to Vesa. “I’ll return this in a bit. If you’re as good a writer as you are a Navigator, it’ll make for some fine reading.”

“It’s not like I’m alone in doing my duty, Captain,” Vesa told him softly. “Sometimes I feel a presence next to me at the chart table, and sometimes at night I see unexplained shadows. Perhaps this is why I learned things so easily.”

The Rabbit winked. “I seen’em too. Won’t do you no harm. Kelly loved The Queen like she was alive. It wouldn’t be like him to leave entirely.”

The Sergeant nodded to the two figures standing on the bow looking out over the ocean. “H’ve they come down from there a’tall?”

Tabor looked up at Mr. Flopears and Duroc. “No. I managed to get them dressed out a bit against the night and sent food that was hardly touched; but they haven’t come down. They’re grieving still. They’ll come down when they’re ready... not before.”

Prince Uric sat next to Governor Gulo, who was sleeping in a hammock strung up in the Captain’s cabin. He was contemplating the pieces of this huge puzzle they were living through. As he worked at it, he watched his parents sitting having a cup of tea. Both were expertly balancing their cups and saucers to the movement of the ship; which they had readily adapted to.

Taverness was now off to the ship’s galley, heating water so they could again bathe the Governor’s wound. The Prince’s brother, spy that she was, had been no help to his

thought process. She'd refused to say anything about what was what and whom was whom, and...

"You're wondering why I never told you," said a weak voice from the hammock.

"Uncle," the Prince began, but the older Wolverine held up a finger, silencing him. There was a huge bandage on the older Wolverine's shoulder and though he'd refused to drink any rum offered to him, he reeked of the spirit as they'd been washing the wound liberally with it several times each day. The ball had actually been removed soon after the reunion at the prison; just as soon as he'd fainted upon greeting his brother.

"I was on a mission," Gulo told him, "The same mission that you'd set out upon; but I wasn't aware that you had until we met at Blueportdoggie. You needed to be in charge. If you'd realized I was your father's brother, would you have trusted me as your advisor? I can only guess you've not heard much good of me since you were raised in the palace. The old King, our father, was still alive when you were born and very much in power."

"What I heard," the Prince began, but again the finger was raised.

In a louder voice, Gulo managed, "Ludwig, I wish to speak with your son privately. Could you give us a moment, please?"

Even under the circumstances, Uric was momentarily shocked that anyone would speak to the King like this.

"Certainly Louis," Ludwig cheerily agreed. "Ludvika and I were just discussing taking the air in any case. I was going to suggest as much. Better that he hear our history from you; and I would not want to intrude. I might be tempted to throw in my two sovereigns," he chortled. "Meaning the coins of course, though it was a good pun wasn't it?"

"You'll never change, will you little brother?"

"I hope to never change, thank you very much. It's who I am and who I shall be till the day I die." Rising, he came around the table and offered his wife an arm while bracing himself against the roll of the ship with the other. "My dear?"

When they were gone, Gulo chuckled, and then said, "Sometimes you think life is not fair; and then you realize that everything is exactly as it was supposed to be. Your parents deserve each other... they are a wonderful couple." He cleared his throat, taking a moment to sip from a cup the prince held up for him. Continuing, he said, "I was first born to your Grandfather Uric; the throne was rightfully mine. Before you ask; yes, once upon a time I was terribly upset about being deposed. I was named Louis in honor of the language of the Labradoreans, our truly great allies, sister nations and so alike. Your father was given the same name but in our mother tongue; a name I wished for myself. Our people never fully trusted me for that christening." He sighed. "Such power there is in a simple little thing like a name."

Uric nodded, understanding that he was supposed to listen.

Gulo coughed, bent over the edge of the hammock and spit into a pan placed on the deck for that purpose. The spittle was still flecked with red. Lying back again, he continued.

“Your father was birthed one year after I was.” He hesitated, indicting a canteen hanging on the bulkhead and Uric again helped him drink. “Thank you,” he managed, “Plain water is sometimes much preferred to tea and rum.”

Lying back he continued with the history. “There was a time, when I was a hot headed young fellow, though I’m sure you would never believe it to be so.” He chuckled and then sighed again. “So many bad things shouted across the space of a dinner table and in front of so many invited guests. I had several good military victories under my belt and was rather full of myself; egged on no doubt by agents for the Labradorean King. Like his son, he was a sly bastard and enjoyed playing the game. Father had no choice but to discipline me. I was banished to Saylavee and Ludwig was formally announced heir to the throne.”

He closed his eyes and for a moment appeared to have drifted off to sleep. The Prince was about to leave when he asked, “Where are we headed?”

“To Saylavee Uncle; your little town has been blockaded by King Gaspar and Father insisted we go there to confront him. It would seem that The Black is satisfied to wait for reinforcements.”

Gulo’s eyes opened. “How fresh is this information?”

“We received it from the captured packet. Captain Tabor convinced its Captain to talk, though what transpired happened in private so I cannot tell what the good Captain threatened him with.”

The elder Wolverine chuckled again. “He is ‘The Dread Pirate Tabor’; I seriously doubt he had to threaten anything as his very presence is enough to make any honest sailor squirm. It is certainly good that we know him as we do... though there was a moment when he let me know what he was truly capable of.” He paused for a moment and blinked as if just realizing something. “That is indeed good news. If the Black is blockading and waiting for reinforcements, then he has outsmarted himself and lost most of his fleet to my guns. Call the others... perhaps I might shed some light upon what has happened.”

The cabin’s door opened. Tabor stepped in but stopped, seeing the pair in close conversation. “If I’m interrupting, I’ll come back later,” he told them.

Gulo struggled to sit a little more upright in the hammock. “Please... come in Captain. We were just about to summon you. Is it possible that we might call in the other Captain’s? It would appear we need to once again make plans.”

It took until four bells of the afternoon watch to get everyone aboard. Hiss, of necessity wearing clothes that were not hers, was not happy at the delay. She was anxious to get back to Blueportdoggie and Ilene's skirts. The Cat Captain had made it clear that once she picked up the rest of her crew in Saylavee, she was homeward bound, Black King or no Black King. She was also hoping Rosa would mend her ways when again confronted with Kate.

The young Cat smiled at her from across the cabin where she sat next to Tabor. Her smile could have meant anything but one thing the old Queen Cat did know, her daughter thought what had happened to her mother upon her arrival to the ship, especially hysterical.

Babacomb sat silently in the stern windows with Prince Uric, while the huge Duroc sat near the King and Queen. Ludwig treated the Pig as an equal, and this had worked much influence on everyone's attitude towards him; she apparently being the only exception.

On seeing the Swine as she came over the side, the Cat captain had actually forgotten herself and given him a hug. She then told him sweetly, "Ewe r steel a Peeg," meaning it as a compliment.

"N'd you R Cat," he responded, a spark seeming to rekindle in his eyes. He smiled, returning the hug, and then added, "Make good soup."

She'd almost drawn her pistol, but he gave her a sudden disarming tusk filled smile and told her, "Tit for tat."

She nodded, smiling back; she had started it after all.

Then he reached out and squeezed one of her small breasts. "Tit," he giggled, and then placed a paw on his groin and said something in his native language that did indeed sound like 'tat'.

Tabor, standing next to the pair, stood slack jawed and dumbfounded. Not being able to help himself, he guffawed loudly. With the look on the Cat's face at his laughter, he quickly stepped between them, grabbing her paw and forcing the quickly drawn pistol into the air where he jammed his fingers into the firing lock to keep it from discharging.

It was the first time since the battle he'd seen the Pig smile, let alone act even a little like his old self. For him, that small bit was quite worth the fuss. "Easy there Hissy," he told her softly, "Don't make me do something drastic like kiss ya."

"Eye kees ewe all right," she snarled; and then kned him in the groin.

The Rabbit immediately doubled over and began gasping for breath. Things on deck turned suddenly tense as his crew watched horrified.

Duroc, apparently snapping back to his time of the rescue, stepped forward and gathered the Cat into his massive arms. Hoisting the pirate captain over his head, he made to throw her overboard; stopped only by a firm yet kindly voice.

“Oompalahalala Duroc! Captain Hiss is an honored guest. Kindly set her down.”

Hearing his native language spoken, Duroc turned to the speaker about to reply in anger. Seeing the old Wolverine who’d addressed him, the wind seemed to leave his sails. “I want go home,” he yelled, his expression strong with emotion.

“And you will,” the King told him. “I will see to it personally once my affairs are settled.”

“PUT ME DOWN!” Hiss commanded.

Without even thinking, the big Polynesian complied, dumping her over the side.

Tabor, who was leaning over the bulkhead throwing up, immediately jumped in after her.

And now they were all again in the small cabin, talking of a blockade... plotting a war she wanted no part of.

Rosa, still smiling at her mother, inched a little closer to Tabor, until Taverness’ white furred arm circled around behind the pirate and pinched her ear.

There was a quiet squeak, a pair of flared nostrils, and then the little Cat inched herself away again.

Tabor, listening to Gulo talk, was oblivious to what had just happened.

Taverness smirked.

Rosa rubbed her ear.

Captain Hiss smiled.

And Babacomb watched... taking it all in while listening to the sea talk to him through the open window.

Loose Cannon

From the journal of Vesa Dufva:

'Deceased among the Ferrets counted at twenty seven with an additional thirteen wounded. I regret not having come to know them better. Commander Pablo Ferret, an asset to the campaign all the way through to his demise, perished honorably. I was told that given the suggestion he cover his own flank, he chose to fire suppression upon the enemy's middle as a protection to our own middle. This undoubtedly saved the day.

Deceased among the Wolverines, twenty three, with an additional fifteen wounded.

I am so very sorry to report Lox and Fenus were numbered among the dead while Sergeant Urhea was gravely wounded and though he recovers, is in and out of consciousness.

Deceased among the enemy 536 with 234 additional wounded.

The prison's warden was never found.'

The ship shuddered as it broached a large swell stern first. When enough of the hull hung over the precipice, she slid down the backside and then slammed into the bottom of the trough. Tabor, his body long used to such punishment, easily rode with her. Unconsciously, he alternately braced himself or gripped the table, which was fastly secured to the deck. So long as the weather permitted and the sea did not force its way in through the shuddered stern windows, they would ride like this. It was the most comfortable tack; straight before the wind and sea, bare poled but for one jib, just as he'd predicted.

Without even thinking, the pirate felt, smelled, and heard all that he needed to know.

The ship was running before the storm. The rest of their small fleet was doing exactly the same thing; though spread out a good deal to prevent any collisions. All of them had their weather signals hoisted, though sometimes the lanterns didn't stay lit for very long.

The Black Packet had been given over to big bottomed Toby (his first such command and he was tickled to death about it) and a mixture of five seasoned sailors comprised from the crews of the other ships. The packet's captain had been taken aboard Gabriel's Sara, and his crew split up between the other ships. All had given their parole, paws on a Labradorean holy book with a spit to the side for good measure as they swore. If it was one thing the pirate was sure of, it was the superstitious ways of sailors. If they so swore, they would not dare try anything different.

At this point, the pirate was the only inhabitant within his cabin who was not sick. He'd played nursemaid for as long as he could stand it and then finally called in two of his more seasoned hands along with the cook and then left the work to them. The hammocks were now strung in a position better to ride the ship's fore and aft motion and their occupants stuffed with very dry biscuits which would help settle their stomachs. His quarters, stuffy and still smelling of vomit, had taken on the look of an encroachment of caterpillars cocooned for the winter. The Royal family, it would seem, did not come from very good sea faring stock.

That done, he'd settled in next to his small sea lantern to pass the time reading Vesa's journal.

' King Ludwig commanded that the huge howitzer be disabled and used as a headstone for our brave fellows. Digging a deep hole, we tipped it in muzzle first, removed the carriage, and then solidly spiked the touch hole. Each individual grave was then marked with the very musket the soldier had died holding; the firing locks removed, the barrels bayoneted and then shoved deeply into the earth. It was the least we could do.'

Something caught Tabor's attention, though he couldn't place a finger on what it was. Rising, he made his way across the small cabin in a zig zag fashion, moving as The Queen moved and ducking around the shadowy hammocks. Placing the journal safely within the closet he made to leave but stopped by Taverness' hammock to kiss her on the cheek. With his duties as Captain and sleeping only sporadically, they'd decided upon separate hammocks for the trip.

She opened one eye and gave him a pathetically miserable look before closing it again. "How do you do it?" she managed.

"Magic," he replied, "Let's go... I need to get you up on deck. Take a turn at the pumps, and it'll get yor head cleared out. As I recall you spent a lot of time working them on the Caveat Noir."

Vesa was still at the navigator's table, when his captain came up to the quarterdeck. The young Wolverine had a heavy cloak wrapped around his short body, its loose end flapping in the wind like an old sail. Though there was light enough to see, conditions were such that seeing much further than just beyond the bow was near impossible. Every hatch that might take water had long since been battened down and anything loose had long since been secured. This included Vesa's equipment and maps; now placed into safe and dry storage. For the present he watched the gray foaming sea around the ship.

"What's different?" Tabor yelled to be heard above the wind.

"I don't know," the Wolverine shouted back. "She was riding well just a short time ago, but now..." he shrugged, "I don't know. She just feels different."

The Rabbit turned to look over his shoulder at the pumping station; sheltered just behind the forecastle. Everyone there, including Taverness, was securely tied off with a length of line. They were working at a steady pace, but not one born of fear.

“How’s the bilge?” he yelled.

“We run the pump but half of the watch,” Vesa responded. “Her bottom is remarkably sound Captain.”

That was a good sign. When a ship suffered heavy weather, water only naturally seeped in as the seams worked. Wood was not ridged and flexed as if living. That’s what gave it strength.

“Anyone go over the side?”

“No, sur. I’ve kept a close watch, and so far everyone is still with us.”

“Do you ever sleep?”

The Wolverine actually smiled a very toothy smile. “I do my best Captain, but...” he shrugged, “I find I rather like staying out in the weather.”

Tabor nodded, but in the howling wind and spitting seas, this was hardly noticed. “Some says a sailor is born... Balls used to tell me a sailor is made. I tend to believe it’s both; but in your case I’m not sure...” He stopped as a tie down line on the larboard carronade snapped with the sound of a pistol shot just as The Queen’s stern buried itself in the trough of a swell again. The resulting halt in the ship’s momentum easily snapped the remaining lines that were strangely loose. Two tons of gun was suddenly rolling aft with the uncaring weight of a charging Bull.

“LOOSE CANNON!” Tabor screamed in warning, but those at the pump had already seen and scattered to the ends of their tethers, frantically trying to untie themselves.

There was a pause and then the ship’s stern rose again on the front face of the next swell. The carronade rolled forward again as if it were a demon seeking its dinner. As Tabor watched horrified, he saw a silky white body found by the cold angry monster and pinned against a bulkhead that was crushed in the same manner as its victim’s bones.

The Queen, following the wind and being not more than a point off of the following sea, heisted her rump into the air as if expecting to be mounted and thoroughly sexed by the sky. Before tipping again she shook herself and then began her backwards ascent.

“RING THE BELL VESA!” Tabor shouted, his mind almost numb with his sudden grief. “RING THE BELL DAM YA! WE HAVE TO SECURE THAT MONSTER OR WE’RE ALL LOST!”

Unraveling a length of line from around a belaying pin, he leapt the distance to the main deck, barely managing to stay on his feet. A few of the pump crew grabbed for the gun in an attempt to hold it, but what strength they had did not compare to the weight of the metal coupled with the motion of the ship. As the ship broached the swell and the deck again tipped drastically towards the stern, the carronade began its decent aft. The red of the barrel's wooden tomkin looked as an unblinking eye and seemed to fix upon the pirate in its maddening and bloody run. Like an evil Djinn released from an uncorked lantern, Tabor's securing line represented repression... a re-corking of that same lantern and the creature's ultimate loss of freedom. The carronade seemed to instinctively know this.

As it rumbled down the canting deck towards him, the pirate nimbly sidestepped like a matador and placed the loop end of his line over the steel beast's muzzle. He then snaked it back to the carriage as he began his mad run in pursuit. This ended when his paw tangled with the line. With a curse he was jerked from his feet and pulled along behind as the monster careened down the deck until it crashed into the base of the quarterdeck.

Vesa was thrown backwards from the ship's bell by the collision and crashed into the ship's wheel. His left arm pushed through the spokes as he struggled to maintain his balance and then broke with a snapping sound as his feet slipped from under him and he tumbled.

The two thousand pounds of shifted weight caused the stern to sink deeper into the trough than it would otherwise and the stern window shutters were forced under water for a brief second while a white spray cascaded up and over the fantail, drenching the frantic navigator as he screamed out in pain.

Tabor, working himself loose, quickly ran the line through a ring fastened to the deck and then looped this back around the gun's knob. The whole of the time he cursed the gun, the sea, and anything else he could think of as he desperately tried not to think further than what he had to do.

The crew, hearing the bell, was just now beginning to stagger out onto the deck. As a group they buried the gun under their bodies, bracing themselves against its weight; but to no avail. As the deck again tilted, there was a brief moment as the line held, and then the ring pulled free. The resulting recoil struck one of the sailors in the chest with the jagged metal, sending him staggering backwards, blood running from a deep wound.

The sea boomed around them as if laughing. This coupled with the rumble of the gun trucks as the carronade, gaining way again, sounded of death. One frightened sailor actually jumped overboard.

Tabor, legs wide against the pitch and roll of the ship, ran after as it careened down the deck, now turning a lazy circle as it slid on the wet deck. It was as if the weapon were looking for him, set to cough a ball at him... waiting to kill.

Its backside crashed into the forecastle with a deep sound of crushed timber and bone as it again mangled the white furred body lying on the deck. The foremast shivered at the close strike. The Queen's backward assent now reached the peak of the swell and her hind quarters shook themselves as the wind shot up under her skirts.

Vesa struggled now to hang on to the base of the wheel while the helmsman did his best to keep the ship on course. Pitching was bad, but if The Queen turned sideways to the ocean, she could turn completely over.

The pirate pulled a gunnery pike from its place of storage on the mainmast. With a battle cry he charged forward and jammed the long bar into the wood under the carriage and pushed up on it, bracing it against his shoulder. With additional thumps the crew followed his lead; while still others gathered more line in their effort to secure the thing that would kill them all.

"WHERE'S FLOPEARS?!" Tabor yelled as loudly as he could. If anyone among them could bring the beast under control, it was the gunner.

The ship's stern now slid high enough on the rolling ocean that she once again acted like a huge teeter totter and her deck shifted directions. Tabor's feet went out from under him, and he slid the length of the deck on his back, slamming into the bulkhead near the quarterdeck. For a moment he was stunned.

The carronade, momentarily arrested by the crew, spit the red wooden tomkin from its muzzle as if it were about to speak. As odd as it seemed to the downed pirate, its mouth reeked of death, and a red fluid trailed downward from the black opening like bloody drool.

"TAKE ME YA BASTARD," he yelled, "I DON'T WANT TO LIVE WITHOUT'ER! TAKE ME NOW SO I CAN BE AT PEACE!"

With a startled shout, the crew lost the fight, and the gun began its sliding roll down the deck, reeling first towards the starboard side where it slammed into its sister. This released that gun's bonds and the pair descended upon their master in four tons of crushing weight compounded by the gravitational pull of a sea that had lost all sanity.

There was nothing the Rabbit could do... nothing...

Tabor gasped and woke with a start. He said nothing, letting his heart slow from its race with his breathing. The cabin was pitch black and he could hear the soft snoring of those he was sharing his space with; but his senses told him there was someone else standing near.

“I have cast the carronades overboard,” whispered the familiar voice of Mr. Flopears. “I he’erd’ em talk’n mutiny’n sedition, sur. They meant ta kill ya.”

“Why?” he asked the darkness softly.

“I don’t know,” was the almost unheard reply. There was a pause and then the gunner said almost too low to hear, “The island where they fought was an evil place... but... I don’t know. My brain is fuddled these days Cap’n. I have been so sad.”

“Would you like ta crawl in with me,” Tabor asked with true feeling. “Ya been through a lot Gun Bunny... much more than a regular Rabbit could stand. I’ve been hope’n ya would come to me.”

“If I might, sur... I would greatly appreciate it.”

Tabor moved over as much as he could as his old friend crawled in beside him.

“We’ll say a prayer for the lost guns in the morning,” the captain whispered in the other Rabbit’s ear as they positioned themselves. “Strange though, I had a terrible dream...” he started to say, but Flopears’ soft interjection stopped him cold.

“Tweren’t a dream, sur. It truly happened thusly; but the sea took back. That’s what a premonition is, sur... a take back. N’ere fear; all’s well now. The sea’ll wash’em clean n’their demons’ll drown afore they rust. Duroc helped me tip’em ore the side. Gor bless ‘is strength. He told me he was a Kahoona... big medicine where he comes from and will pay their passage to Jones’s Locker. He’ll do a purification ceremony when the storm has past. I think The Queen’ll accept that. The other guns ‘ve already agreed. They’re still loyal to ya.”

“Taverness?” Tabor whispered almost holding his breath as the dream came totally back to him.

“Sleeping fretful; but she’s well, sur. I stopped by her hammock and checked,” the gunner told him.

Tabor put his arm around his friend’s chest; snugging him in and smelling his scent... remembering other times long before.

It truly must have been bad if Mr. Flopears had so quickly cast the carronades over the side. With the weather what it was, probably not even the quarterdeck watch had noticed when it happened.

It was probably what he’d felt different in the ship’s ride. Two tons missing... and the stern no longer pounded at the bottom of the swell’s trough.

Two tons missing... and as he closed his eyes, he could still see that one red eye glaring at him. There was no understanding what had just happened; there was only acceptance.

It was good that the gunner had done as he'd done, or there would have been blood. He wasn't sure if he could now live without her.

"Welcome back Mr. Flopears..." he whispered in the other Rabbit's ear. "Welcome back old companion."

Though Tabor didn't sleep, he did not rise for fear of disturbing his friend.

Sail Ho

From the log of Gabriel's Sara, Captain H. Babacomb has the deck:

'Three bells of the noon watch. The seas are light with two foot swells from the aft larboard quarter. The wind follows the sea in direction at a moderate strength. The weather sails have been stowed with but enough fair weather canvas set to keep station behind the Black Packet which leads. The ride is easy, and the crew relaxed.'

'Entry of import; a sail has been reported on the horizon by The Queen. Her masts are twenty feet higher and so gives better advantage. She is last in line, the Packet is first. Tabor's Little Mistress (Here the black Dog captain paused to look up and view the distant sloop sailing ahead of the barque. He smiled a rare smile and then went back to writing his log.), comes second. We are third, then the Caveat Noir. The guns are being loaded with chain and the decks cleared for action, but we have not run out as it is important to yet look innocent. We now wait to see what comes of the strange sail.'

Tabor climbed the mast and perched himself next to his chubby lookout on the main topgallant cross tree. His glass sat across his legs and one arm was around the tarred wood. Adjusting his glasses with a free paw, he asked, "What do ya make her to be, Toby?"

The plump bunny squinted slightly at the sail on the horizon. "Sail's Labradorean cut and large for a t'gallant, sur. I make 'er to be a frigate... big'n too. I don't right feel good about letting 'er get close. She'll 'av 24 pounders to our puny eights, 'n right guns not carronades. We ain't even got carronades no more. If I didn't know Mr. Flopears the way I does, I'da thought him crazy for pitch'n'em over the side."

"But we have surprise on our side," the pirate replied, ignoring the comment about his gunner. "That's worth a whole slew of guns. We follow the plan and he won't stand a chance."

"Signal flag," the lookout told him, nodding toward the distant ship, "And there's a black puff of smoke so he's fired a gun for our attention."

Lifting his glass, Tabor looked across the miles of water and smiled. A few seconds later he heard the distant boom which accompanied the now dissipating cloud of smoke. "It's a 'come to me' signal," he reported, "All friendly like. So far he's not beating to quarters." He paused and sniffed the air, taking the time to allow his senses to feel their environment. "The wind's blowing from behind us and not likely to change," he said aloud as his mind worked. "We've no need to tack while he's hanging on as close to the wind as he can; probably to show us what a good sailor he is. That'll work against him right fine like." Looking aft, he regarded the Labradorean Eagle flying boldly from the

mizzen mast. “Good thing we decided to add those to the flag bag,” he muttered. “I thought they might come in handy. It would probably be a good idea to change tack for a short while just so he can see it better too; all the same we’ll still hold the wind gage.”

“Aye,” Toby rumbled, “But I’d still rather it was a fat merchantman we were coming up on and not a Tiger with a mouthful of teeth and wickedly sharp claws. My skin’s gett’n all goose fleshy Captain.”

“A good sign ya still got’s yor wits about ya, Lookout Bunny.” In a more serious voice, Tabor told him, “Thank you for sticking by me Toby.”

“I’d have it no other way, sur,” his look out replied with a smile.

From the journal of Vesa Dufva: It has been three days since the gale blew itself out. My estimate sees us taken two days off course, so again, Captain Tabor was correct in his prediction. Being too busy with my shipboard duties to write in these pages, I will now try to provide a summary of recent events.

Governor Gulo called all of the captains in for a meeting before the gale came upon us. I was invited, though I felt uneasy leaving the quarterdeck. I am glad I did not decline. The old Wolverine laughed heartily through his pain as he told us the reason for the Black King’s plight, and rightly so; the Dog had been caught in the Governor’s well laid trap.

Shortly after King Ludwig and Queen Ludvika were taken prisoner, King Gaspar sent an emissary to Saylavee. Friendship was offered and accepted. In these things, Governor Gulo explained, we all play the game of chess. He already knew of the Royal abduction, but kept that fact hidden. As a token of this new friendship, King Gaspar’s emissary offered, on Gaspar’s behalf, to build the port city a brand new lighthouse. Being that his city was not very rich the Governor accepted, allowing the stone tower to be erected upon the rock of the fortress at the mouth of the harbor. He then secured the plans as secret, but left them in a place lightly guarded, where his foster niece (he’d never known of her true sex), the Lady Taverness, could easily steel them. (He apologized for using her in this fashion, and I believe it to be true felt.)

After she’d disappeared with the plans, he shortened the height of the light by fifty feet.

He waited for understanding, but none came – except for Mr. Flopears, whose sudden intake of breath showed he understood immediately. The Black King was to use the exact height of the lighthouse to lay his guns for bombardment. He would sneak his fleet in at night with an exact angle already placed and destroy the fortress with his first volley. With the shortened height of the light, however, his ships came in far too close and their broadside blew harmlessly over the fortress.

The tables then turned and the Wolverine gunners were firing almost point blank. Gaspar's ships were nothing more than fish in a barrel.

And thus, King Gaspar now sits off of the port city with his one triple decker flagship, waiting for reinforcement before attempting again to take the city.

"You played me!" Lady Taverness yelled at Gulo.

Tabor grabbed her around the waist as she leapt forward to strike the Wolverine lying in the hammock and was hard pressed to hold her. Gulo had a good belly laugh and then winced from the pain it caused his shoulder.

"It's a good thing your boyfriend there stole the plans from you and sold 'em like he did," he managed. "Your anger with him sold my moldy flour and I'm glad to say Gaspar apparently choked on the biscuits he baked with it."

"Bravo, brother," Ludwig told him, standing so he could give a small bow, "Bravo. And so; what do we do now?"

The ships formed a 'line ahead' formation, with the black packet as the first vessel to greet the Labradorean frigate. The packet's captain, a Dog named Jacob, had been an easy one in convincing to treason against his King. He'd been a smuggler for a good many years and accepted his bag of gold with a wink and a nod. He also understood that his crew would not be aboard with him and there would be a loaded pistol at his back.

"Wouldn't 'av it any other way," he quipped merrily when Tabor explained things to him. " And I ken tell m' pups I fought on the side of The Dread Pirate Tabor... that alone is worth a second bag of gold, though I wouldn't turn that down neither."

"Play your part," the pirate told him, "And it'll be waiting for you on the other side. Yor clear then, just exactly what you need to do?"

The Dog winked at him and replied, "Jest you watch me Captain Tabor... jest you watch and see me perform. I've had a right good bit'o practice convincing revenue cutters I was a simple trader. You ever need any documents to look all official like, I can do that too."

Now, with the frigate no more than a hundred yards off and slowly bearing down upon the smaller vessel, her captain aimed his speaking trumpet and called out, "Ahoy there... what vessel?"

The Dog, good to his word and knowing the frigate's captain knew exactly what vessel he was approaching, raised his own trumpet and called back, "Black Packet Jacob's Bitch! What ship am I addressing?"

“King Gaspar’s Royal Horse!” was the less than friendly reply.

“Is that Captain Rook then?” Jacob cried out in a joyful voice. He’d had dealings with Rook before and bore him no good will.

“It is!” the colorfully dressed Labradorean called back. He wore a dress uniform for the occasion, complete with several gaudy medals, a neck ribbon, and his dress sword. “What are the vessels with you Jacob? I didn’t expect to see you in these waters for another month!”

“Glad tidings for King Gaspar they be, sur; supplies! I found’em drifting about after that gale. Perhaps it t’weren’t that bad up yor way, but it was a right bastard down ours. I’m lead’n’em to Saylavee. The last one in line is a rummer! Mayhaps you might like to re-supply your ship?”

The reply Jacob received was exactly the one he’d hoped for; Royal Horse immediately shortened sail.

“Bear off a point,” he told the helm softly. “Best we be a distance off and not in a direction that water skippers might find us.” (author’s note: cannon shot has been known for skipping across the water after missing its mark)

Accepting a cup of tea from one of the crew, the Dog settled in to watch the fun.

When Tabor’s Little Mistress made her way towards the big frigate, Rosa squealed in delight as if she’d never seen a ship so pretty. Waving her arms and causing a fuss, she ran forward and climbed the mast. By now, most of the crew on the frigate were watching her. To ensure they were, she stripped her shirt off and shook her small breasts at them. There was an immediate cheer that the ship’s captain found amusing, but gave orders to quash it as unseemly. His mind was not on some whore Cat, but on the last ship in line and the barrels of rum he would take on.

The Dog was not so amused when, as the vessels came end to end, the sloop’s helm was put over and she crossed his stern. With a bang her swiveled four pounder spoke and the Royal Horse was suddenly without a rudder.

As he screamed curses at the Cat now taunting him from atop of the little vessel’s mast, understanding suddenly swept over him like a blanket made putrid by sea sickness. Turning, he found Gabriel’s Sara close approaching. Her small teeth now protruded from the gun ports and the Labradorean Eagle was swiftly descending; being passed by the Royal Wolverine now on its way up the yards.

“BEAT TO QUARTERS!” the Dog shrieked.

On the heels of his cry, Sara's first cannon sounded out and chain shot whirred across the distance tearing a huge chunk out of his foremast some six feet off the deck. Four well placed shots later it became the first to go over the side, taking the jibs with it. The lines attached snapped with a sound of pistol shots. A multitude of Captain Rook's sailors now precariously clung to the main having climbed there for a better view of Rosa's naked breasts. With a single boom of Sara's last three cannon, the main, though still intact, teetered precariously even as the sailors cut the sails free. The ship's deck fast became mired in the wreckage. As the rigging fell it became almost impossible to run any but the guns protected in the forecastle out; and these still had not yet received any powder.

The Caveat Noir came next with her slightly larger six pounders.

Captain Hiss looked over at the other ship, relishing the damage Babacomb had already inflicted on her. As a pirate, she had no use for military ships of anyone's navy, and would dearly have loved placing some balls into her guts, but she would stay with the plan; rudder and masts unless he got a gun out and then it was shoot to kill.

"STEADEEEE!" she called to both the gunners and the helm. When they were directly alongside, she yelled, "FIRE!"

With a roar, all of her guns recoiled and the frigate's decks were swept with more of the whirling chain. The main and mizzen jerked simultaneously and then crashed down, going by the side. Royal Horse quickly came broadside to the swell, dragged there by the wrecked rigging.

There was a cheer among Hiss' crew which came primarily from the Wolverines who'd remained hidden until Babacomb opened fire. Their unison in reloading and running out again was borderline chaos, but there'd been no gun practice for a long time and the crews were still getting used to each other. It pleased the Cat to see her guns being serviced none the less. It had been too long since they'd been used. Her body surged with blood lust. Though she dearly wanted to turn for another run she held to the plan and sailed past the frigate without ordering her ship about to fire again. The choke hold on the Labradorean would now be made by The Queen.

Tabor, seeing the destruction wrought on the enemy vessel, immediately shortened sail and ordered the helm over so they would cross the other ship's bows. The frigate, now totally immobilized, was still far from helpless should her crew be keen enough for a fight.

When the brig was approaching broadside to the Royal Horse's bow, the Rabbit had his crew fire off one gun, placing their shot close alongside to get the other ship's attention. Lifting his speaking trumpet, the Rabbit carefully aimed it at the other ship. In clear Labradorean, he barked, "STRIKE YOUR COLORS AND LIVE!"

There ensued an animated discussion on the frigate's quarterdeck. After about ten seconds, a single gun was fired for the sake of honor (away from The Queen) and then

their ensign, still flying from the flagstaff, was cut loose and allowed to float off like an errant kite.

“CAPTAIN AND OFFICERS COME TO ME!” Tabor called over, satisfied with what he saw, though he thoughtfully added, “CROSS ME AND DIE!”

How To Win Hearts and Gain Allegiances

Gaspar the Black, ruler of Labrador and a good portion of the world, stood on the quarterdeck of *The King*, his massive triple decked flagship. No one dared approach him as he stared into the night; dimly lit by the lighthouse of Port Saylavee. The meager illumination represented defiance to him. For that, as soon as he was able, the beacon and all who manned it had to die.

As yet, however, no reinforcements had found him; and so he sat at anchor stagnating like a body caught in the tide and riding the seaweed. His supply flotilla was now two weeks over due. It was as if he'd dropped off of the face of the earth in his pursuit of conquest. This placed him in a very foul mood. To date, since the beginning of the blockade, he'd had no less than fifty of his sailors flogged for 'infractions to good discipline' and three hanged for cowardice in the face of the enemy. These three had been captains from some of the vessels sunk by the fortress guns. They apparently had the wherewithal not to go down with their ships but had not counted upon their King's wrath at having been caught out so badly.

When he got back to Labrador, Gaspar decided while watching the light describe its lazy circle, heads would roll; beginning with the Queen's. He had long suspected her of numerous infidelities which he could perhaps forgive after she spent some time in the tower. Treason against him, however, required real punishment. Though she was currently held prisoner in her own palace, the King was sure that his 'chosen for him' mate was somehow behind this first crushing defeat. She'd always been just a little too cozy with the Wolverines and her favorite 'Lady In Waiting' had been a Rabbit.

"Captain!" he called out without turning.

"Aye, sir?" replied the *The King's* Captain from a safe distance aft.

"Have you gotten the soundings from the mouth of the harbor yet?"

"Not yet, My Liege."

"Why not?"

"We've lost five boats so far to enemy fire, trying. I have a sixth boat trusting to the night to obtain the soundings."

By their charts, the depths even at low tide were sufficient for the monster ship to make her way into the harbor where she could easily level the entire town. Gaspar's suggested forced entry tactic was foolish at best, totally suicidal at worse; but it had been suggested and no oppositional discussion was dared. The Captain quickly explained, however, that with the recent sinking of so many ships in that exact location, they could possibly strike one and be held fast where the guns of the fortress would make quick work of them.

The King's orders had been quite clear. In no uncertain terms he'd barked; 'Find a clear route and do it quickly!'

Turning to face the other Dog, Gaspar now snarled, "Perhaps you'd like to test the rope kept in the forecastle with your neck?"

"The men have been pushed to their limits, sir," the captain protested. "We are trying as hard as is possible to..."

Gaspar slammed his paw down on the railing and snarled, "I WANT THAT TOWN!"

"Of course, My Liege," the Captain replied with a salute.

"I ALSO WANT THAT FORTRESS DESTROYED AND THE GUNNERS SHOT FROM THEIR OWN DAMNED CANNON!"

After a pause he turned back to the night and the sole light, still lit, still rotating slowly, still taunting him.

A spark shot into the air, followed after by a soft thump of a mortar as light again beat sound over the distance of open water. The flare burst into illumination and the harbor ways were lit in a yellowish flickering brightness. The boat sent to attempt the soundings, easily seen with the naked eye, was caught cleanly out in the open. With a much louder percussion, one of the guns from the fortress sounded out; the ball slamming dead onto its target.

"You'll need another group of volunteers Captain," the King said coldly. "Perhaps you should go personally this time to ensure its survival."

"Put your backs into it!" Babacomb yelled at the crew of Royal Horse. "Get the foot of the stump positioned and secured with a wedge so she'll tip up. When I give the word, we hoist up from the top end." He pointed at the crew standing by on both sides of the quarterdeck, lines in their paws, "You there; when we get'er off the deck she'll want to move with the swell; you're to keep it as steady as possible. Do not let it swing outboard or we're all bloody well bugged!" Turning to the crew on the forecastle, he yelled, "And you lot had better heave when I yell heave. We've got one shot at this and it has to go fast; do it wrong and we've got a hole in her bottom. That happens and we're all doing the Dog paddle."

There was laughter... a good sign.

On boarding the frigate, Tabor had the officers immediately separated from the crew and sequestered in their cabins. Captain Rook was escorted to his cabin where he remained alone and under close guard. The crew, surly and looking as if they would still fight if pushed, were broken into the smaller groupings of their watches and told to sit upon the deck among the wreckage. The cook was then summoned and instructed openly to prepare the best meal he could summon in as short a time as he could. The Dog knuckled his brow and asked in a growl if that would include an extra ration of rum for his lads.

“No rum,” the Rabbit told him. “Every tar aboard this ship needs to be cold stone sober. Get the food and get it quick. A full belly and sober mind lend to even justice... and it is justice we seek this day; nothing more. We shall drink only tea in honor of that.”

On Babacomb’s count, the sailors, bracing their feet in a delicate balancing act with the sea, hoisted up what would be their foremast. The foretop mast would be trickier, and the experienced Sea Dog already knew he would take it no higher. Once the foretop was set he would use it as a construction gurney using a fore and aft spar to raise the main mast. The mizzen would be raised in kind from the main. Using the remnants of the old rigging they would then mount the yards. It wouldn’t be a perfect rig, and it would use most of the spare lumber and cordage from the other ships, but it would suffice. Already extra craftsmen had been brought aboard to assist.

With a unified shout and an inhuman heave, the mast began its ascent skyward. As soon as the end of the huge piece of lumber was three feet off the deck, a crook in the form of an ‘X’ was wedged underneath to hold their gain. With another shout, and another heave, it was up another foot and the wedge was moved forward.

“Check the foot!” Babacomb called out.

“She’s on course, sur,” the Carpenter called back. “And we got’s the girdle on her good and tight so we’re ready to ease her on down.”

Tabor stood on The Royal Horse’s quarterdeck looking down at the crew, all of whom were sitting about the deck as ordered. The deck was now reasonably clear and what pieces of the rigging that could be salvaged floated along side, fetched back by the other ship’s boats and secured in place with line. The black Dog sailors were now fed well and quietly awaiting their fate at the paws of the pirate. Duroc stood on one side of the Rabbit holding his huge spear while Vesa stood on his other side, wearing a brace of pistols and holding the ship’s log in front of his chest as if it were the Holy Scripture on Seventh Day. Further of the pirate’s crew members remained close to loaded swivels against the possibility of an uprising.

“My fellow seafarers,” the Rabbit called out to them. “My name is Captain Tabor, formerly a pirate, but presently under Letter of Marque presented to me by King Ludwig D’Gulo, whereby...” Unrolling the parchment he held in his paws, he adjusted his glasses and read the letter loudly. His finishing words were; “To attack, sink or capture any warship belonging to King Gaspar the Labradorian Dog; assisting and holding any crew left alive as prisoners of war.”

When he finished, he looked up at them, hearing their nervous whispers. Finally, one burly Dog, undoubtedly a Boatswain mate, stood, squared his shoulders, and addressed the pirate in passable Rabbit.

Pointing his finger angrily, he declared, “You are the Devil. You are the Dread Pirate Tabor. I say you will kill us all.”

“I am a sailor,” the Rabbit replied loudly in equally understandable Labradorian. “I am not the Devil, though I have been accused of that before. Think about this one overpowering fact; if I killed you, who would I have to sail my prize?”

There was some quiet laughter. The boatswain looked to its source and it stopped. Turning back to Tabor he asked, “What you tell us... how do we know you speak the truth?”

Tabor smiled at the Dog. “I was hoping you would ask that.”

This was when Henry Babacomb stepped forward and removed his tricorne. Placing both paws on the rail, he looked at them, exerting a physical will over the entire crew. When questioned later, each sailor on that deck would say Black Dog Babacomb looked directly at him; seeing to the very depths of their soul.

“I believe you do know this devil?” Tabor asked in the deathly silence.

With a muttered curse, the big Boatswain mate sat back among his mates and refused to say another word.

The upper foremast was more difficult. Normally a ship losing her masts would run in under a jury rig formed only on what remained of the lower trunks. A proper repair would then be done in port; but to do what they needed to do The Royal Horse had to look reasonably fit.

Babacomb now had the smaller upper mast erect and loosely lashed to the front of the foremast. Lines were passed under the bottom and attached to tackle that had been attached at the top of the foremast. Inch by inch the crew moved the huge piece of lumber skyward until it was where the carpenter could properly attach it. When he was done, the crew raised a cheer which was rejoined by the crews of the other ships standing close by.

While half of the Dogs went to eat, the other half continued, running the stays to keep the mast steady and the jib lines to the bowsprit. Shortly after, the Royal Wolverine was unfurled and the first jib was raised. Using a long oar with some attached planking as a makeshift rudder, the ships head slowly came around until she was running before the wind, reducing the depth of her rolling ways.

Vesa took the ship's log and stood at the Navigator's table while around him wreckage was further cleared and work was begun. The crew was called up by their watches, remaining under close guard by a sultry group of Wolverine soldiers brought to the ship for this specific task. As each Dog singly came forward, the young Wolverine formally entered his personal information into the pages.

The conditions that Captain Tabor offered had been generous. Except for a few, most of the sailors agreed to them readily.

“Keeping to the wishes of King Ludwig, and to the ways of a fair and just war, you are all his prisoners,” the Rabbit told them. “This was a war that he did not start. His kingdom was stripped from him while he and his wife were unlawfully held prisoner.”

“The grayback attacked our King!” yelled one of the sailors. To this comment, the contingent of Wolverine soldiers brought over to ensure order, bristled ever so slightly. The ship's deck was still a possible powder keg.

“That is not true,” Tabor replied levelly. “He was taken by stealth during what should have been a friendly game of chess. All of his guards were stabbed in the back and his wife was beaten in front of him. They were then thrown into prison.”

The pirate paused to look at them, and then said, “He has since been freed and rides aboard my ship. I assure you every tar on board this ship will have the chance to meet this sovereign where you may ask him yourselves what exactly happened.”

There was a hush on the deck and Tabor let it work its magic.

“What's the offer?” asked an older and wiser sailor, giving the one who spoke previously an evil look.

“Freedom!” Tabor told them. “Unlike your former masters, King Ludwig offers you a way to go home. At the end of the war, you will be released and given land where ever you wish to live. Further, you will be given gold as compensation for your new allegiance. He is a fair monarch. He does not press his citizenry to serve aboard his naval vessels, and his word is trustworthy.”

“What do you get?” asked another.

The Rabbit smiled at that question. “I get married,” he replied, “But that ain’t none ‘o’ your concern.”

This brought a round of laughter from everyone present and the tension was broken.

“Name please,” Vesa asked of the sailor standing before him.

“You’re a Wolverine?” the sailor asked.

“Aye, you know that I am. May I have your name please?”

“Scully Dog,” the fellow replied. “I ain’t ever even seen a Wolverine up close a’fore.” He smiled and sniffed the air. “Yor not as ugly as I thought ya would be and ya don’t stink like they said ya would.”

“Place of birth?” Vesa asked, ignoring the apparent simple minded honesty of the sailor. There had been no meanness contained in his words.

“Banks of the Serne... born on my family’s barge. My Da beached us there so I could claim the place as my home. After that I don’t recon I ever set paw on dirt.”

“Joined the navy or pressed?”

“We was boarded. My Da was beat down and I was snatched.” He turned and spat upon the deck. “May God judge the Black King and ‘is navy,” he mumbled.

Vesa looked up at the sailor. He had a slow eye and scars on his face indicating he’d seen battle. “You do not curse the one whose fault it is you are here?” he asked softly.

“Naaaaa... why would I. It be’s God’s job to do that. All I ask is that He judge proper like,” replied the sailor. He pointed to the scars on his face. “I got these at the hands of an officer when I first came to the navy as just a pup. He struck me about the head and shoulders wif ‘is cane and then laughed about it. Him I would... well... I’d like to return that favor all right.”

“I see,” Vesa replied. As his captain had instructed, he kept what he was doing as formal as possible. Turning the log book around, he told the Dog, “You are here by signing on freely and of your own will with the Royal Wolverine Navy. Make your mark where I have my finger, please and you shall have a vote in your Captain’s trial.”

“Trial?”

“Aye, there is to be a trial. By his own paw he has recorded in this log that he has abused his crew badly.”

Smiling a strange smile, the fellow bent and licked the end of the quill and then dunked it in the ink bottle making a mess on the navigator’s desk. He then proceeded to make a squiggle looking mark on the page in a surprisingly delicate manner.

“That be’s me,” he said admiring his mark, “Scully Dog. May I go’s back to work now, sur?”

“You are to see Captain Babacomb first. He is on deck seeing to the ship’s repairs. He has asked to speak with every Dog who signs on as he is now your new Captain.”

When the sailor left him, Vesa looked around the ship. Everywhere were sailors working towards the repair of their ship. They had been given a new purpose and were responding well to it.

A familiar paw was placed upon his shoulder.

“I don’t like what we are to do, Captain Tabor,” he said without turning. In this small gesture he was displaying his displeasure towards something he felt contained no honor. “Captain Rook surrendered fairly and should receive our protection as a prisoner of war.”

“Did you read back through the log, lad?”

“Aye, as you requested, I have so done.”

“How many floggings in the past month?”

“Twenty eight.”

“How many of ‘em died?”

“Ten.”

“How many hangings?”

“Three.”

“I value your friendship Vesa,” the Rabbit told him softly. “It will be a fair trial, and he will have representation, unlike those who served under him. His former crew will decide his fate. Once it’s done we shall record it in the ships log right and proper. With the names of those who signed on there as well, none of the blighters will dare cross back to Gaspar. They’ll also fight that much harder to bring him down knowing reward and pardon wait for them on the other side of the battle; and know too that a hanging waits for

them if they lose. Life is like that. In the end your sins find you out and there is always a telling.”

The Navigator did turn then and looked at his Captain. Without a word, they understood each other perfectly.

As the Dread Pirate Tabor said it would be; so it was.

Vesa wrote the details into the log and then added a small epithet.

*When all had signed in that binding log
Captain Rook was brought up upon deck.*

*He was tried by the sailors he once ruled
Three hundred of whom voted to stretch his neck.*

*With no mast to support a line for such a ride
He was tied to a gun and pushed o’re the side.*

The Flotilla

“Damn but she is finely armed, Tabor!” the Black Dog Captain exclaimed over his glass of port. He and the pirate were now alone in the Captain’s cabin after a stem to stern inspection by the two. Where Tabor looked relatively refreshed, however, the Dog appeared tired to the point of exhaustion. “Rook must have sucked up really hard to get a ship like this and I’m sure as hell he didn’t appreciate her. I don’t think Gaspar appreciates the design either. He has but five frigates in his fleet and three of those, including this one, were prizes taken from the Foxes. Their’s is a new country and with that comes new thoughts. I dare say I truly have a new found respect for the Vulpine as The Royal Horse could easily dance around any of Gaspar’s lumbering ships of the line and has nearly the same firepower under the right conditions.”

“What’re the guns?” Tabor asked, though he already knew.

“Eighteen long twenty fours on a side with four twelve’s on the quarterdeck,” Babacomb replied. Pausing to sip his wine he then added, “Make that three twelve’s since Rook’s demise and that only because I stepped in. I can afford the loss of a twelve, but not a twenty four. There are also two more long twenty fours as bow chasers, another two at the stern, and we’ve two whopping huge thirty two pound carronades on the forecastle. You pound any capital ship up the arse with those and you’re playing skittles with’er guts.”

The Rabbit adjusted his glasses and then looked at the Dog. “That’s a lot of weight Henry, but ya lost a third of your yardage; or have you forgotten already?”

Babacomb smiled at him. “Not forgotten at all old friend. We’re underway and still repairing what we have. The crew is very good; well seasoned and certainly glad to be out from under the tyrant’s paws. I do wish I could go higher with the masts, but even as good as the crew is; it’s simply too dangerous.”

“Thanks to your good shooting we were at least able to salvage much of what went by the boards.”

“Thanks to ‘our’ good shooting,” the Dog returned, “And your plan. Remember that the Gabriel’s Sara only took out the foremast; Hiss took out the main and mizzen.”

“Aye,” Tabor agreed with a nod, “And let us not forget the Kitten who showed her teats and then blasted away the pompous bastard’s rudder.” They both laughed.

“You do realize she is in love with you?” Babacomb added soberly with a raised eyebrow.

“Aye... but it’s a passing fancy. She’s young and’ll get over it.” He looked up at the Dog, now being equally serious. “It was a plan executed by everyone present, Henry, but I

somehow don't think Gaspar is going to be quite so easy. Rook was a fool. Ego brought him down; plain and simple." He placed his now empty wine glass on the table, making sure it was secure in its holder. "Gaspar, however, will have the best of the best for his personal use and we cannot rule out his paranoia of all things. We won't be able to approach him in the same manner we The Horse." The pirate calmly looked at the other captain and then added, "I'm thinking it would be best if we quietly land Ludwig in Port Saylavee and let him hunker down for a while."

Babacomb gave this some thought and then asked, "What of his officers and the few loyal crew members? We can't risk them exposing us." The insinuation was there for what must be done, but the words were not spoken.

"Treated fairly," Tabor told him, "And that will not change. I gave my word to Ludwig it would be so, and my word is gold, or so I have been told. I split them up among the ships. They're in chains but comfortable. When we get close, they shall be gagged and a guard placed with direct orders to silence any noise. As much as I oppose the idea, we are a navy at war now; not some heathen pirates raiding ships for their beaten copper coins."

Babacomb almost spit his wine out, managed to swallow, and then laughed until he had tears in his eyes. "I'm sorry," he finally managed, "I think the fatigue has caught up to me. My mind grasped the fact that only a short time ago we were trying to kill each other; you the pirate, and me the despicable arm of King Gaspar's Law."

Tabor smiled his mirth. "Aye, you were navy as I recall."

"Revenue Service," the Dog quickly countered, "There is a strong difference. The navy floats here and there and does nothing but flex their muscles. The Revenue Service chases down the scum of the earth and brings them to heel while banging away with their little pop guns."

"Now you're bragging," the Rabbit told him, "Though I did notice your reputation appears to be deeply feared among those of the navy. I saw the looks when I introduced you. 'Gaspar's feared Captain Babacomb gone to the enemy's side', which set the eye of the cannon squarely upon each of them. I would say that puts the Revenue Service one up that they should fear you above their own captain."

Babacomb became very quiet and then finally whispered, "I wish to God I had no reputation at all, Tabor. What I did to earn it..."

"Is in the past Henry." The pirate replied, cutting him off. Their eyes met and held each other.

"The past is real and will not go away," the other Captain finally told him. "I have much to atone for."

"And revenge yet to reap?" the Rabbit questioned, raising an eyebrow. "Balls is dead..."

“May he rest in peace,” Babacomb interjected as he leaned back in his chair, “And not killed by my paw.”

“Aye,” Tabor agreed, “Not by your paw; and for that I am thankful as it keeps me from having to kill you in return.”

There was a moment’s silence between them. Honor was honor and family was family. The Dog understood and did not bother to reply. He would have expected nothing less.

“And you can’t sink The Queen,” the Rabbit added in a soft but firm voice.

Babacomb leaned forward in his chair and placed his glass in its holder on the table; leaving a paw on the table against the motion of his new ship. “Done,” he intoned in the same softness of voice. “I will give you that. She was solely a means to an end against a more important piece to my needs for revenge. My intentions were only to obtain that end through her destruction.”

“I like a well laid plan,” Tabor told him, “Usually, though,” he continued reflectively, “I rarely have much use for them beyond what I’ll do according to the wind’s favor. Tell me all of it now Henry.”

“Tell you all of what?” the other captain asked a sudden edge to his voice.

The Rabbit looked at the Dog and squinted one eye. “You wanted The Queen, and you wanted the pirate who sailed her cuz he killed your father. My father, Balls, may he rest in peace, was that same buccaneer. What’s the rest of the story, and give it to me straight.

Babacomb looked at him, breathing shallowly as if contemplating jumping across the table at the Rabbit. “My father,” he finally said in a very soft voice, “Was the King’s third cousin. He was a true sailing master and had a entire fleet of cargo ships. He was fine sailing by himself, but the King decided his son, who was a mere Midshipman, needed command experience. ‘The King’, (and he fairly spat the word out as if it was disgusting in his mouth) gave his son a promotion to full Commander, gave the lad a war ship and orders that he was to be our escort. Unfortunately for us, as soon as he saw your ship on the horizon, he turned tail and ran leaving us to our own. My father cursed him for being a coward and then we prepared for the fight. The rest you know.”

“And the final piece to the puzzle finally falls into place,” Tabor said in understanding, “You’ve always meant to kill Gaspar.”

Babacomb nodded, relaxing slightly. “There was no inquiry, no mention of the incident anywhere, and even the ship’s log was expunged. I know because years later I researched it. The bastard was even given a medal for a successful cruise. His whole life has been one big fat lie.”

“How old were you Henry?”

“Ten.”

The pirate nodded, and then poured them both another glass. “That’s a long time to carry such hatred,” he said as he poured. “I’m surprised you didn’t try to do him in before now.”

“I did try,” Babacomb replied with a chuckle. “The very first time happened as soon as we landed. I headed right off to the palace armed with only my deck knife. Young as I was, and as naive as I was to the ways of the world, I intended to call him out and challenge him to a sailor’s duel. My own life didn’t matter. I would have sacrificed it in a heartbeat to obtain justice. His guards took my knife, beat me, and then laughed as they threw me into the river. Apparently the event went unreported as it never interfered with the career I chose in an attempt to get close to him. I emulated his very sadistic ways trying to gain his trust; but getting that close to him was never to happen. Try as I might, I could never quite get close enough to the bastard to stick my deck knife through his ribs.”

“And now you have a means to both get close and to kill him,” Tabor said in an equally soft voice. “You should at least consider those who sail under you Henry. Getting yourself killed is one thing, but throwing away the lives of those who trust in you is a grievous sin not likely to be forgiven.”

The black Dog raised his glass, nodded, and then said, “Leave me to worry about that. To the King’s death.”

“To the Queen, may she live a long long time,” Tabor responded, meaning his ship.

He was about to drink when he paused. “By God!” he whispered, “I’ve just been struck with an epiphany.”

There was a knock at the door and before the Rabbit could explain his thoughts, the Dog had turned to it and cried out, “Enter.”

With a quiet squeak, the door opened and a familiar face peered around the corner.

“Stays’l is set sur, as are two jibs. She appears stable enough under the jury rig. The Carpenter’s mate told me the rudder will be a bit longer though, as he has to forge new fittings. The hands will break for the evening meal in an hour. They’ll begin again at first light.”

“I know you,” Tabor said with a smile. “Bob, isn’t it?”

The Dog stepped fully into the cabin, his hat held respectfully in his paws. “Scatter Brained Bob, sur. I’uz with Captain Babacomb on the Lady Taverness.”

“And before that, I think,” the Rabbit replied, giving him a hard look.

“Oh no, sur... not so,” the Dog returned suddenly nervous, “But Captain Babacomb is a good Captain, sur, and I’m proud to serve wif him. If you’ll excuse me, I have a watch to keep.”

When Babacomb nodded, the Dog quietly left, closing the door behind himself.

“And what was that all about?” Henry asked, looking back to the pirate after the door thumped closed.

“He looks enough like you to be your brother,” Tabor responded, adjusting his glasses to his nose again. “I rather like these things. They allow me to see so very clearly. I dare say, Henry, if you search your memory hard enough I’m betting you’ll find old Bob there lurking in the shadows at every turn; rare that a sailor would stand by someone the likes of you. I would wager, you had to replace a good half of your crew every time you made port.”

Lifting his glass, the Dog gave a small salute but offered no response.

“He looks like you; but he ain’t as hard,” Tabor furthered. “I’m thinking he mostly favors his mother’s side.”

Duroc sat watching the Royal Horse, perched on the larboard chain next to the Foxish figurehead of The Queen. His legs hung in the air, limply moving back and forth with the motion of the ship. Their sails were well furled and they remained short hauled; staying as close to the wind as possible until the Royal Horse was repaired enough to keep up.

He missed the cantankerous Balls greatly, but the past was past. There was no changing the finality of death.

When they’d made it back to Masadune’s port town, the huge Swine had secluded himself at the beach front not far from where the Ferrets had been landed. Building a small fire, he took out the old Rabbit’s severed pinky finger and performed the remembrance ceremony as best he could. He didn’t eat it, as many might have thought he would, but rather left it in the fire until it was totally consumed. He’s then cried himself to sleep watching the ocean break upon the island’s shores to the light of the stars in the heavens. In the morning, he flung the remaining small bones as far out into the ocean waters as he could. Then, covering himself in the soot of the ashes, he scattered what was left in the wind.

His journey had taken him far away from home; so full of the adventures he truly did not want. What friends he seemed to make ended up dead and this thought made him feel so very alone.

Now he simply did the best he could, remaining stonily quiet for the most part. Actually he was sullen to the point that none of the crew wanted anything to do with him. Even Vesa and the Lady Taverness had been too busy to pay any attention to him. The closest thing he'd had to fun was in boarding the Royal Horse with Tabor, imposing his threatening bulk on the sailors there. After that there had only been the usual boring shipboard routine. With the rest of the crew, he'd stood by on the Queen's deck, stonily watching as Babacomb righted the frigate's masts while the rest of the crew made wagers on the lumber going back over the side; and how many of the sailors would go with it.

The chain upon which he sat wiggled and a delicate white paw touched his shoulder. A moment later a set of lips pressed against his cheek, giving it a kiss.

"I miss him too," Lady Taverness told the Pig softly and then handily swung down upon the chain to sit next to him. She was barefoot and dressed like any of the other sailors; since comfort ruled the day. "I wasn't able to witness what he did for me the day he cut off the Dog's ear... that is to say, I did hear the whelp scream mightily and that did make me feel a bit better."

The Swine chuckled. "Was good."

He hawked and spat into the ocean and then said, "Balls tried to shoot him later but pistol misfired. Gulo grabbed his paw and kept him from mistake with second pistol. Better to push bastard off cliff like Commander Pablo." He made a whistling sound ending in a splat.

The one eyed white Rabbit laughed, her voice musical against the sound of the ocean. "It's delightful up here," she told him. "I'm surprised Tabor didn't tell me about this place." The fact that she knew exactly of the spot and what it was used for slid past the Swine's conscious thought, exactly as she knew it would.

"It's small ship," he replied, "Only so many places to sit. Mostly sailors only come here to poop. Sit on chains and hang butt over water. I come to talk to figurehead. She not judge me."

The Rabbit leaned against him and said, "No one judges you Duroc. You are a true hero." Hearing a grumble, she turned in time to see a sailor heading to the windward side of the brig. "And you sitting here doesn't cause some tribulations?" she asked, full well knowing the problem he was causing.

The Pig smiled at her, grateful for the company. "Not for me; wind from other side so it's nice here."

Her laughter was music to his ears.

“How family doing?” he asked, his accent much less now than it had been when first he came aboard.

“Father asks for you,” she replied. “He wishes to know if ‘The Other King’ would like to dine with him tonight. He can’t quite pronounce your title in its original language.”

“Oompalahalala ,” the Pig said helpfully.

“Yes, that one,” she told him with a chuckle. “Dinner will only be the same fare served to the rest of the ship, at father’s insistence, and you will have to put up with grumpy old Governor Gulo. He is doing better, but his wound still causes him pain so he’s still a bit snappish.”

“Sergeant Urhea died this morning,” the Swine told her quietly, “Funeral at sunset.”

“Yes, I know.” For a moment, they both simply watched the ocean. Finally, she told him, “Prince Uric has been sitting with the body all day. He is very upset by the death. He told me that the Sergeant was one of the few people he has ever met with guts enough to treat him as a regular soldier. He learned a great deal from him in the short time they were together. Father wishes full military honors for the ceremony.” She cuddled on his massive arm. “So was that a yes, or a no for dinner?”

“Aye, we eat,” the Pig told her and then pointed at The Royal Horse. “Tabor comes now.”

In a movement that belied his size, the porcine whaler stood on the large chain and hailed the quarterdeck even before the lookout, informing Vesa that their Captain was coming.

Vesa, in turn, hailed the lookout and chewed him a new rear quarter, colorfully cursing the Rabbit in his own language, fully aware of what the words meant.

Punk’n Cat, standing next to him, only smiled. They were now a mated pair and as the navigator, the young Wolverine was given a tiny cabin where they were afforded a small amount of privacy; though the entire crew joked about the sounds heard coming from the space.

Lady Taverness sat watching the long boat pull for The Queen and smiled. In all that had happened... in all that she was... she never ever thought she would marry the Dread Pirate Tabor; let alone love him with her whole heart.

If she were to have her own way, they would turn and simply sail very far away... but that could not yet happen.

Night Delivery

The night was a smuggler's delight; extremely dark and the sea calm. No moon shone, and even the swells were down which was perfect for what Captain Jacob was about.

In front of him shone the light of Saylavee, significantly eclipsed by the bulk of The King lying at anchor; well out of range of the fortress guns. As it was, the good Captain's small vessel was beating against the wind and running against the tide, trying to gain the huge ship's side. This was assisted by the sweeps; long oars manned by his small crew.

His intentions were to moor alongside the larger ship and he needed the wind and tide to take him away again before the Watch Officer might become wise to his purpose. It was a risky gambit, delivering Babacomb's letter to the King, but the bag of gold he'd received for his efforts far outweighed the odds of him being caught.

"Hoist the recognition signal," he called softly to one of his four crewmen, "When it's at the fore, tug on the cord to pull the shades open three times quickly. When they see it, we'll be hailed. Lower it back down then and blow out the lamp." He wanted to add that the sailor should be quick lest The King's watch thought they might be under attack; but he restrained himself giving in to his learned smuggler's ways. 'Less talk was better as voices carried clearly in the night air.' If that happened, all hell would break loose and their little packet would be no more than toothpicks drifting with the tide.

No sooner had the light been exposed the required three times, than a voice amplified by a speaking trumpet called out to them. "King Gaspar's son's name."

The fact that the King had no heir made little difference; it was only a password, and meant to be devious.

"Rufus!" Jacob's called to the other ship through his own speaking trumpet. "Urgent dispatch for King Gaspar."

"Come along side."

"Sails in," he called to his crew. "That done, stay with your oars and put your backs into it."

On The King's lower gun deck, three of the twenty gun ports meant for her thirty two pounder main armament opened fully. The rest remained but partially opened for ventilation. Sailors leaned out and hung lanterns and rope bumpers so the small vessel would be able to safely approach.

"Hello there Jacob," called a Dog in a friendly voice. "What th' Divil'r you doing in these waters? I figgered you'd be well home by now supping on boiled eggs and beer."

The old smuggler recognized his friend's voice immediately and was right away put at unease by the good memories of past ties.

"Mak'n my coin, if it's any business of your'n Jolly Jawbone," he called back softly. "Damned son, what in blazes are ya doing on The King?" The plan was for them to come in, drop off Babacomb's message to Gaspar, and be off again before things could heat up. This nuance put a different twist to things. "I have an urgent dispatch for King Gaspar from the Royal Horse," he added hastily, giving his actions an official feel.

Lines were tossed fore and aft and the small vessel was pulled into the larger. The crew shipped their oars before they struck and then quietly lay boarding axes near each line tied off to a clevis. As the hull touched the rope fenders, Jacobs told Jolly Jawbone, "I only have time to drop the packet, eh? Then I'm off again."

"Certainly not before the King reads this urgent message," retorted a crisper voice. Another Dog in an officer's uniform pushed past the seaman at the gun port, holding out a gloved paw. "I will take the dispatch, if you please. If it is indeed all that urgent, then Captain Rook will be expecting a reply, will he not?"

"Certainly, Lieutenant, sur," Captain Jacob replied in a reassuring manner. "No disrespect meant, but I was jest keeping in mind m'orders. That and I'm not liking the idea of catching a stray ball from the fortress." The officer was equal in rank to his own, but he was the master of a vessel, so he would not be talked down to... that would be cause for closer inspection.

The officer gave him a look that implied he was in the presence of a coward.

"If you don't mind," Jacob added as he passed over the weighted envelope, "While I cool my heals waiting for our King's further orders, I would like to speak with an old shipmate. Perhaps, with your permission (he almost choked on the word), I could have him over on my own small boat for a cup of tea as we have a pot freshly brewed. It would certainly help pass the time."

The officer took the envelope held out to him by the other Dog, gave his boat a cursory look under the lamp light, and then sullenly nodded his approval. As he turned to leave, the sailor called Jolly Jawbone scampered through the gun port and enveloped the packet captain in a large hug.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, "It's nice ta see ya up close ya old bugger, not to mention getting off'n the lower deck and once again into the fresh air. I ain't seen blue sky for a time now, cept for the few allowances to come up on deck. She's a monster ship Jacob, but never so sweet as your little Black Packet."

"Shush you mouth now Jolly," Jacob growled in a whisper. "There are things here that must happen as I says they must happen. We be's leaving now, and we be's leaving right quiet like. You do remember yor smuggling ways now don't cha?"

The sailor tensed, and for a moment Jacob was afraid he would yell an alarm. His knife silently slipped out of its sheath and lay ready to cause a permanent silence.

“I’d love that cup of tea ya old fart,” the other Dog said loudly. In a whisper he said, “Row’er for’rd when ya make yor move. The bow points towards the land and it’s only the quarterdeck what’s awake, though they got’s a couple of twenty fours primed and ready.”

“Rocks?” Jacob asked him in a cough, slipping the knife back to its home.

“None the fear of yor packet,” the other Dog whispered back. “When you’re a cable away, turn and run with the tide... which is what I figured ya had in mind when I seen ya approach the way ya did. I’m always keeping an eye on the sea I am.”

The Captain hugged his friend back then. “Still the able sailor ya are Jolly... what the flying fuk are ya doing aboard this monstrosity?”

The black Dog sailor’s smile shone in the lantern light. “Black cut tea would be fine Captain,” he said loudly, “And I would be pleased that it be strong.”

In a whisper, he told the other Dog, “Me and my few got caught. The shortage of crews saved us from the gallows right enough. Have you room for three more ‘sides me?”

“Bring’em,” the Dog whispered, “And then we cut the lines.”

Waking the King was no easy task. Most of those relatively in charge were extremely afraid of the Dog, and with good reason. The last Captain was lost attempting to take soundings of the harbor. The next Captain was less political and more a sailor; he lasted no more than a day before he jumped overboard. He might have made shore if it hadn’t been for the sharks.

Now, the King had taken full control of the ship and everyone was on edge. This gave the Duty Watch Officer pause as he readied to knock on the Royal Cabin door, but knock he must.

“COME!” yelled a muffled voice.

Pushing the door open, the young Dog pushed his lantern through the opening first, announcing his presence as he did so. “Lieutenant Hawthorn; Duty Watch Officer with an urgent dispatch from Captain Rook of The Royal Horse, sir.”

The officer heard a pistol being thumbed back to full cock. "I said 'come', dam it all, not stand in the doorway like some sniveling child. What in Hades could be so all-fired important that Rook would send a special dispatch?"

Lieutenant Hawthorn stepped fully into the room and found his liege cuddled up with his cabin boy, a pistol held across his chest as his eyes blinked sleepily in the dim light. Swinging his legs over the edge of his bed, the king thumbed the hammer back to half cock and placed the pistol on the nightstand. He then threw the covers over the pup, belatedly hiding him from view before holding out his paw for the letter.

The writing on the envelope, when he looked at it closely, bore no resemblance to his favorite Captain's. "What the devil is this?" he asked grumpily, motioning for the officer to turn his lamp up and hold it closer.

'To: Midshipman Gaspar Labrador'

"Midshipman?" he muttered, the blood finally beginning to flow to his sleepy brain. "I swear someone is going to hang for this... this... impertinence. How did you come by the letter?"

"The Black Packet delivered it, sir," the Duty Officer assured him. "She came alongside no more than ten minutes ago," he lied. In actuality she'd arrived closer to thirty minutes prior, but the officer had been in no real hurry to wake his King; knowing how he was occupied.

Gaspar checked the seal on the envelope. Surprisingly, it was from the Royal House of Labrador, though it had a remarkable antique look to it... similar to his father's. Breaking the seal, he took out the letter and held it to the lantern's light. There was no salutation; simply the first line written in bold strokes suggestive of a commoner's quill.

'Rook is dead, tried by my paw, judged by his crew, and summarily executed.'

Gaspar swore and would have ripped the letter up then and there; except for the next sentence.

'I am coming for you next. In the name of Queen Fran, I call for you to surrender. Do this and quarter shall be given. Fight me and I will kill you.'

Your Humble and Previously Devoted Servant,

*Captain Henry Babacomb
Late of the Royal Revenue Service
Son of Fredric Babacomb
Royal House of Labrador*

King Gaspar's paw shook as he hissed, "Secure the Black Packet and bring me her Captain immediately!"

Lieutenant Hawthorn went pale and charged from the room, heading directly back to the lower gun deck. When he arrived he found nothing but sleeping sailors, and three empty gun ports where the Black Packet had been.

Silently weeping, he stripped off his clothing, slipped through one of the gun ports, and began to swim.

At eight bells of the morning watch, the ship was turned stern to the wind for stability, and muster was held. The entire crew of the Royal Horse, except those needed for the duty watch, was assembled by division upon her main deck and a head count commenced to ensure no one had fallen overboard during the night. When all hands were accounted for, and the entry was made in the ship's log, King Ludwig D'Gulo was escorted by Captain Babacomb and Captain Tabor to the quarterdeck. On his arm was a pretty white rabbit bearing an eye patch and dressed in a bright yellow sun dress. As she came from the cabin, she opened a matching yellow parasol against the brightness of the morning sun. When the party climbed to the quarterdeck, the King was helped to stand upon a barrel so he might address the entire assembly.

"Sailors and Marines; Gentlemen all," he said loudly. "I believe you know me, though I've not had the pleasure to speak with you until now. I bring you glad tidings and a welcome to the Royal Wolverine Navy."

There was some muttering and tentative applause broke out; where upon the old gray back raised a paw for silence.

"No need to thank me," he told them with a smile. "I do understand your feelings, as I too was whisked away to prison and required to pledge abeyance to a King other than myself." He chuckled, but did notice that his small joke had fallen rather flat. "In that demand I refused; and for good reason. It was unjust, unfair, and against the letter of all common law known to civilized beings such as ourselves."

He paused, letting them digest the words he was speaking.

"The good tidings I bring you," he told them when the moment was ripe, "Is your release from that same navy, and your ship's readmission into the Royal Labradorean Navy under the auspices of Queen Fran of the Royal House of Labrador. She will be under the able command of Captain Henry Babacomb, also of the Royal House of Labrador."

To this news came a thunderous roar of voices cheering as one; which tapered off as one by one the sailors came to the shocked realization that they had executed their Captain and were now to be readmitted to the same navy from which they mutinied.

One of the sailors closest to the King removed his cap, and holding it to his chest asked plainly, "And what of our sins yer Highness? We shall be hanged."

"No you shall not!" Ludwig exclaimed. Looking up to the rest of the sailors, he cried out, "None of you shall hang! I hereby give full pardon to every loyal crewmember aboard this ship... a ship which is loyal to Queen Fran who is unjustly held prisoner by one unfit to claim the crown he wears!"

He allowed this information to seep into the minds and hearts of those to whom he spoke.

"YOU ARE HER HEROS!" he yelled.

"YOU ARE HER PALIDENS! he bellowed as if possessed.

YOU," he cried out, "WHO WERE NOTHING BUT CANNON FODDER TO GASPAS, WILL REBUILD YOUR NATION WHICH WILL THEN BE A FRIEND TO THE ROYAL WOLVERINES FOR THE REST OF TIME!"

"Three cheers for King Ludwig!" one of the sailors yelled.

This was followed by three resounding 'HUZAH's', whereupon the aged Wolverine jumped down from his barrel. Before he could be stopped, he was among them shaking paws and back slapping for all he was worth.

Just before the noon meal, there came a knock upon the door to the Captain's cabin. Babacomb, pausing in the meal specially prepared for his guests, called for the person to enter. A delegation of eight sailors and two marines came in to stand before the two Captains, the mistress Rabbit, and the Wolverine King. All stood to rigid attention.

"Begg'n yer pardon Highness, but we have a request of our Captain."

"Please," Ludwig told the Dog, "Speak your thoughts."

The sailor bowed slightly to the King, and then turned to Babacomb. Knuckling his brow, he said, "The crew 'as talked Captain, and we wants ta raise the masts to their full height."

Sea of Tranquility, Sea of Transgression

The Black Packet made her rendezvous with Tabor's Little Mistress just after sunrise. Both vessels were just over the horizon from Saylavee and the on shore wind they'd been fighting was already beginning to falter ever so slightly.

"Eye take thee first watch!" Rosa called over to Jacobs. "Eef e moves eye will seegnal with a rocket."

"Don't be a fool," Jacobs yelled across to her, "No rockets! Think like a smuggler kit, and keep yur sail down. If he spies you watching he'll send a cutter and the cutters he carries are every bit as big as your sloop." He thought for a moment and then added, "You dun real good in taking the Horse, but it was a different game then."

The little Cat waved to him showing her understanding. Rosa took no offense at his shouted advice or in the fact he had called her a kit. She'd asked around, and his reputation was a solid one. Such as it was, he ran the Black Packet and continued his smuggling right under the noses of those who would stop him. What could be more sweet than that?

"I've a passenger to take to Captain Babacomb," he called to her. "It's important so I have to go. I'll be back in three days time. Will you be all right alone?"

The Cat at the tiller of the sloop raised a hooked arm. "She'e ees not alone Capitan!"

The small Raccoon on the sloop's bow waved as well, his other paw remaining on the swivel four pounder that had done so much damage to the Royal Horse's rudder.

Captain Jacobs frowned, and then made a decision. Calling to one of his crew, he told the Dog to stay with Rosa. "I'm sending Bartholomew to stay with ya," he yelled to Rosa. "That'll give ya four sweeps if there's no wind. That happens and the bastard sends a jolly boat after you, you'll at least have a chance to get away. Anything bigger than a jolly and you'll have to make a fight of it."

The boats moved closer together and the Dog jumped across easily. That done Jacobs checked the compass and then set his course. Time was of the essence. Should the fleet Gaspar was waiting for arrive before they could accomplish the impossible, then all was lost. Should that be the case, he already had in mind a few good islands where he could hold up. It would mean eating nothing but fish for a while, but such was the life of a smuggler.

Captain Hiss leaned upon the rail of the Caveat Noir's quarterdeck and watched the Royal Horse with her keen sailor's eye. The superstructure was alive with sailors. Most were hanging from the lines like spiders while setting the yards and running the rigging as if spinning a web. She was amazed, impressed, and six gold coins poorer for their abilities. The main and mizzen were already hung with the yards while the fore was in place and waiting.

When Tabor told her over a meal shared in her cabin of the crew's request to raise the masts back to their full height, she had pronounced her thoughts on the subject quite plainly. "Theyy are out of their fuking m'eye'nds. The sea 'as forgive much, but they push thee luck."

Lady Taverness had laughed lightly and then daintily dabbed her mouth with a napkin. "I think you under estimate the Labradoreans as sailors Captain."

Hiss had pointed her fork at the faux doe, and gave her reasoning. "They are Dogs, not Cats. We are at sea. Thee sheep rocks, no? Down here eet ees no problem, one foot, maybe two up and down. Up there," she pointed upwards with the fork, "Eet ees twenty or thirty feet back and forth. That ees suiside trying to secure the top mast, eh?"

"I seen it done only one time," Tabor agreed, taking the time to munch on a carrot. "It is suicide. That time was just a fore top, and they lost three good lads do'n it. Saved the ship though, I'm sure of it."

"You both underestimate Captain Babacomb," Taverness told them. "That Dog is a marvel. And to think I almost killed him a few times."

"As deed Eye," Hiss agreed with a smile.

"And I," Tabor added.

"And still he lives," Lady T told them. "I'll give two to one odds he succeeds without loss of life."

Hiss immediately dug into the pouch at her belt, and slapped six gold coins on the table in front of the Rabbit. "Eye w'eel take that bet, but you must throw in the eye patch."

"And what would you do with my eye patch?" Taverness asked her.

"Eye geeve eet to Gulo as a cod piece," the Cat replied straight faced.

The Rabbits both burst out laughing at that one, but only for a moment. There was a distant cheer, and Lady T smiled sweetly. "I believe that would be the top main up and secure," she said without looking out of the cabin windows, "Just two more to go."

Now, standing on her quarterdeck, Hiss reflected that the Foxes had out done themselves in designing the Royal Horse; she was magnificently beautiful by anyone's standards. Three times bigger than the Cat's ship, she was made for speed and yet could easily punch through a heavy sea without duress. She was lithe and low compared to a bulky ship of the line and but for the heavy ordinance of the tripple's lower gun deck, carried slightly more ordinance as compared to the middle and upper decks. With Babacomb in command, Hiss knew she would also be a good five knots faster than Rook would have ever dared hope for.

She turned to look over the deck of the Caveat Noir. Her six pounders suddenly looked so very small. The decks, too, seemed rather empty as half of those normally aboard, with her permission, were over to help with the rigging of the Royal Horse, including some of her Cats, who were especially good in the tops.

Sitting by the water cask, his back against the foremast, she observed a large pinkish tattooed form. The hair on the back of her neck rose up and unconsciously she let out a low and throaty hiss. Tabor and Lady Taverness had left to The Queen four hours earlier and there was no reason for the Swine to be on her ship. In fact she didn't even remember seeing him coming aboard with them.

"What are ewe do'ing on my sheep?" she yelled when she found her voice.

The Pig made no response, but kept doing whatever it was he was doing. The pirate captain began walking towards him, paw on the butt of the pistol in her belt. "Eye ask nicely, Peeg... what are ewe doing 'ere?"

He snorted, pulled a needle and thread up and then bit it off at the end. Looking up at her finally, he said, "I bring present. I think you not like Oompalahala Duroc so much, so make something special for you."

Hiss' eyes narrowed suspiciously. " 'Ow deed you ge'et here?" she asked him.

"Boat," the Swine told her simply, as if speaking with someone a little slow of the mind. "It too far to swim."

"Whose boat?"

"Black Dog's cutter. It come to Queen for supplies, then come to Caveat Noir for spars. Babacomb say rig stuns'l's off main spars. Make Horse very fast to catch King."

The Cat looked over towards the other ship and saw the crew beginning to de exactly that. "He'll do eet too," she muttered, "But eye th'ink he bite off more than he can chew. Better to take such a sheep and rule thee waters. Ewe see a triple decker, though, and ewe run like 'ell. They never catch ewe."

Duroc held up the smallish thing he had been working on. "For Ewe," he said, mimicking her accent.

Hiss frowned at the possibly perceived insult, but the Swine's smile was genuine. "What ees it?" she asked, reaching out for the small object.

"Is doll. Figured you had bad time as kit... maybe no toys. Made it for you to cuddle with."

"Eye am a Pirate Cap'e'tan," she told him with a frown. Reaching out she snatched the doll from his paw. "Eye can cuddle with any of my crew Eye wish to. What makes ewe so sure Eye need a doll?"

The Pig patted his big belly. "Guts tell me... or maybe need to fart. Not so sure yet. Duroc thinking you really nice and tender kitty; not so tough. Can see you in dress and making dinner for family. Maybe have more kits like Rosa."

He smiled at her and though she really wanted to punch him right on the snout, his smile was actually disarming. He made her so crazy. "Rosa is a sweet kitten," she replied, trying very hard to be civil. Looking down at the doll, she saw that it wore a dress made of sail cloth, and its feet were made out of line tied in intricate little knots. "This is... nice," she told him in a rather unconvincing tone.

The Pig smiled very big, missing the insinuation completely. "It is special doll... keep bad spirits away."

The Cat looked at its face, which had the remnants of fur and a smooshed sort of appearance. Though the fur was discolored, it had obviously been white once upon time. Oddly, the eyes and mouth were sewed shut. "Eye used to dry apples and make carved faced dolls for Rosa," she told him. "They looked a leettle like this."

"Not apple." Duroc told her with a snicker.

"A hard pear then?" she asked.

"No."

The Cat sniffed at the doll's strange little head. It smelled like pickles. "Pee'cules?"

"Dill pickles," the Pig told her with a giggle.

"Ewe make a doll's 'ead from a dill pee'cule?"

The huge whaler smiled a smile as large as the harpoon he usually carried. "Not pickle... you are such a silly Cat. Pickled head in barrel of dill pickles."

Now the Cat's curiosity blossomed fully and she held the doll first at arm's length, and then closer; examining the strange little face which obviously took a good deal of skill to create. As ugly as it was, it was rather cute.

"Who you think it is?" Duroc asked her.

"Eye do not know." She squinted her eye and ventured a guess. "Tabor's mother?"

The Pig laughed, enjoying the moment. "Noooooo... guess again."

"Eet does look familiar," Hiss told him.

"Someone you knew," he hinted.

One of the sails began to flap loudly, and the pirate took a moment to yell abuse at the helm watch, telling them to come up a point. Currently they were only station keeping, but that was no excuse to be sloppy. When she was satisfied she turned her attention back to the doll. "Someone eye knew?" she pondered. "Ewe mean they are no longer alive?"

The Polynesian laughed loudly. "Dead and pickled too. Little shit make nice doll now."

Captain Hiss looked at the Pig in curiosity; and then slowly what the Pig was telling her sunk in. "Leetle Shit?" she repeated. "Dead and pickled?"

She looked again at the dolls smooshed in face, eyes and lips tightly sewed closed, and found Lord Pugwash looking back at her.

With a shriek, Hiss threw the doll as far from her as she possibly could. It bounced off of the forecastle bulkhead plopped down on the deck and sat looking at her as if accusing her of something grossly horrible. Pulling out her pistol, she shot the thing right between its little eyes. Green pickled goo splattered the wood.

"EYE KILL EWE!" she yelled; pivoting and swinging the pistol's heavy barrel at the Pig's head.

Duroc ducked, giggling madly. "Was peace gift!" he yelled, moving much faster than his bulk suggested he could move. "I only want make you smile!"

"EYE SMILE WHEN YOU'RE DEAD!" she screamed, throwing the pistol at him. As it bounced off of his belly he farted loudly.

"Oops... gut feeling obviously wrong."

Hiss pulled out her cutlass and charged.

In a clatter of hooves, the Pig was to the ship's side and launched himself over. Splashing into the cold water he swam for all he was worth. Hiss threw the cutlass after him. It came so close that it nicked his shoulder.

She shrieked a string of curses in Cat as he reached a small boat that was shuttling between the ships, the crew helping him aboard. Running to the quarterdeck, she untied a swivel gun mounted on the rail and began looking for its powder and shot.

“PULL!” Duroc roared at the boat's crew. Pushing one of them out of the way, he began to frantically work the oars. For a moment there was only pandemonium, but as soon as one of the Dogs spied the pirate Captain priming the lock on the swivel, order was quickly restored and all the oars began moving together.

Black smoke erupted from the barrel of the small cannon to a resounding bang. All in the boat ducked as the ball whistled over their heads, splashing down near them. Now, everyone in the fleet was watching, wondering what had sparked such anger in the Cat.

It would have ended there easily enough except that every time Hiss somewhat calmed down, she looked towards the forecastle and became angry all over again. If she thought she could have used one of her six pounders, she would have. Before her tirade was over, she had cut the little doll into small pieces with a cutlass taken from the armory and then thrown the stained blade overboard. The remains of the doll were then piled over with black powder and burned; the crew very worried that their Captain was going to burn their ship in the process.

By sunset, the good Captain was stinking drunk on a hidden stash of catnip. In her inebriated state she again thought how the little doll looked as she held it in her paws.

The expression on the pickled Pug Dog's little smooshed in face was suddenly too much for her to take... she burst out laughing, and didn't stop until she'd fallen fastly asleep.

Preparation

Jolly Jawbone sat upon the ledge of the Royal Horse's stern window regarding those within the cramped quarters. In his paw was a tankard of grog, half gone now, and on his face was a warm smile. On either side of him and securely tethered were a pair of twenty four pounders, taking up a goodly portion of the compartment. Old Jacob had brought him and his mates directly to the Horse. In a quickly shouted exchange with Captain Babacomb, he explained the circumstances and then put about and was off again. In a fatherly way he was worried about Rosa. As a veteran of many a naval engagement (mostly where he was being chased), he also knew that a single boat watching their prey was not enough should she make sail. The flotilla would need to be advised of such a movement so it was one to watch and one to run as messenger when needed. With this in mind, Tabor had already ordered Gabriel's Sara to act as the way point between the watchers and the flotilla.

To this point, nature was at least in their favor; the wind remained in an 'on shore' direction preventing The King from leaving her anchorage. Trying to keep the advantage over the guns of Saylavee, Gaspar had mistakenly ordered her too close to shore. Any attempt at a move now would see her fastly on the rocks.

"It does give me a great feeling of security sitting between these great weapons, the sailor said rum loudly, "But they can hardly compete against The King's Thirty Two's."

"We are not idiots, nor are we lubbers," Tabor growled. "Like sex, weight of iron counts only after yer engaged and can't pull out." He paused to take a drink from his mug, and then sat it in the holder on the table. "Jacob said you were valuable. I'll take him at his word, but now you needs to be proving your worth. Where's the monster weak?"

The Labradorean leaned forward slightly, his large namesake jaw sticking out; giving him an almost Bulldog appearance. Unlike Babacomb, his fur was chocolate in color. Holding his arms out expansively, he told them, "She's weakest right here in where you sit, sur. In Royal Horse's case," he nodded to the guns on either side of him, "She's wearing iron britches and ain't no one gonna put one up her pooper without a fight. Now; The King, on the other paw, has no such nether teeth. She was built to bear a mountain of steel, and destroy whole cities all by her lonesome, but she was always meant to have an escort to protect her hind so the Admiral, or in this case His Royal Highness, could live in the lap of luxury while underway with no ugly e'cutrements of war cluttering up his bed chamber. The escorts, you may be awares, all got sunk trying to clear a way into Saylavee; poor buggered bastards all."

"I might buy that song for the middle deck," Babacomb replied, his chair braced against the compartment's removable bulkhead, "But what about the upper and lower gun decks?"

“None on the lower either,” responded the sailor, “ ‘Cause of ‘er steering gear and the weight of ‘er metal. A couple of ports back there would have made our living conditions a might bit better for the cross draft it woulda give us. The upper deck’s got but a single twenty four as it’s all the deck will manage and mainly it’s used for signaling in any case.”

“What A’bout thee crew?” Hiss asked. She was leaning against the bulkhead near Babacomb, maintaining a clear view of the Caveat Noir. Her one stipulation in attending this meeting was that Duroc not be allowed to come. Lady Taverness had agreed to babysit him, as the Swine didn’t like having Tabor out of his sight for too long.

“All stout Labradoreans, Madam Captain,” the Dog told her with a respectful nod.

“Eye am not a ‘Madam’,” she bridled.

“Beg’n pardon Capt’n,” Jolly quickly apologized. He had no illusions about those in the room with him. As a former smuggler he was well aware of each of their reputations, and easily realized his very existence depended on seaborne civility and usefulness. “They are blind loyal on the upper and middle decks, Capt’n, but the lower deck is manned completely with conscripts like m’self. They’ll fight because they have to or be flogged, but if they see’s danger coming up their backside, they’ll jump out the gun ports to live.”

There was a moment’s silence as everyone present considered the thought of attacking a monster ship whose one broadside was enough to blow any ship in existence to match wood.

“I cannot order, nor will I ask any of you to do this,” said a soft voice from the far side of the compartment.

All eyes went to King Ludwig. He sat in a plain chair, his undress garb allowing him to blend nicely with the dark corner. A sword that had been liberated from Captain Rook’s sea chest and presented to him lay across his lap.

“To attack a regular ship of the line would be risky, but a ship of this size is a sure death sentence for anyone foolish enough to try. You are all free to pursue your lives,” he told them with a sigh. “I will take Royal Horse and make my way home where we will sue for peace. I think at this point Gaspar might listen to reason.”

Tabor leaned forward in his chair, the legs thumping down on the deck as if in reply. He looked at the old Wolverine, who looked back at him with an almost imperceptible nod. The Royal Wolverine family had transferred to the Royal Horse soon after the raising of the masts, though Queen Ludvika had been settled on Gabriel’s Sara. Prince Uric stood next to his father, dressed in a plain seaman’s garb, his paws now calloused from working alongside the sailors. Governor Gulo stood on the other side of his brother, his one arm still in a sling, and his sword on his belt. The pirate captain could not read the Prince’s

expression, though the Governor's angry look plainly stated his desire to end this once and for all.

Slowly standing, the Rabbit looked at each person within the captain's cabin.

"I am not one to needlessly risk my ship and crew doing things that are not directly based upon the profits gained by pirat'n... but... it is my feeling that should Gaspar get away, he will eventually hunt us down one by one until those who dared oppose him are no more. It's a death sentence either way, but at least this time I get to tie the hangman's noose. My vote is to go after the bastard. He might have the big dick ship, but if'n he can't keep it up what good's it going to do him? I say bugger the bastard good while we have the chance and then kick him in the chops for good measure." He looked at the Cat captain. "Hissy, what's your say so in this?"

"M'eye vote ees Aye," she told him without argument, "But when wee are done, eef we live, Eye do not evar want to see any of ewe again."

Tabor heard Ball's voice in his head, laughing and making his sheep jokes. He smiled at the Cat. "I'm gonna miss ya Hissy."

"Eye am sure," she replied with a straight face.

And so the questioning had continued, each in turn asking very specific questions.

From the sailing log of The Queen: Vesa Dufva navigator on duty, Captain Tabor Rabbit commanding.

The wind is from the North Northeast, steady and estimated at ten knots, pointing directly at Saylavee, though we are not yet in a hurry to get there. The seas follow the wind and roll gently in a two foot swell. The sky is clear with no clouds.

Royal Horse lags, staying to the North Northeast; maintaining the wind gage as the fleet practices in preparation of the coming battle. I can hear the distant thunder of her guns and see the smoke near the horizon. The Caveat Noir now sails landward, closer to the horizon, watching for signals from the Black Packet and Tabor's Little Mistress relayed by Gabriel's Sara.

Gabriel's Sara will not be part of the action. Her primary function will be to pluck any of those poor sailors adrift from the sea.

We are presently one days sail from Saylavee and still The King has not set forth. The wind will change tomorrow; of this I am certain. When that happens, the chase will begin.

Captain Tabor is presently instructing those new among the crew in boarding drill.

Tabor stood on the larboard railing, holding on to the rope ladder leading aloft to the main top. Before him were the landsmen and soldiers rescued from the prison on Masadune and assigned to The Queen for the battle. He now wore a red bandana, as did all hands aboard. This was for identification during the upcoming mêlée and everyone had to get used to the sight and feel of it.

Their numbers had swelled even more when The Queen took on every hand from Gabriel's Sara that could be spared. Lady Taverness, protesting loudly, had been sent there under the pretense of watching after her mother. Tabor actually threatened to throw her overboard if she didn't go.

Likewise, the Caveat Noir had received a contingent of Royal Labradorean Marines from Royal Horse. Normally this would not have set well with the Cat, but under the circumstances she'd welcomed the Dogs with (for her) open arms. Tabor suspected the Cat Captain had broken out the pleasure barrels for the evening if only for the opportunity of seeing the Dogs unknowingly take advantage of one of their own. He'd thought about this himself, but with the seriousness of the situation and the amount of new faces (the decks were completely crowded with the overflow in preparation for what they were to do) he reasoned it might cause more pandemonium than pleasure.

"The sound of the drum will be your signal to report to boarding stations!" he told them loudly. "Most of you lubbers thinks there's only carnage and mayhem to the ways a pirate does things. I'm here to tell you that without order and direction any ship in existence could not sail and any attack attempted would fail. Because of this, we are going to practice, and practice, and practice until everyone of you aboard is a unified body of Queens' men. Listen now to the call!" Pointing at the Wolverine drummer standing on the quarterdeck, he yelled, "ACTION STATIONS!"

The soldier beat his tattoo for a good thirty seconds before the Rabbit motioned him to quit.

"On hearing this, day or night, every tar on board this ship repairs immediately to his action station, is that clear?"

There was a general nod and mumble of understanding from those assembled. Duroc giggled and when Tabor looked at him he mouthed the words 'action stations' with an accompanied hip thrust, upon which the Rabbit scowled, trying to hide the smile he really felt.

"When you are at your action station you will not leave it without permission," The Rabbit continued, and then paused to adjust his spectacles. "When I give the order 'Cast loose and provide'," he continued, "The guns are cast loose. For you lubberly soldiers," he said to the Wolverines, "This means you untie the tethers and pull the gun back to the length of its breeching. That's the thick line it's tied off to and shackled to the bulkhead.

Do not untie this line! It keeps the gun from running you over when it recoils and also from damaging the ship... which is a hell of a lot more important to me than your sorry butt cheeks. Next you will pull out the tompon from the muzzle and then ready your piece for the service.”

Duroc playfully grabbed his crotch and smiled a tusky smile at the captain.

“I’m being serious here Duroc!”

All eyes went to the Pig and he was suddenly quiet.

Tabor waited a moment for the crew to settle again, the sound of the sails working the wind punctuating the moment. He briefly looked aloft, checked the rigging and barked an order to the watch. A moment later the flapping noise ceased.

Looking back to the gathering, he asked, “How many Sergeants are here?”

By a showing of paws, he counted ten. This was good as he would not have to assign any others.

“Your jobs will be to bring up the small arms from the armory. Everyone receives a waist-belt for cutlasses, bayonets, pistols and battle axes. This is a pirate ship, and pirates carry two things in numbers when boarding; pistols and grenades. Each of you Sergeants will be assigned a unit. I want everyone to practice lighting grenade fuses and shucking out ‘o their belts. You screw up with a grenade and it’ll blow you up. You fall into the sea wearing your belt and you will sink like a steel ball. Do you understand?”

There was again the general ascent. The Rabbit spied a familiar face among the Wolverines from the battle at the prison and smiled. “Sergeant Blue?”

“Here, sur.” The soldier replied with a like smile.

“Why are you on my ship and not on the Horse?”

“I requested it, sur. My King has ample protection what with Governor Gulo being with him and all, so I volunteered to come over. I rather like your style and it does give me certain bragg’n rights having sailed with ya.”

The Rabbit nodded. “Dine with me tonight. Pick out ten of your best marksmen and bring’em with ya. I have a very special job for’em, and a very special weapon to be used.”

“Delighted, sur, and ten is exactly the number I brought along.”

“Each gun crew,” the pirate continued, “Is divided into boarders, pikemen, sail-trimmers, firemen and pump-men. Each of you not assigned to a gun crew will also be borders. The

boarders will provide themselves with a cutlass, four pistols, and four grenades. Pikemen will have a musket at paw and ready to grasp. Make sure you have a bayonet fitted to the muzzle. Pumpmen will keep a battle axe.”

He paused to regard them.

“When it is time to call away the boarders, I will command you to the place I want you to go by yelling ‘Boarders on the larboard bow!’ or to where ever it is we will be boarding from. You will go there and standby.”

Uncorking a bottle, he took a swig of rum before continuing.

“At the order ‘Pikemen over the boarders!’,” he told them, “Those of you who are under arms... especially you soldiers on deck,” he said, pointing at the graybacks, “Along with the pikemen will form a line with bayonets along the deck in rear of the boarders.”

“Borders, you will keep close down on the deck until the order comes to board. The enemy will want you dead so you cannot board them and because of that you are protected until the last moment. Should the enemy attempt their own boarding, I will command ‘Repel Boarders’. Upon this order, the pikemen will advance their pieces over the heads of the boarders and fire until the order comes to; ‘Fall back pikemen!’ You will then hear the preparatory command, ‘Stand by to board!’ Then when I yell ‘Board!’ you do what you must. Grapple hooks and line... climb for your lives, but stop before going over the top and lob your grenades first. Just make sure you don’t hold them too long after the fuse is lit. When you’re done with the slow match, for the love of a good vegetable dinner do not throw it anywhere but in the ocean.”

There was some laughter after this particular instruction as even the landsmen were aware of the dangers of fire on a ship.

“The Queen is much smaller than the monster ship we intend to take,” Tabor told them, “We will grapple and climb to the main deck with the possibility of also boarding through the gun ports of the middle deck. If you can; toss some grenades in there as well. With luck Royal Horse will have taken care of the lower deck. Mind you, the gun ports should be closed as The King’s actions stations will be on the side opposite from where we will be boarding. Our intentions are; that Royal Horse will be filling The King’s bucket with poop, while The Queen and the Caveat Noir conduct the boarding on the fore and aft quarters. We will stay well clear of her middle. We wouldn’t want to be damaged by the same balls passing through the big bastard’s guts, now would we?”

There was much laughter over that one.

“If a fire should break out aboard The Queen,” he continued, “A quick ringing of the bell will call away the firemen and pumpmen.”

And so the instruction continued, the group finally being broken apart into their divisions under the sergeants. At the noon meal, they were served extra rations along with a tot of rum, and extra time for a nap if that was desired.

After this, the drill continued.

Mr. Flopears stood before Captain Babacomb. He was on loan from The Queen with the thought that his presence would help transform the chaos of gun drill into something better. Nothing of his demeanor suggested he was intimidated by the Dogs in any fashion.

“What do you mean the guns are resistant to their orders? A gun is a gun is a gun... it is cold steel heated by the fire of gunpowder. It does what it is supposed to do at the touch of a Slow Match; nothing more, and nothing less.”

The Rabbit sighed, and then again tried to explain. “A gun, sur, is the war hammer of the gods. If it is wielded correctly it is deadly and efficient. If it is not, then the shot will do nothing more than glance off of the target.”

“Bad powder will do that,” the Dog told him.

“Bad marksmanship will also do that,” the Rabbit countered.

“I need three rounds in five minutes!” Babacomb demanded.

“You’ll be lucky to get two rounds in ten,” Flopears told him placidly.

Babacomb’s fist slammed down on the table rattling the glasses set in their holders.

“That’s not good enough!”

There was a moment’s quiet and then he hissed, “We’re going up against a triple decker ship of the line Mr. Lopears. One good broadside from that monster and all that we have worked to accomplish is gone. I can’t have come this far only to be defeated by...”

“I can give you four rounds in six minutes,” the strange Rabbit told him, “With the first two broadsides deadly accurate at a thousand yards... but you will have to trust me. The guns have some demands.”

For the first time in a long while, Captain Henry Babacomb was actually at a loss for words.

Fifteen minutes later, the entire ship’s company was assembled, including King Ludwig, Prince Uric, and Governor Gulo. Only the King had been consulted on what was about to happen and he readily agreed without so much as a blink.

“I address myself to the guns of the Royal Horse,” Babacomb announced loudly, tightly gripping the quarterdeck rail with his paws. “Guns... hear me! I require your best performance and it is my understanding, as explained by Master Gunner Flopears that for your cooperation in this matter, you are willing to negotiate as the crew negotiated. To this I agree.”

He looked around at all the blank faces staring at him, their eyes now saying they believed he'd gone stark raving mad.

“At the end of this battle, I give my word, and the word of King Ludwig of the Royal House of Wolverine, that Royal Horse will be set right and given back to the Vulpine Navy. In return for this pledge, you must give me four rounds in six minutes.”

There was a gasp among the veterans of the crew. The absolute best any of them had ever done was two rounds in four, with the third round coming in seven.

The 24 pounder long guns required a crew of fourteen sailors to man. Each weighed a good 5600 pounds and though they were mounted on wooden wheels called ‘trucks’, everything done to service them was done strictly through the gun crew’s physical exertions. Running them out was accomplished by hauling on the gun’s tackle which was a massive rope and pulley system. Moving them then from side to side in order to aim was done by placing long handspikes under the truck carriage and forcing the gun one way or another through shear muscle and leverage.

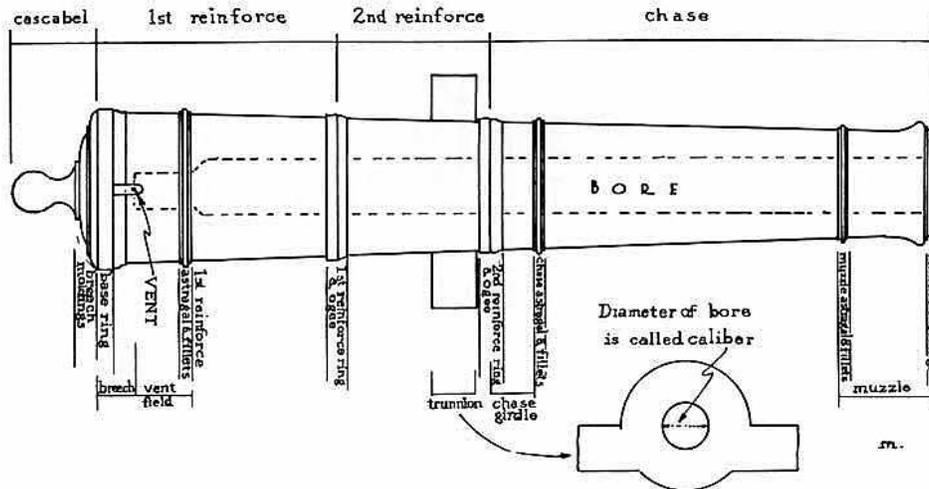
Above even this, should the ship be to the enemy’s lee during their engagement, then the gun, when it was run out, would have to be moved uphill.

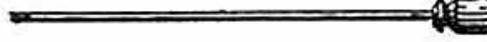
“Gun crews,” Babacomb called out, “Report to your stations. Action stations will be to the starboard. The heel of the ship will best simulate the gun’s recoil. Mr. Flopears will watch and advise. When he is satisfied, we will conduct a live fire exercise.”

Turning to the Rabbit beside him, he said in a softer voice, “When the guns give you an answer, come to me. You will then prove your four in seven before I waste any of my precious powder on a live fire exercise.”

“Aye, sur,” Flopears replied, knuckling his brow.

The Guns; They Speak



- | | | |
|--------------|--|----|
| 1. SPONGE |  | |
| 2. WORMER |  | |
| 3. LADLE |  | |
| 4. RAMMER |  | |
| 5. SCRAPER |  | |
| 6. HANDSPIKE |  | m. |

“The diameter of the bore is called the caliber,” Mr. Flopears told the gun crew he was working with. Sixteen sailors were gathered around the starboard number fifteen gun, each of them with a paw placed upon its barrel.

“Why does we need ta know that?” groused one of the sailors. “The ball fits, that’s all that matters.”

“You may remove your paw from the gun,” the funny looking Rabbit told him. “You are now a linesman.”

“Fine,” he replied, taking his paw away from the gun. “Linesman I was before anyhow.”

He moved to the side next to the ‘hauling out’ lines and their tackle. These were shackled to the gun’s carriage and laid out in an orderly fashion from the side of the gun so they wouldn’t foul during its recoil. They represented all the mechanical assistance available to move the 5600 pounds of steel outboard; only so it could recoil back again. The process would then repeat itself over and over and over.

To the front of the gun was the breeching, a very thick line, one side shackled to the bulkhead and the other to the gun. This line was meant to check the recoil. Presently, with the ship on a lee tack to the ordinance being used, the deck was tilted enough that the gun pulled back tight of its own accord. This was intentional as a truer representation of the recoil, thus adding more realism to the drill when not using powder and shot.

“Windage,” Mr. Flopears continued, is the amount of space between the ball and the bore. It is thought that more windage is preferable as it keeps the ball from getting stuck in the bore when the gun is heated from firing. It also leaves room for the powder scoop to fit around the ball should it be necessary to extract an unfired round. To some extent this is true and for those times when the gun is heated, we shall use a smaller ball; but the first four shots when we engage The King will be placed with a larger ball and wadding as this gives us much more accuracy.”

One of the Dogs pulled his paw off of the gun, and sucked at his fingers. “Damnation! She’s hot. Don’t none of you others feel it?”

“Linesman,” Flopears told him quietly and the fellow went to join the other Dogs; still sucking on his paw.

And so it went. As the pirate lectured on the art of gunnery, he closely watched each of the gun’s crew until only one dog remained with his paw on the breach; the others having all sworn the gun’s metal had become too hot to stand. This fellow he named as the gun captain.

“Your gun’s name is ‘Mary Weather’,” he told the new gunner. “When we are done here, you will paint her name on the carriage and only refer to her by name thereafter.”

The big Labrador knuckled his brow, not questioning the order at all. He was a sailor, and sailors the world over knew these things that simply were so. That the Rabbit knew was enough.

By the time all the gun crews and positions were selected, they were eight bells of the morning watch. As the funny looking Rabbit continued working with each individual crew, the hands were fed by gun position and then released back to their action stations. Returning to their now named guns they went over and over their drill which they already knew by heart, hauling their gun outboard and then letting it fall back again to the length of the breeching. As in a real action, only the guns on the engaged side of the ship were cast loose. Those not to see action were left secured. Should there be a sudden change of tack, or any other phenomenon that might make the ship heel to the opposite direction one loose cannon by itself could sink a ship, let alone eighteen or twenty.

Presently the Royal Horse was on a starboard tack so only the guns on that side were cast loose and readied. Everyone of the gun crews now wore a rag around their head, covering their ears, with those closest to the firing tying them extra tight against the roar of the weapons.

Captain Babacomb, pacing the quarterdeck, tensely watched as his gun crews were instructed by Tabor's gunner. The Rabbit's words kept echoing through his mind; 'Four rounds in six minutes, the first two deadly accurate.' If he could indeed do this, then there was hope.

"The gun blows back," Flopears sang out in his squeaky voice. It was the beginning mantra for the crew he was working with.

"STAY THE FUCK OUTTA THE WAY!" chorused the crew he was working.

"First action?"

"WORM DOWN THE BORE!" yelled the rammer, holding the implement aloft. It was a metal knife blade cork screw type of thing mounted on a long pole. "Twist it around right like and pull it out again to remove any coked on powder and debris!" He then proceeded to do so.

"Next?" Flopears asked.

"THUMB ON THE VENT HOLE TA SNUFF THE EMBERS WHEN WE SWAB WITH THE SPONGE!" yelled the gunner. He held up a paw showing the Rabbit he had his glove on against the heat of the gun when he covered the vent.

"SWAB OUT THE BORE!" yelled out the spongeman.

"Do so," the Rabbit instructed when the fellow stood grinning at him like a village idiot.

The gun captain and the spongeman went through the drill and then stood back. When they were done, the powderman held up his scoop and yelled, "LOAD THE FIRST CHARGE!"

Mr. Flopears nodded and the sailor carefully filed his scoop with gunpowder. He then pushed it into the gun's muzzle, getting it as far down as he could. When it was all the way in, he gave the long shaft half a turn to ensure all the powder would fall out properly and then withdrew his instrument. "Just like sex," he rumbled, flashing a toothy smile at the Rabbit.

"TAMP THE POWDER THREE TIMES!" yelled the rammer, pushing his long button-headed pole down the bore.

"LUCK!" sang out the gun's crew.

"POUR IN THE SECOND CHARGE!" yelled the powderman. He then proceeded to do exactly that.

"STUFF IN THE WADDING AND TAMP TWICE!" the rammer yelled as he pushed down a handful of old sailcloth with his rammer and then tamped it firmly twice.

"SKILL!" sang out the gun's crew.

"How much powder?" asked Tabor's master gunner.

"SIX POUNDS!" the crew chanted as a team.

"The ball?"

"TWENTY FOUR POUNDS!"

Load and prime," he told them.

The loader hefted the ball into the bore and the rammer pushed it all the way down. While this was done the second gun captain took his powder horn and poured the special fine powder into the vent hole until it filled and then spread out into the small pan area. When he was done, he called "READY!"

"If the gun is depressed?" asked Flopears.

"CHEER IT UP!" they all chorused and then burst out laughing. They'd been waiting for the question having observed the Rabbit's directions when working with the gun crew next to them, and all had agreed to pull the prank on him. Everyone on deck burst out laughing. Finally the rammer showed Flopears his handful of rags, which he stuffed into the cannon's mouth and then pushed it home with his rammer.

“RUN OUT!” the gun’s captain yelled, and the linesmen immediately hauled away until the gun butted up against the bulkhead. The pulleys sang a pulsing tune as the lines ran through the tackle designed to get the heavy piece of ordinance into firing position. Once the gun was in place, one rear wheel was chocked against the deck’s cant and the lines were laid down in a manner where they would not bind up during the recoil.

“Very good,” Mr. Flopears told the gun captain. “Now let’s see how accurate you are. Place a paw on her breech. Keep it at distance and then bend down to peer over the tangent and up over the bell mouth. Call your orders from there.

Their target was a large barrel floating a thousand yards distance; hauled out by the ship’s boat along with five others as replacements should any be sunk.

“HANDSPIKE RIGHT THREE INCHES!” the Dog yelled.

Two beefy sailors holding iron bars slipped the ends under the gun carriage and inched it over with a grunt.

“How is the gun’s elevation?” the Rabbit asked at the Dog’s ear.

“I think she should come up a hair, sur,” he responded.

“We need to lift the end a bit then and slide the quoin back a hair.”

“Push down on the barrel lads,” the gun captain instructed his crew in a quieter voice than his normal drill bellow. When they had done this, he pulled the wooden wedge just a bit aft and had them let the barrel come back to its resting place.

“Are you ready now?” Flopears asked him.

He checked his crew and saw all was prepared. Everyone was out of the way, the chalk man had his line taut, and the second gun captain had the slow match to his lips and blowing on it softly to keep it ember red. “Aye, sur,” he replied.

“You may fire when ready; and I expect your second round fired off in less than two minutes.”

Giving one last look down the barrel he yelled, “PULL CHOCKS! FIRE!”

The resulting explosion and recoil were tremendous. The gun ran itself back and the crew automatically began their drill. The Rabbit watched the fall of the shot and was very pleased when the splash was no more than ten feet from the barrel. In his mind he counted down the time, and was even more pleased when the second round was fired off in only one hundred seconds. This was the first crew to break the two minute mark, and they broke it with flying colors... and to come so close to actually hitting the target. He

would have Captain Babacomb move them and their piece to the chase gun position on the forecastle.

Congratulating the gun captain and his crew, he instructed that they clean their weapon and then moved on to the next gun.

Sergeant Blue clinked mugs with Tabor. “It’s a bloody good pleasure ta serve with ya again, sur, and after what I been through it’ll be a bloody good pleasure ta kill Labradorean Dogs.”

The pirate captain smiled over his mug. “Not all Dogs are bad Blue, just easily led astray. Most will believe anything you tell them, I am thinking. As much as old Babacomb has tried to kill me, and the other way around o’course, I have rather developed a touch of admiration for him. I wouldn’t want to be King Gaspar round about now.”

“Just let me get that crowned head in my sights,” the Wolverine told him with a wink, “And I’ll finish this war once and for all.”

Leaning forward in his chair with a thump, the Rabbit placed his mug in its holder. “I was hoping to hear such feelings from ya,” he said with a chuckle. “Are ya afraid of heights?”

“Not a’tall, sur. I rather like them actually. Height gives ya an advantage when shooting at the foe, mind you adjust for the bullet drop.”

“You and your ten will be in the fighting tops then,” the pirate told him. “We can fit four of ya at the foremast platform and six at the main. The Ferrets among the crew I will give to the deck swivels as they’re a pretty sharp lot in such things. Then, before we close proper and grapple, we will fire grape from the deck guns at the highest elevation in order to rake the monsters rigging. He’ll be sure to have his marines up there trying to shoot us in the same manner. He’ll especially be a’want’n to kill our borders where we will be wanting to kill his officers.”

“Those’ll stick out like raven’s among the seagulls,” the soldier assured him, “Cuz of their uniforms.” He smiled. “Easy pick’ns and a distinct advantage. We’ll start with the quarterdeck.”

“No,” Tabor remarked, “You must begin with the tops. If you don’t, we won’t stand much of a chance.” He stood and moved to his wardrobe, stopping to admire the small crack in the wood that made such a fine peep hole. “I have two very special weapons for you that Mr. Flopears picked up in Blueportdoggie, one here for show, and the other still in the armory. I actually thought he’d lost his mind and was spending my gold on silliness... but now I see the wisdom of his ways. I should know better than to mistrust his thoughts on such things. I surely do miss him, but if Babacomb is to stand a chance, he absolutely requires the little fellow’s assistance.”

Opening the wardrobe, the pirate took the weapon proffered by white paws and lifted out a seven barreled musket, the weight of which caused him to set his muscles and frown. Closing the wardrobe with a foot and turning back to the soldier, he said, "It's a heavy bastard, and kicks like a drunk'n pissed off Horse. I fired it but one time and that was enough. It holds a tight pattern and I'm thinking it'll make short work of The King's crow's nest."

He stopped, and blinked. Turning back to the wardrobe, he managed to open its doors without setting down the monster gun and found himself looking upon Lady Taverness. She was dressed in a plain sailor's garb, her black eye patch seeming even blacker against her white fur.

"You're right," she told him with a smile, "This 'is' a wonderful hiding place. It's a pity that you and Sergeant Blue didn't give me a show, but what with your monster in the closet with me it wouldn't have been quite the fun that you had with the kitten at my expense."

Scowling, Tabor rounded back to the now grinning Wolverine. Passing over the musket, he told him, "Fire it out the stern windows if ya likes."

Turning back to the white Rabbit, he stuck a paw out to help extract her from the cramped position, only to be enveloped by her arms. Before he could say a word, she'd whispered in his ear, "You didn't really think you could keep me away, did you my love? I shall be right at your side the whole of the battle; and be assured that if you die, I will die with you. That thought will give us reason to fight all the harder."

Tabor was about to say some very unpleasant things when there was a tremendous blast behind them, followed by the thump of a body bouncing off of the bulkhead and then crashing to the deck.

Both Rabbits jumped well back out of pure reflex and the cabin door burst open. Duroc, brandishing his harpoon, jumped to the fore. It was only too obvious he's intended placing himself between them and whatever danger might be threatening. All three looked at each other and then at the Wolverine sitting on the floor; the huge seven barreled musket laying on the floor next to him.

"DAMNATION!" the soldier managed, "I'M IN LOVE!"

When they all stopped laughing, Tabor looked at the huge Polynesian and told him, "I should have guessed you'd be a part of this. Be a good Piggy and help the Sergeant out. Then you stand guard at the door so there's no interruptions; we have some catching up to do."

The Signal

From the sailing log of The Queen: Vesa Dufva navigator on duty, Captain Tabor Rabbit commanding.

At four bells of the afternoon watch, the masthead lookout reported Gabriel's Sara has raised the red signal. She remains well out on the horizon. The Black Packet stands out from her and Tabor's Little Mistress the same further on. This means The King has set sail; doing exactly as Captain Babacomb predicted, taking the wind directly up under her skirts and flying before it.

The wind shifted from due North to South Southwest no more than two hours past. It remains at ten knots and gusting. This is the off shore wind Gaspar has been waiting for. The seas follow the wind and roll gently in a three foot swell, raising the stern and moving us rocking horse fashion. The sky is overcast.

Royal Horse now leads on a course intended to intercept, with the Caveat Noir following close on her heels. The Queen is hard pressed to keep up and I am sure the other two ships view us impatiently.

On board our crew has become reserved with conversations kept soft. All of our weapons have been serviced and lay waiting in the armory. Prevalent is the sound of cutlass and axe steel being sharpened on the whetstone.

Setting his quill down, Vesa powdered the ship's log page to dry the ink and then blew upon it. He was so very tired, having stood hour upon hour of duty as The Queen readied herself. Large orange paws found the young Wolverine's shoulders, and began to massage his tense muscles.

"Ewe need sleep, my love," purred a voice in his ear. "Eye think thee Captain might spell ewe so Eye can make you tea and pur'aps we make love. Tomorrow or the next day will be battle, no?"

Vesa looked skyward, observing the draw of the new stun'sails. The duty watch was hanging about the rigging as if they lived there, tightening or loosening the running rigging as they saw fit. It was the first time the sails had been used since Babacomb had rigged their standing rigging back in Blueportdoggie. True to what he'd promised, the ship was a good two knots faster before the wind.

"I am so very tired, my love," he told her without turning. He placed the log into its secure drawer. "If not the Captain, then perhaps... perhaps..." He slumped forward onto his navigator's table and fell fast asleep. He would have slipped all the way to the deck if Punk'n hadn't bent down and caught him on her shoulder.

"I've got the deck," said a voice behind her.

Punk'n turned, bearing her burden easily, and regarded the spectacled Rabbit. "E do this for you Capitan," she told him. Her chosen mate lay limp on her back and her voice carried a tone of disapproval.

"Put him to bed Punk'n," Tabor replied, not unkindly. "Let him sleep as long as he needs, and then make wonderful love. We'll be at least two days in catching The King. Make the most of it."

"Will it evar end?" she asked him in her strange accent. "I think I weesh to 'ave a 'ome now weeth my Vesa Dufa."

The spectacled Rabbit nodded. "I think that's what we all are presently wishing for my dear. If all goes well, we might just have such a thing in our lifetimes." He thought for a moment and then added, "I don't know if I could ever leave the sea, Punk'n, but right now a quiet little carrot patch somewhere does seem mighty attractive. When the battle comes, I will need Vesa to hold the quarterdeck. You're to stay with him and guard his back. You'll keep five loaded muskets at the chart table. If anyone so much as pokes their head over the rail you shoot'em dead." He motioned to the companionway leading to his cabin. "Go on now and take care of him. Use whatever you need in my cabin... and that's an order."

"What's he doing now?" Rosa called up to Gabby. The little raccoon was hanging on tight to the mast and trying to aim his spyglass at the same time.

"Same thing he was doing ten minutes ago," he called down to her without taking his eyes off of the huge man of war.

All of the big ship's sails were set and they were filling well. For her bulk, though, The King was only about as fast as a fat merchantman. As it was, Rosa had to take in the main sail two full reefs and kept but one jib flying in order to keep station.

"Do you think he knows we're here?" she called up to him.

"Most likely," Gabby replied. "I've been catching reflections off of telescopes at the main top, and the quarterdeck all morning."

"But there's no boats in the water?"

The Raccoon scanned the entire horizon using the other ship as the center point. He found no other vessels but the distant sail of the Black Packet keeping station with them on the opposite horizon.

A few days previously every boat the huge ship carried was put into the water as her crew attempted to pull her to sea physically. Even with an outbound tide, however, with a good

many boats lost to the sounding of the harbor entrance, the wind kept them right where they were and actually moved them closer to the rocks when the anchor line was slackened. This caused a small amount of panic, but the anchor was easily restored and the boats called back again.

“No other boats,” he replied.

“Come down,” she told him. “We’ve caught a nice fish for dinner. You clean it and we’ll cook it.”

“Cat’s like their fish raw,” Gabby replied as he made his way down the mast, “So it’s not a fair trade.”

“I’m the Captain of this vessel, Mr. First Mate, and poor Ellen has but one paw.”

“Bartholomew likes his fish fried,” the Raccoon told her as his bare feet hit the deck with a thump.

“He’s asleep,” Rosa returned, “Same as Ellen will be as soon as she eats.”

A geyser of water erupted five hundred yards off of their bow, followed by a second, and a third, and then the entire sea before them erupted as an entire broadside of thirty two pound cannon balls splashed down; seeking the small sloop out for destruction.

Ellen quickly put the tiller over, causing the boat to heel as it tacked away from the maelstrom.

“**LOWER THE SAILS!**” Bartholomew bellowed as he raced up on deck. “**QUICK, SO THE BASTARD THINKS HE SUNK US!**”

In a flurry of bodies and falling canvas, the sails were quickly hauled in and the sweeps put out. On the horizon gun smoke curled skyward and was quickly stained with fresh black as a second volley of the big guns was loosed in their direction. As one the cannon balls splashed down again five hundred yards from where they were and exactly where they would have been had they continued in the direction they’d been sailing.

“E ees good,” Ellen said as she manipulated her sweep with just her one paw and the hook of the other through a special hole bored in the hand piece. “Eye we’el geeve heem that much. Those be’eg guns ‘ave quite the reach, no?”

“Bless’ud be The One who kept us from being on the receiving end of that weight of metal,” Bartholomew said absently as they rowed.

Three voices added a quick ‘amen’ in chorus.

“If we did not sink him out rightly, sir, then he’s slipped away over the horizon again.”

The King’s new captain stood at the starboard rail, glass to his eye, as he reported. Having said this, The Dog collapsed his telescope with a snapping sound and then checked the masthead lookout for his paw signal response. He then turned to look at his monarch; seeking a note of approval. He’d had the lower deck guns all set at thirty degrees for the ‘long’ shot and run straight out. He then aimed his armament in group through the positioning of the huge ship, having them fired on his command. Though the Labrador (recently a mere Lieutenant) wanted to add his thoughts on the waste of powder and shot over a mere small boat (spotted just that morning), he wisely kept his peace.

“May I secure the guns, sir?”

“Do as you wish,” Gaspar growled, “You’re the Captain. I shall be in my cabin. Send someone to get me immediately if you sight another sail.”

“It will be good to see home again, sir,” the new captain said with a smile. “Shall I set course accordingly?”

“He’ll be expecting that,” Gaspar muttered.

“Who would that be, sir?”

“None of your damnable business!” The Royal barked. “Keep to your set course – straight before the wind. I want all possible speed. With luck we’ll meet up with the supply convoy. They’ll have escorts.”

The new Captain knuckled his brow, knowing the long overdue convoy would be coming from a different direction. “As you wish, sir.”

He watched Gaspar go below to his cabin feeling a chill creep through his body. Something was severely amiss.

First there was the disappearance of a fellow officer whom he would have suspected being knifed by the crew, except that his clothing was mysteriously found on the lower gun deck. None of the crew professed to knowing anything about it and there was no blood.

Then at quarters the day after, four of the lower deck crew were found to be missing too. This was coupled with a rumor that the Black Packet had mysteriously paid a visit the same evening the officer disappeared. The small vessel, like some malevolent nightmare spirit, had apparently delivered a message to King Gaspar and then slipped off again into the darkness from whence it came. If this was true, Gaspar had not mentioned a word of it.

Why the King has ordered 'action stations' and had the ship fire upon a mere sloop with her big guns was again further strangeness. There was no doubt as to the other vessels size as the mast head had confirmed it. More than likely it was nothing more than a fishing boat. Because of this, the new Captain had deliberately slewed his command to fire by a few seconds; ensuring the broadsides would be well ahead of his target. He knew that at deck level and with the unaided eye, this would be close enough to look good.

The young Dog had a sudden vision of Gaspar walking down a dark road and whirling to discharge his pistol into the night. The hair on the back of his neck stood up and the skin of his arms rippled in 'chicken flesh'.

Shaking the feeling off, he turned to a Midshipman and said, "My respects to Mr. Abbey, and he can secure his guns for sea. Tell him I said to make sure they are well snugged into the bulwark. I'm not expecting heavy seas, but it is always a good thing to be prepared."

To the duty Navigator he asked, "What do you make of the weather through the night Smith?"

"Like you, I don't expect a change none for another four to five days, sir. Seems for once we're favored. She'll ride well and perhaps the lads can get some rest."

"I would think that after being at anchor for so long they would already be well rested."

"T'ain't the same, sir. With respects, I can even see it in you. It's been a bad voyage. Sleep we got plenty of, but that don't mean we got any rest." Looking around to see that they were alone, he furthered with a wink, "Good shooting, sir."

Captain Hiss stood on the windward rail of the quarterdeck enjoying the feel of the wind in her face. Her ship was once again full of life. All but her stun-sails were flying in emulation of Royal Horse. If they'd set these, they would have left The Queen in their wakes. How she would have loved to do that just to spite Tabor; but it was not to be.

The Cat was tired of this venture. She was also tired of Rabbits, Dog, and Wolverines. Blueportdoggie called to her and it was for this reason she was pressing on in her attack of the monster ship. Tabor was right. If they did not settle this now, Gaspar would be back later to settle things on a more individual and unfair basis. He would especially be keen to avenge the death of his friend Pugwash.

Glancing aloft, she watched the Royal Labradorean flag flying at her masthead. She found it fascinating how one small rag flown from on high could proclaim with clarity who you were and what you were about.

Taking out her telescope, she looked back at the brig and saw a lone figure standing on the forecastle, not moving as the ocean's spray flew over him every few minutes.

"Fuking Peeg," she muttered under her breath. "E stand there proud like jest to bother me. Eye geet he'em on my sheep again and I have thee cooper make the beegest barrel e evar see for thee pleasure night."

As she watched, a white Rabbit came to stand next to the huge Polynesian, offering him a mug of something.

"Nd what are ewe doing there, eh?" she asked. Suddenly she missed her one legged Ilene. Her breath suddenly caught in her throat and she felt tears on her cheeks. If she lived through this, perhaps she would give up the life and retire as Ilean wanted her to. Perhaps she would turn her ship over to Rosa... oh yes... that one... and suddenly her heart was away again, but in a different direction.

Duroc accepted the mug of tea Lady Taverness offered him. In preparation to the boarding action The Queen's compliment had swelled to over two hundred and there was little personal space on board the vessel. Even in this he was allowed whatever space he chose.

"Thank ewe," he told her, doing a fairly good impersonation of Captain Hiss.

The white Rabbit laughed and placed a paw on one of his massive forearms. "I can't fathom your interest in that Cat. She is not your species, does not like men, and she definitely does not like you."

"Fathom," he replied, placing a finger at the area of his Adam's apple, "Is this deep. Why you fathom?"

"You answer a question with a question," she told him. "That might work with some when seeking to avoid answering, but it won't work on a trained spy. Tell me straight up what your interest is in the Feline."

"Straight up," he countered, "Is rum not mixed with water. Sailors mostly like straight up when drinking grog." He pointed at the Caveat Noir. "She ees watching us. I want her see me."

Lady Taverness squinted her one good eye, attempting to make out the details of the ship ahead of them by half a league. "It's not possible to see that far," she told him finally.

"No need see," the huge whaler told her. "I can feel. She watch Duroc and not understand. We much like each other."

The Rabbit laughed. Her voice was music within the soft thump of the hull riding the water and the hissing swoosh of the spray as it flung itself skyward. "You're nothing like each other," she finally managed, "Not in species, sex, size, or attitude. That Cat is an iron hard pirate who has not a care of whom she kills to get what she wants."

The Pig sipped his tea and grunted his approval to its warmth and taste. "I heard some of you. Tea is good like Cat Captain. She nothing like you say; though she try hard to make people think is so."

"Why did she try to kill you the other day?" Taverness asked him, trying to angle a way through this mystery. Her curiosity was now peaked.

Duroc giggled. "Made her doll."

"You what?"

"Made her doll from rope, sail cloth, and little Doggie head. Thought she would like it."

Lady Taverness looked towards the Caveat Noir and smiled. "That was so sweet of you..." she began, and then stopped. Turning to the Pig, she said, "Rope, sail cloth, and what?"

"Little Doggie head." He told her sipping at his mug of tea. "I pickle little fellow from Blueportdoggie." He giggled, suddenly seeing the joke in his words. "Blueportdoggie... little doggie head," he muttered, beginning to giggle again. Finally he said, "Give it to Hissy. Thought she might like doll. She smile once until she recognize Pugwash; then get real angry."

Lady Taverness opened her mouth to say something... but closed it again without saying a word. Finally she asked him, "What did you pickle the head in?"

He shrugged his shoulders, "Cask of pickles... dill pickles, not sweet."

Swallowing, she asked, "There's no other surprises one might get if they perhaps broached another cask of pickles... dill, not sweet?"

The huge Swine smiled and looked at her out of the corner of his eyes. "Can't remember."

The Rabbit punched him in the arm, telling him it wasn't funny, though both of them laughed.

"Hissy need a friend," Duroc told her after their laughter died down. "I just try to be friend."

A time passed with nothing said between the pair. Soon the Rabbit was as wet as the Swine. Taking the mug back from him, she bid him bend down, and when he did, she kissed him on the cheek. "Captain Hiss doesn't know how lucky she is to have a friend like you Duroc. One day she will understand."

He snorted softly and then stood straight again; continuing his vigil.

Lady Taverness, slowly made her way aft, contemplating the strangeness of the world, and wondering if she should order the remaining casks of pickles be thrown overboard.

The Wait

Captain Tabor Rabbit

The Queen growls forth
Inta the trough 'n out again
Hull thump'n
Spray fly'n
Wind strong at our hind.

Pitty the poor bugger when we catch'im,
And poor be we all who live to tell the tale.

The Lady Robert Taverness Rabbit

The ship sways gently
Like a good wife's buttocks;
Inviting to the touch
Durable over the long run
With a slap waiting to happen
Just to keep things dicey.

And I lay in my hammock
Thinking about casks of dill pickles.

Captain Merdue De Hiss Cat (speaking to a picture of her Ilene)

Eye watch thee sky and pray my love;
Quietly in my own mind.
Many of my crew 'av died,
Lovers all, they are missed
Yet again wee ready to ke'el.

Eye clean m'eye pistols
Sharpen m'eye claws
N' keep an eye on the sea.

Eye we'el return to ewe soon...

Captain Henry Babacomb Dog – House of Labrador

I have not slept in two days.

My ship talks with me through this weariness.
She is not afraid,
Nor am I;
Though I am apprehensive that I have used up my luck.

Scatter Brained Bob steadfastly attends me;
As if he was my brother.

Perhaps I misjudged him.

Prince Uric

My station is the quarterdeck
In charge of the swivels.
My men and I practice constantly
Though the Captain will give me
No more powder.

I worry for my father.
I worry for my Uncle.
I worry for my men.

But I say nothing, as therein lies the path to dishonor.

Governor Louis Gulo

My shoulder hurts like fire to flesh
And what little sleep I get is fitful.
I hate hammocks and would
Sleep on the floor if it were steady;
Fucking ships!

Two days more and perhaps I will find my rest
In the muzzle of a cannon.

Oompalahala Duroc (translated from his native Polynesian)

I request Mother Ugga and Father Bugga,
(Mother Sky and Father Ocean,)
Owners of life and death,
Watch over my friends and my enemies
One and the same;
As life and death are one and the same.

I shall sharpen my spear
I shall begin another doll
I shall eat many pickles.

Rosa Cat (thoughts in Cat – not said aloud)

Sipping tea with Gabriel as the sun rises
Thinking of spurning in Tabor's wardrobe
And how I wanted him in me...
Wondering that I am not dead
Many times over.

I miss my mother and her ways;
Though I could never live with her again.

This is both poetic and tragic;
Yet very much Cat.

The tea is good.

Vesa Dufva

I half wake to the feel of my ship
And the soft warmth snuggled next to me.
Duty calls me forth...
Punk'n Cat drags me back again...

Her voice whispers in my ear;
'Thee Capitan say rest and Eye say wee make love;
Wheech dew ewe want?'

With a thump we roll out of
Our hammock to the deck below.

King Ludwig D'Gulo

The sound of the ship's wake keeps me company
As I sit in the stern windows watching aft.
The Cat's ship races close, graceful in its thinness.
The Rabbit's stout ship, further back, carries every stitch of sail.

I would find joy in this

But for the death we race towards.

How is it I deserve such loyalty?
Or could it be Gaspar deserves such hatred?
Live or die;
Life is a mystery.

Sails On The Horizon

The King's mast head lookout held his palm to the sun and squinted hard trying to see through the early morning glare. Well above the horizon now he saw the sails of three ships following on an intercept course. "Deck there!" he sang out, "Sails on the horizon!"

At Gaspar's insistence, the sailor was actually as far up the main mast as was possible to climb. The sun was now full above the horizon and rising on the man of war's starboard side, slightly aft of amidships. It had blindingly kept the discovery from being made by thirty minutes or better. This translated to a good five nautical miles of closing distance; not much in the grand scheme of things but enough that a small advantage had been gained by the Royal Wolverine/Labradorean battle group.

Captain (formerly Lieutenant) Jackabee Babacomb stepped from his 'day' cabin still rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He'd retired for the night well into the mid-watch, after having his remaining officers conduct an inventory of the ship's stores. As he'd suspected, The King was woefully short on both munitions and victuals, though their fresh water supply was still sufficient.

Cupping his paws around his mouth, he looked skyward and called out, "Wheraway?"

"Fine off the starboard quarter, sur. I make out three ships, Labradorean flags. Looks to be Royal Horse leading."

There was an immediate cheer from the crew and word was quickly passed to the lower decks of the expected company.

"Mr. Weedaboro," the Captain said to the Midshipman of the watch, "Take a telescope to the upper crosstrees and watch for signals."

The Midshipman, not much more than a pup, knuckled his brow and did as ordered, beginning the arduous climb into the rigging.

To the duty watch officer the new captain said, "I've got the deck Mr. Hanson. Hoist the recognition signal, and then call for the chaser gun crew. If they don't respond to the recognition signal we'll fire a salute to get their attention. From their course I would surmise they were looking for us, so I don't think that will be a problem. Have the Bosun call the duty watch up and get the sails trimmed while you're at it. We don't want to be seen as slackers now, do we? We are a capital ship and should at least give the appearance of being shipshape."

Going to the lee rail, he urinated over the side and then sent another of the watch below for a cup of tea. Though he'd been captain for only a few days the crew liked him since he'd had guts enough to run interference for them with Gaspar. It wasn't a matter of the refusal of abeyance to the monarch, since that was a quick death penalty; the young sailor

had won through the use of logic and soft argument. Then again, he was also quick witted enough that if he saw the King's eye singling out a particular sailor for some pretend or otherwise petty offence, he would have the fellow moved to another berth as a punishment for some other infraction; thus ensuring the sailor was kept out of sight.

As he leaned against the lee rail he had an epiphany. This sudden insight was hardly a good omen.

"Mr. Hanson," he called to the officer of the watch, "Entertain me for a moment here at the lee rail, if you please."

Hanson was a fellow Lieutenant, the pair spending long hours in discussion over the observation concerning the attrition of those officers wishing to curry favor with the monarch during their one ship blockade of Port Saylavee. They were as close as two fleas on a Dog's back (no pun intended) and their friendship was tighter than a square knot binding two dissimilar lines.

"Yes, sir?" Hanson inquired of his friend; giving him the respect that his position called for. As it was the young officer was now the ship's First Lieutenant.

"I had a thought, but you need not worry yourself for what it was. Simply this, old friend; use the starboard bow chaser as the signal gun. Have it prepped to fire but do not fire it until I give the command; which will be the removal of my hat. I shall do this when speaking with Gaspar shortly, so you will have to hurry. I wish the entire crew surprised by the report so load and run out discretely. Alert me when the gun is ready, and I will then send for our King. Do not take your eyes off of me when he arrives."

"Aye aye sir," the other officer replied with a wink. "My mother always said, 'If you're going to dance with the Devil, it's best to lead'. I've always considered it good advice."

The Captain only smiled in response, but touched his nose indicating his friend was on the right scent.

"Best you be careful Jackobee," Hanson whispered, "He's still got the marines full at his back."

"They man the tops do they not?"

"Aye... they do at that," the First Lieutenant replied in admiration of his friend's cunning. "I suppose I'd better hurry then and get the signal gun readied."

Captain Henry Babacomb watched the rigging of his ship, feeling every line, every sail, every wooden peg used to pound her planks into place. She was he, and he was she, come

to life; breathing the salt air through his nose and feeling the strength of the air pressing her forward over the waves.

The lookout had spotted The King's sails at daybreak. Babacomb knew the rising sun would give him added time. Anything that could get him closer was welcome. When the lookout first reported the sighting, the Dog had done the math. One point seventeen times the square root of two hundred feet (the rough height of the lookout) equaled their distance to the horizon; in this case sixteen and a half nautical miles. He unconsciously doubled this distance and added a bit more since The King's main mast would be almost three hundred feet tall, and what the lookout was seeing was only her very top sails. Since they were both heading relatively in the same direction, closing would be slow; but this would allow him time to think.

On their current tact, the Royal Horse was close hauled. He was now using the wind to greater effect and picking up more speed than The King ever could in a following wind. The black Dog also held the wind gage and if his adversary did not turn to fire, he wouldn't even have to tack to rake him with a broadside straight up his stern. This would be at a middle distance, but if he was lucky, his cannon could effectively gut the larger ship, the balls traveling her length rather than just her girth as they would when exchanging broadside for broadside.

He would then carefully go a bit further and if the larger ship still hadn't turned, would tack and come back to do the same thing over again.

Obviously that was not going to happen. No captain in existence, not even Gaspar, would let his ship take such punishment; but turn either way and the Royal Horse would dance back again, keeping the angles such that a square shot would never be given the enemy until he was ready to go toe to toe.

The Dog truly didn't think it would be that easy, but Gaspar was certainly not a good sailor. Much depended upon whom the ship's captain was and how much interference the monarch would be. If it was him, he would turn and come back, in an attempt to hold the wind gage, forcing Royal Horse on the defensive and placing the larger ship in a position where her big guns could track by a quick positioning of a few points on the compass.

Then again, he thought with a smile, if it had been him he would have shot the bastard monarch long since.

Scatterbrained Bob broke into his reverie just long enough to serve him a mug of tea, and a boiled egg already peeled.

Taking a sip of his tea and then popping the egg into his mouth, Babacomb thanked the sailor and went back to letting his mind wander. It truly didn't matter to him who the captain was, nor how The King might be positioned. The only thing that mattered was what he would do when it began; and for that he was ready.

Their plan was relatively simple and depended solely upon his superior seamanship. If the huge thirty two pound guns of The King's lower deck could be counted out, then the Royal Horse was easily her equal in metal. The trick would be in holding the wind gage until he could traverse either her stern or her bows in order to 'cross the T' and rake her soundly with his broadside. He would then turn to come down her length on the opposite side, where the lee wind would keep his deck at an upward cant, enabling his guns to easily fire into the middle gun deck. His crew would not attempt to affect a boarding. Their muscle would be focused upon four rounds in six minutes, and more after that if they were still able. While the two ships were thus engaged, Captain Hiss would lay alongside the forecastle and board there. Captain Tabor would next come alongside the stern and board at the quarterdeck.

Death and destruction was inevitable on both sides.

He looked skyward at the Labradorean flag flying at their mast head. It fluttered in the direction of the wind; across the deck from the larboard side towards the starboard bow. It made a snapping sound he found ominous.

Turning to the Bosun, he said, "Run up The Queen's colors at the fore; it's time Gaspar understood we do not represent his interest."

"What about your personal colors, sur?" the sailor asked.

"Time enough for that presently."

"Sur?"

"Waging war is like making love," Babacomb explained to the Dog with a strange smile. "You give her only an inch or two at first. Not until she's truly ready do you thrust home with all you've got."

When the Dog only looked confused, he explained; "They know the ship and expect Captain Rook's colors to be flown. Flying mine would tip our paw a little too early in the game."

"Ah... right you are, sur!" The Bosun exclaimed with a smile. "For a moment there you had me thinking of my Bess. I'll be glad to see her after we're done here... and she'll be glad to see me as well, especially when I shows her the coin I earned, eh?"

Henry Babacomb turned and looked at The Queen following in his wake. Suddenly he felt very lonely.

Tabor watched the other two ships keenly. They were like hawks, cruising near side by side with but a cable between them. Hiss was staying just back far enough that she did

not steal Babacomb's wind. This reflected exactly the state of their minds. He could feel their impatience with his portly brig, which was struggling to keep up.

As soon as Babacomb's lookout passed word The King had been sighted, signal flags alerted both the Caveat Noir and The Queen, whose masts were shorter. So far none of them had beaten to action stations. There was still plenty of time for that. Instead, the pirate had asked the cook to provide his very best for everyone. It was only fair to offer a fitting 'last meal' to those who would be putting their lives on the line.

Turning, he snapped open his telescope and regarded the other three ships of their small squadron. Gabriel's Sara, The Black Packet, and Tabor's Little Mistress had instructions to stay well back. If the battle went well, they would come forward and pick up any survivors who'd fallen overboard. If the battle went badly then they were to sail off to Port Saylavee; taking Queen Ludvika to safety. Once there they would report what they'd seen.

He was relieved to see that Rosa was finally following orders. As it was, The Queen would not last long under the cannons of the huge ship. The little sloop, on the other paw, would not have stood a rain drop's chance in Hades.

Soft arms wrapped around his waist and he smiled without lowering the glass. "I thought we agreed not to be so clingfull during these times of battle?" he said without turning.

"I can't seem to help myself," whispered a voice. It was soft and sultry; inviting to the fullest... and a true distraction. Her tongue tickled the inner hairs of the ear.

"Stop it now!" he grumbled, "You'll have me full erect to the laughter of m'crew. That happens and I won't be able to do a thing with'em."

"Sexually, or order of battle?" she asked, one paw snaking around to briefly cup his cod.

Snapping his spyglass closed, he turned to face her. He expected her to still be dressed as a sailor in order to blend in, but was surprised; finding himself nose to nose with a smiling white Rabbit attired in a pale yellow dress and wearing a rapier at her waist.

Faretheewell Rabbit, sitting on the ship's cargo hatch watching the pair, picked up his concertina and began playing 'The Shipfitter's Waltz'.

Tabor looked at him and winked, and then taking his bride to be in his arms began dancing her around the quarterdeck. After two passes, the ship's musician smoothly turned the waltz into a lively polka called ironically, 'Though We Die We Dance'. Within moments the entire ship was dancing, with three more musicians quickly joining in. The whoops and raucous behavior clearly carried across the distance to the other two ships.

“Rabbits are two sheets lacking of full rigged,” Hiss remarked in Cat to her second in command as she watched through her telescope.

Babacomb, taking in the silly gaiety aboard The Queen, actually laughed. He then felt bad when he noticed Mr. Flopears at the stern rail looking back at his ship and wearing a very homesick expression.

“We’ll get you back to’er soon enough Master Gunner,” the Dog said loudly, “And then you can join in the dance too, eh?”

Though his one ear twitched, the odd looking Rabbit didn’t even appear as if he’d heard.

“I LEFT EXPLICIT ORDERS I WAS TO BE INFORMED THE MOMENT ANY OTHER SHIPS CAME INTO SIGHT!” Gaspar roared at the young captain.

They were standing on the poop deck, all the way back at the stern rail where they could have what small bit of privacy could be offered on the huge man of war.

“They are Labradorean, My Liege,” Jackobee offered as he wiped his face of the King’s spittle with a handkerchief. “They also fly the Queen’s colors, which is indicative of the relief convoy. I’m sure she sends you her best, Sire.”

Gaspar stuck a finger in his face and hissed, “There is no relief convoy you ignorant fool. The Queen hates me and is locked securely away where she can’t interfere. Send me her best? I took her precious Rabbit away from her and swore I hung the bastard by his balls just to see her cry. She’d send me to Hell as quickly as you could blink.”

He slammed a paw on the railing and swore loudly, looking for a moment in the direction the ships were approaching from. Not seeing anything, he turned back to the young captain and told him softly, “We were supposed to have Saylavee flattened and wrapped up tidily in the initial attack. After the smoke cleared did we even have a single ship left that could have taken a message back for us?”

“Sir?” This was the first Jackobee had heard of this. Like everyone else, he was still expecting the supply convoy at any time.

Coming close to his ear, the King whispered, “They mean to kill me.”

“Who sir?”

“THE PEOPLE ON THOSE SHIPS!” he screamed, pointing in the direction of the Royal Horse’s flotilla.

“That’s nonsense, sir. I know Captain Rook personally. He’s the most loyal Dog I’ve ever met.”

“Deck there,” called the Midshipman atop of the main mast.

Both Dog’s eyes were drawn aloft. Gaspar momentarily forgot his invective to look at the small figure so high up in the rigging.

“Captain’s colors breaking out at the mizzen,” the youngster called as he squinted through his telescope. “He’s flying a blue, white, and green swallow-tail.”

Jackobee’s eyes became very large. Those were his colors.

With a thump, the duty Quartermaster opened the large recognition book, thumbing through it to the section on swallow-tailed flags. He paused briefly as he looked closer, reading the print a second time. He then turned and yelled out, “Captain Babacomb! The bugger’s flying your colors, sur!”

No sooner were the words out, than the King whirled upon his captain. “Your name is Babacomb?” he squeaked.

Jackobee quickly removed his hat to a resulting ‘BOOM’ from one of the forward chasers. Everyone, including Gaspar, turned to the explosion.

The young captain quickly removed the belaying pin hidden within his coat and struck his King over the head with it, tossing it quickly over the side and catching the Dog in his arms as he fell.

“Assistance here,” he called out. “The King has swooned.”

There was an immediate rush of sailors and marines to the aid of their sovereign and he was easily transported below to his cabin. A guard was set upon the door and the ship’s doctor, first summoned to the quarterdeck, was advised by Captain Jackobee that when Gaspar had swooned, he’d struck his head on the railing. The young Dog then suggested it might be best if their sovereign was kept still... perhaps an elixir to help him sleep would be in order.

“Aye, aye, sir,” the doctor replied, “And perhaps it would be best if I bled him while I was at it. Too much blood in the system will cause swooning right enough.”

“Capital idea,” Captain Jackobee Babacomb replied with enthusiasm, sending the smaller Dog on his way.

He then called to his Duty Watch officer. “Mr. Hanson, pipe all hands and prepare to ware ship. We shall turn to meet the strange vessels. Have my colors broken at the

mizzen immediately. We will ready the guns but not run out yet. Have your best Quartermaster come up here and ready him to make signals. It is time we got to the bottom of this strange development.”

Engaged

“She’s com’n about!” the lookout sang, his paws around his snout in order to be heard better below.

All eyes went to the Dog far up on the main topgallant cross tree. By now he could see all three masts rising from the man of war. Some fifteen minutes prior The King had fired a signal cannon and yet no signals had appeared. Babacomb had composed a message to be spelled out by the signal flags, but they had not yet been raised to the mast head.

“Looks like ‘is mains’ls are being drawn in, sur!” the lookout furthered. This was not good news. Henry now knew that whoever the captain was, he was not afraid to touch blades with him. Getting the main sails out of harms way from muzzle sparks was clear preparation for battle as the worse thing that could happen to a wooden ship was fire. Flying sparks from a broadside could easily catch on any low lying canvas. If that were to happen, those in the rigging had to either jump or burn to death. Eventually the hapless ship would burn to the waterline; or ‘at best’ become a drifting hulk totally at the mercy of the enemy.

“Captain’s colors breaking at the mizzen, sur!” Called the lookout. “She’s a blue, white, and green swallow-tail.”

“Thos’r your colors Cap’n,” the duty Quartermaster commented softly. “Do you think he’s making fun of you, sur?”

“No,” Henry responded absently. “He’s only being who he is; a man of war. There are regulations and courtesies involved in these things; not to mention honor. He has simply named himself. Are the signal gun and flags ready?”

“On your command, sur,” responded the Quartermaster, holding on to the halyard that would raise the brightly colored flags. Presently they were all tightly balled, meant not to unfurl until at the mast head and the halyard pulled taught.

“Make signal to the Caveat Noir and The Queen that we will be changing course. They should follow. On putting the helm over, we shall fire the gun and raise the signal at the same moment.”

It took but a moment to alert the following vessels. During this time, the ship’s newly appointed First Lieutenant, the same Bosun who had dared speak up when Babacomb had first come aboard, began bellowing orders to the deck crew. They, in turn, ran to man the running rigging in order to uniformly swing the ship’s sails as she turned.

“Will we be shortening sail, sur?” he asked his Captain.

“Not yet,” the Dog replied. Turning to the helm he commanded, “Four points to larboard, and sharply if you please.” To the rest of the crew he said, “Gun and signal when we steady up.”

Jackobee stood on the quarterdeck with his paws behind his back watching his ship’s crew ready for battle. The main sail yards looked as if they’d sprouted lumps as the sailors spread out across their length and then bent over them in order to haul in the sheets one paw at a time. The ship’s Marines were also busily climbing to the fighting tops carrying what supplies of powder and shot they would need in order to do their bloody work. From their high vantage point, every border they could kill was one less the crew would have to fight on the deck; and the young captain had no doubt the smaller vessels would try to board. In such a situation as they were about to face, it was an all or nothing proposition. You either lived fighting, or you died fighting.

“They’ve tacked with signal gun and colors!” yelled the Midshipman still up on the main mast.

“Can you make out the hulls yet?” Jackobee called up to him.

“Not quite yet, sur.”

“Can you read the signal?”

“I’ll need the book, sur,” he replied, yelling as loud as he could, “But one of the flags is definitely ‘surrender’.”

“That would be expected,” Hanson muttered. “I’d wager it’s something like ‘Surrender or Die’.”

The taller Dog was standing next to his captain, equally watching the crew’s progress and occasionally yelling commands. “I must admit to having great admiration for you sir,” he added when he was satisfied. “You handled our good King very nicely.” Turning to the Quartermaster and believing the Dog was not moving fast enough, he yelled, “Get the blessed signal book aloft Apple Head! If we wait much longer we can use a speaking trumpet!”

“Apple Head?” Jackobee asked him with a smile when the officer turned back to him.

The First Lieutenant blushed slightly. “I am opposed to cursing, as you well know, and it was all I could think of as my mouth worked.” Turning slightly he yelled after the Quartermaster, “And have the message brought; do not shout it out!”

“You’re the only one who saw?” the smaller Dog asked him.

“If I wasn’t, then your reputation among the crew will surely grow to the point of hero worship. I am curious that the other captain is also named Babacomb. Do you have a large family of which I am not aware?”

“Someone seeing what happened and telling of it could also cost me my head should the marines get wind of it.” He nodded to the tops, “They’re up there, I’m down here, who knows from where the bullet comes during the heat of battle, eh?” Looking aloft at his sails, he said, “My family have all been seafarers. My Uncle Henry was actually a right feared Revenue Service Captain, but I only met him a few times. He was a very cold individual.”

“Was?”

“Yes, was. The rumor I heard claimed that he tied in with some Rabbit spy and then sailed away chasing a damnable pirate for God knows what reason. No one’s ever heard of him since. My guess would be that the sea took him and good riddance if only for my mother’s sake since he was her brother. I have heard of his reputation in almost every port I’ve been in. Most spit when they say our name. He was a vile and cruel Dog.”

There was a moment’s silence between them and then Hanson said softly, “If you live and I don’t, please give my regrets to my mother, eh?”

“I am assuming you will do the same for me?” his Captain replied.

The pair smiled at each other and then walked to the weather rail. There they looked out over the sea, still not seeing the other ship’s sails.

Jackobee pointed out to where they would be. “He hopes I will continue on this track until he is amidships and I will fire off a broadside. Mind you he is still at the furthest reach of our guns. That would be a waste of what little we have. You saw the figures; what would be your guess on what we’re good for?”

“Four complete broadsides, sir, no more. That would be on whichever side you prefer but not both.”

The Midshipman who had been in the rigging just moments before came up to them and knuckled his brow. “Beg’n pardon, sir, but I have the message,” he near shouted.

Jackobee bent down and told him softly, “Whisper it to me Mr. Bellmore. We do not wish to share it with the ship in general just yet.”

The Midshipman came close and did as requested.

“Very good; and back up to the rigging with you. As soon as we get another signal, you do the very same thing, all right?”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

As the child sped off, the Captain turned and said to his First Lieutenant. “How very odd; the signal says, ‘In the Queen’s name, surrender and quarter will be given.’ Do you think the old girl escaped and took over while her King was away?”

Hanson cleared his throat and then quoted the old tale, “ ‘Balls,’ said the Queen, ‘If I had a pair I’d be the King.’” He then furthered, “I wouldn’t be surprised. We’ve been away for some time now and these things do happen among you Royals.”

“I’d rather not be reminded of my heritage if you please,” Jackobee told his friend with a frown, “Very well then; to business. I do not wish the guns run out until I am ready to use them. To do so prematurely will put us out of balance.” He placed a paw on the rail and looked off into the direction of the other ships, thinking his strategy through.

“We turned towards him and he immediately tacked which will take him off in that direction,” he said with a nod. “That will bring him within range of the thirty two’s, but it will be too great a distance to be sure of a hit. As it is, we have but the four broadsides worth of powder and shot left for all of our guns combined, so we shall have to be very frugal. The further he goes, the more we will have to turn to keep him tracked with the guns until we are pointed directly into the wind and ‘in irons’. Not exactly what we wish is it?”

The other officer removed his hat and wiped his forehead. Placing it back again he said, “He tacks again, and then comes across our stern while we struggle with the rigging and places a well aimed broadside up our poop, bugging us right proper.”

“You are so very eloquent,” the young captain told him.

“Thank you, sir,” the First Lieutenant replied, meaning it. “I had the benefit of His Majesty’s navy to the betterment of my education. Unfortunately I was taught battle tactics in a rather physical way.”

Jackobee leaned over the rail and looked down the side of his ship. All of the gun ports were closed, but he could feel her readiness.

Standing again, he told his friend, “Have the starboard midship thirty two cast loose and run out. I will give you a signal to run up in answer to the upstart’s request that we surrender; one that I learned as a pup, regretfully, at the feet of my famous uncle. I think it will be understood well enough. As soon as I give the word, have it run up and then we will fire a ranging ball to give him something to think about.”

He looked out over the water as if envisioning the shot. “We shall aim at the smallest of the three vessels. If we get lucky, the damage might make a difference. Then, while our friend thinks about life and such things, we will fall off of the wind and come about in the opposite direction. It will take some doing on the crew’s part with the main sails taken in,

but our positioning afterwards will be more advantageous to battle. He will be well within range by then and have to tack back again or feel the weight of our broadside.”

“I like that thought,” Hanson told him. “Perhaps I might suggest using only the thirty twos at distance, and save the twenty fours for close in. We would stretch out our powder that way, and bring in the entire lower deck crew to repel boarders.”

“That’s a splendid idea Hanson. Tell me, First Lieutenant,” the Captain asked with a smile, “Are you pure Labrador?”

“Almost, sir,” his friend replied with a straight face, “I am told I have just a bit of Irish Setter in my blood. I had the doctor bleed me last week though, so I should be well enough.”

Both Dogs laughed.

“Signal from The King,” the lookout yelled to the deck. “I don’t recognize it as a message but I can give you the alphabet Cap’n.”

Henry cupped his paws and yelled upwards, “Do so!”

“Gorf, Foxing, Yankyercod, Muddle,” the Dog reported, sounding out the phonetics as he’d been taught them.

The black Dog frowned, cursed under his breath, and then spit into the ocean.

“What does it mean, sur?” asked the Quartermaster. “I ain’t ever heard anything like it.”

“It’s an old code flown by the Revenue Service when sailing onto a smuggler signaling for mercy,” he replied. “It stands for ‘Go fuk your mother’.”

“CANNON FIRE!” the lookout yelled from the main topgallant cross tree. “HE’S LOOSED A SHOT AT US!”

Mr. Flopears, who was standing in the foretop watching, saw the smoke, and then quickly checked the positioning of the three ships. Looking back again to the smoke, he then positioned himself to face The Queen and began waving his arms and yelling, “TURN! TURN! TURN!”

Amidst the dancing, and the singing aboard the ship he loved, only one person noticed his frantic movements in the foretop. The Dread Pirate Tabor snapped his telescope open and looked to see who was doing the crazy jiggle in the Royal Horse’s rigging. His mind immediately flashed back to when he was on the Caveat Noir and he was the one in the rigging; yelling for the helm to be put over.

Spinning about, he bellowed, "HARD A LARBOARD! PLACE HER INTO CHAINS! ALL HANDS TO YOUR STATIONS!"

Without hesitation, the helmsman did exactly as he was ordered causing the brig to slew to the left. As soon as this happened all hell broke loose aboard the ship. Where the sea had been approaching with the wind from the larboard side, it now took her head on. This sudden shift caused the bow of the vessel to rise sharply and then come back down again in rocking horse fashion. This caused a good many of the dancers to completely lose their balance and more than a few almost went overboard. Next, the sails came full 'aback' as the shifting wind lost them and then found them again, pressing them in a reverse direction against the masts. Standing rigging that had been taut was now slackened and their counterparts equally pulling. With the sound of pistol shots, three lines parted while all three jibs began flapping wildly.

Vesa, managing to keep his footing by grabbing on to the Navigator's table, began shouting orders to the duty watch. What he was shouting, however, was interrupted by a whoosh and the sound of snapping timber as the end third of the bowsprit was severed by a thirty two pound cannon ball. The flying jib, now fastened only to the top foremast, flew back and up towards the sky.

"GET THE HELM BACK OVER!" Tabor shouted as he hung on to the rail. "LET'ER FALL OFF TILL THE SAILS FILL AGAIN! ON DECK... CUT THE FUK'N JIB LOOSE AND SEE TO THE RIGGING!"

Whoever didn't have a specific job to do now simply latched on to a part of the ship and held on as she began riding the swell which fortunately was only about four feet and lightly cresting. Though the deck's roll was not so bad, the pendulum movement of the masts made things more than difficult for those trying to tend to the parted lines. Should this movement go unchecked it was possible for the ship to capsize.

As The Queen's head began to fall off of the wind and the crew swung the sails to match its thrust, there were distant twin booms as Royal Horse fired off her starboard bow chasers in response to The King's defiant shot. Not long after the shots, there was a cheer from her crew.

"They can't have hit her," Vesa yelled over to his captain, "She's still a good two miles distant."

Tabor was far too occupied to even worry about the reason for the cheer. He'd lost way and by the time he had things back together The Queen would be a good mile behind. Looking up he saw the crew struggling to control the extra flapping canvas attached to their regular yards.

"DROP THE STUNSAILS!" he yelled. "DUMP'EM O'RE THE SIDE... WE GOT NO TIME TO FUSS!"

On The King, Captain Jackabee had no idea how his shot had fared, nor did he even give it consideration. It's full intention had been nothing more than a statement made that this strange enemy could expect a fight should they press on and come closer. As his ship fell off of the wind, moving back to her previous course before continuing in its roundabout turn, he had a sudden inspiration. If they thought he was running from the fight they would more likely continue their reach which would put them well within range when he finished his maneuver.

"All hands... let out the main sails!" he commanded. To the helm he said, "Steady up before the wind!"

The sailors in the rigging acting together as a unified body immediately loosed the huge sails. They billowed out to the thunderous roar of wind suddenly contained in canvas. This was accompanied by the wine of suddenly taut running rigging.

"Deck there," sang the lookout, "One of the ships has fired 'er guns!"

A moment later, two balls landed some five hundred yards off and skipped across the water. Both struck the man of war's thick hull but glanced off; though they made a sharp noise of it.

Jackabee looked to Hanson, who was now walking the main deck as if taking a Sunday stroll. The tallish Dog tipped his hat to the captain and smiled. Without saying a word, he acknowledged that the battle had begun.

"She's turned again and loosed 'er mains!" Royal Horse's lookout announced. Though the ship could now be seen from the deck, his job was to watch her every movement and report on anything out of the ordinary. There was an immediate cheer from the sailors on deck; The King was turning tail and running away.

"HE'S NOT DONE AND SHE'S NOT SUNK!" Babacomb bellowed at them, his anger washing over the crew like a title wave. There was a pause as every living creature on the ship looked at the Captain and believed they were peering at the Devil incarnate.

"ARE YA THAT DAFT?" he continued unabated. "HE KNOWS HE CAN'T OUT RUN US! HE MEANS TO DRAW US IN WHERE HE CAN TURN WITH US AND CLOSE! BRAOSIDE TO BRAOSIDE AND THEN IT'S DONE ISN'T IT?!"

He cursed loudly giving voice to his frustration and then pounded his fist on the rail. All his years of wanting just the opportunity to confront the Dog responsible for his father's death.; face to face, Dog to Dog, choose your weapon... and now he had that weapon in the guise of Royal Horse.

Pointing a finger forward, he yelled, "SECURE THE CHASERS AND READY TO WARE SHIP!"

For a moment the entire crew only stared at him, including King Ludwig and Prince Uric who were standing at the stern rail. Then the Bosun, turned First Lieutenant, began bellowing orders and the crew jerked back to life, quickly manning the braces and racing aloft.

"When we come about, I want the sails trimmed in good order," Babacomb ordered. "We need to gain much distance to cut him off. We'll approach from the bow where he won't have a chance to maneuver. If he turns away he'll lose his wind and his momentum."

To the quartermaster he said, "Signal our intentions to the Caveat Noir and instruct her to keep up, then signal The Queen. Tell them to catch up as they can... and find out if their damage was bad. They'll be well enough out of the way when the shooting begins and in perfect position to board from the stern as we planned."

"Deck there!"

All eyes went aloft to the lookout.

"Signal flags from The King. He says 'good shooting', sur!"

Captain Henry Babacomb hawked and spat over the lee rail. Something didn't feel right with this one. It was all too obvious he was not one of the incompetent political captains appointed to such a gaudy position, nor was he acting like some simple smuggler trying to sneak ashore without paying his required duty, he was too damned calm. 'Good shooting' indeed.

After he spat, the black Dog instructed the quartermaster to send a message back to the larger ship; the same message he'd received when demanding surrender.

Captain Hiss' quick eyes caught everything that happened as she made sure she kept her beloved Caveat Noir clear enough of the Dog that she could maneuver in an emergency.

It was obvious to her what the whoosh was as it passed over, though she'd never faced a ball so huge. Nor had she ever faced one that could reach such a distance. When the Cat captain turned to watch where it might fall. She found The Queen's rigging flopping around like a huge wooden wind chime, the brig's helm already put well over. The ball struck and her flying jib sailed skyward. As the seconds passed the Cat waited for the rest that must surely have been fired in the broadside. She was not disappointed when it didn't materialize.

“Ewe R thee lucky one Rabbit,” she called out while watching through her telescope, “Ang on to yur cod Tabor ees a rough ride!”

She immediately knew the Rabbit would be well behind them now if they held to the original plan. Stopping and then starting a sailing vessel took time and skill. Skill the pirate had... time he did not. Though this bothered her, she also knew he wouldn't be too far behind. Babacomb would not be fool enough to try taking The King without The Queen in position.

She smiled wickedly at the sudden mental image of Babacomb bugging Gaspar while the Rabbit held the monarch down. The sound of the Dog's guns erupting only made the mental image all the more savory. “Ewe cum loudly,” she muttered to herself as she turned to watch the Labradorean gun crews perform. Tabor's strange little gunner was still aboard Royal Horse and he was a good teacher. The crew's smoothness of teamwork attested to this, she noted, as the starboard bow chasers were cleaned out. She also noted they had not yet reloaded.

Snapping the telescope closed, the Cat's next glance was to the sails which were filled and pulling well. She then looked to the sky. The wind would remain steady from the south, of that she was certain; though it would increase in strength slightly. This meant their plan was still good. If they continued on, they could easily reach well past the man of war and then come back for a run at his ass end.

For her part she would find and board by his bow, the boarders on her crowded decks being the pry bar meant to force the entry.

The cheer sent up by the Royal Horse's crew next drew her attention and her lookout confirmed for her that the huge ship had turned back before the wind and was making sail.”

“That ees odd,” she said aloud.

“What is odd Captain,” her helm asked in Cat.

“The bastard is running away. He's back again before the wind with his mains let out. He is making it very easy for us. See there,” she said pointing towards the obscure shape in the distance, “He does move away.”

“I was on a man of war once,” her helmsman offered, “And though the ship looked very fearsome, so many of the crew had died of the scurvy there was no one left to fight her. It could be much the same my Captain. Why only one shot and not a broadside, eh? I would guess a lack of crew.”

The sound of Babacomb's angry shouts called her attention and she unsnapped her telescope again, watching his display as if she were no more than a pistol shot's distance from him.

“ ‘E ees a mad Dog, but a brilliant seaman,” she muttered as she watched, “ ‘E’s figured eet out to be a ruse.” Snapping her telescope closed again, she had the watch called up in preparation to whatever ‘Black Dog’ would now signal to do.

Jackabee was about to order the ship to continue its turn, but two things stayed this decision. The signal from Royal Horse and the fact that the lookout now reported the two lead ships had come about and were headed off in the opposite direction. Their course was angled and taking them a further distance from him. It would also, eventually, take them to a point ahead of the huge ship where they could approach and cut him off. He could veer only so far from the wind, and each time he did so would take time and effort. The huge man of war was a snail compared to the two lithe ships preparing their attack. Coming up closed hauled, they would be moving fast and able to keep their broadsides towards his bow no matter which way he turned. When they did this, it wouldn't matter how many guns he carried.

To his Quartermaster, he said, “Make signal and ask of Captain Babacomb's given name. Since we are of the same nation, we can at least speak to one another.”

Taking his telescope he climbed to the top main mast cross tree next to the Midshipman and quartermaster he'd stationed there. As the two larger ships sped towards the distant point, he found the brig now facing bow towards him and following.

“Now who the blazes are you?” he asked aloud. “And aren't you the brave little fellow. Apparently you cannot keep up and the one in the lead ship is impatient. That's very telling.”

Near him the signal flags broke open and fluttered to life. This took him back to watching Royal Horse through his telescope. “Come now, Captain Babacomb,” he muttered as he watched, “Just because we seek to kill each other does not mean we can't be civil.”

At that moment his opposite's signals broke open and began fluttering. It spelled out the name and a request for the same information.

“Uncle Henry?” Jackabee said, lowering his glass and rubbing his eye before looking again. He then swore under his breath and called to the deck. “Quartermaster: send up my first name, and then have the Bosun rig out a long boat. Hanson! Have the crew spill the wind from the sails; I want us appearing full sail but going slow!”

No sooner had he given the command than he swung off of his perch and slid the distance to the deck on the standing rigging as handily as any sailor aboard could have done.

As Royal Horse and the Caveat Noir spun about on their heels, Tabor stood on his quarterdeck shouting commands to the sailors amongst the warm bodies crowding his decks. Turning in the middle of a long string of oaths, he tossed his glass to Lady Taverness. “How are ya at climbing with a dress on?” he asked her.

In response, she took to the rigging like a monkey, making her way all the way up to the main top cross tree. There she hiked the dress up over her hips and straddled the mast as if it were a long lost lover, hanging on by the crook of her left arm as she balanced the long glass and momentarily searched for the man of war. At two miles distance, the telescope sharpened the image nicely.

“HE’S FULL SAIL AND MOVING BEFORE THE WIND!” she reported at the top of her lungs.

“Good,” Tabor called back through his speaking trumpet, “He’s got but the one chaser at his ass end so until he turns we’re still fairly safe.”

He said this more for the rest of the crew than for anything else. If he was as accurate with the single twenty four as he was lucky with the thirty two, they would have a very rough time of things before the Royal Horse could close and draw his attention. Firing back would be a waste of powder as his single twelve on the bow wouldn’t reach half as far.

Lady Taverness turned her attention to the other two ships, and found the tiny figure of Captain Hiss looking at her through her own telescope and waving. She waved in turn, and couldn’t help but smile. It all seems so dream like. On the one paw there was the ship, the ocean, and the dancing; and in the blink of an eye it all changed.

She shifted her gaze to the Royal Horse and found her sailors setting the stun’sls. Before this Babacomb had left them off so The Queen could keep up, but now he was cracking them on for speed even though he was not directly before the wind. She didn’t know much about sailing a ship, but she was a spy and learned fast who could help her when she needed help. She’d used Henry in the beginning to find and kill Tabor because she had recognized both his skill and his need; but he was now at the helm of his own desires, and he was driving his crew hard to get them. Gaspar, she had no doubt, would be dead by day’s end.

Turning the glass back to The King in the far distance, she saw a long boat in the water.

“Now why would he put a boat in the water,” she asked herself without taking her eye from the glass. “That is so very fascinating. Either this fellow is a bloody genius or he’s a fool.” She then remembered Tabor’s use of a small boat to draw both her attention and her fire.

Putting the glass down, she leaned over and looked at her husband to be standing on the deck below her.

The pirate smiled. Lifting his speaking trumpet he called up to her, “I can see straight up your dress and you’re not wearing any bloomers.”

“I had that hope,” she called back. “We’ve got visitors coming.”

Visitors

Captain Henry Babacomb peered through his telescope at the signal flags fluttering from The King's yardarm. The captain of the man of war had been prompt in replying with his given name. The name gave Black Dog the clear image of a young pup being given a 'whale ride' on his foot as he sat cross legged at the kitchen table; lifting the laughing child up and down over and over while making silly sounds meant to be whale like. Those moments were a small bright spot in the vacuum of a life dedicated to the sole purpose of revenge. His sister had bore only the one pup. Her husband, the captain of a Royal Labradorean Man Of War, was scarcely ever home and so had missed his wife's periods of heat. The child, conceived upon their honeymoon, was her world. Apparently he'd followed in his father's footsteps and had also learned well at his uncle's feet. It probably broke his mother's heart, but the sea was in his blood. He felt an odd sense of pride at this until he saw a kicking figure hoisted by the neck to the yardarm next to the signal flags.

Lowering his glass, he felt suddenly sick.

"Was that totally necessasary, sir?" Hanson asked his captain as he watched the body swinging from the yardarm.

"It's all right," Jackobee told his friend. "The line is looped around his shoulders so there's no harm done. I explained it all to him when he volunteered. 'Kick your feet about for about a minute or so and then go still'. We'll bring him back down presently. I must portray hardness to my uncle. Any small advantage I can gain I must gain."

Opening his telescope, he looked off into the distance at the racing frigate. "Consider our fake hanging as another signal flag," he continued. "The crew is aware of the ruse, and we shall reward the fellow him with a tankard of grog when he's back on deck."

Lowering the glass, Jackobee walked to the back of the poop deck and raised it up again, marking his longboat's progress towards the trailing brig. It would appear on the crest of a swell and then disappear again as it slid into the trough, its oars working in perfect unison. With luck Royal Horse would miss seeing it. Again, the Dogs were all volunteers; their objective solely to carry a message to the enemy vessel.

In this case the message was an olive branch and a white flag fluttered from its short mast.

' If ' there had actually been a revolt and Queen Fran (his distant aunt) had been returned to her rightful place, then he was very much for a peaceful exchange; but he also had a duty and obligation to protect King Gaspar. Without reassurances he could not give up

without a fight. The young captain was caught between his loyalty oath sworn on the day of his commission and that of his obligation to family and country.

“Do you think Mr. Weedaboro will do well?” he asked as he watched the boat fighting the ocean’s swells.

Hanson, who’d followed his captain to the back of the ship, thought about this for a moment. Finally he replied, “I believe he will, sir. He’s a loyalist and tends to kiss the King’s arse a bit more than pleases me, but if he has orders he will follow them. In this case, if he doesn’t then he’s a dead Dog, isn’t he?”

“If he survives what he meets at the brig,” Jackobee muttered, “I might hang him myself just because...”

“Precisely,” the First Lieutenant replied absently as he looked up at the sails which were now luffing considerably. The only sail still pulling with strength was the main top. Their fake hanging was now slowly swinging back and forth with the roll of the ship.

“What are your orders should he fail to obtain a peaceful resolution, sir?”

“We shall cast loose and provide on both sides of the ship. I know it will be a waste of one full broadside, but I want to be ready for whichever way we need to turn. Then again, when the boarding parties come close we will at least be able to get off a round or two into their hulls. While I’m thinking of it, have the crew cast all the dunnage overboard.”

“Sir?” questioned the taller Dog. “We may need...”

“If we die we won’t need a bloody thing!” Jackobee told him sharply. “I know it’s against protocol to waste what is valuable, but I want the decks totally cleared. The more space we have for the fight, the better. Also... have someone go in and drag the doctor back to his station on the orlop deck. The little suck up needs to begin preparing the surgery. If he administered a good potion to Gaspar as I instructed, the cabin boy can attend to him. Then have half a tot of rum distributed to the crew with my compliments. Tell them I am proud of them all.”

Hanson smiled. If ever he had any doubts about his friend’s ability to command, those thoughts had just been markedly dispelled. “Certainly, sir,” he replied.

On his way back forward he gave the command to bring their ‘hung dummy’ back to the deck.

“He’s got a white flag flying,” Lady Taverness called to the deck.

Tabor thought about this. It could be a trick, but he doubted it. All the same they would hoist the boat clear of the water to make sure it was not dragging a keg of powder behind.

Desperate times could lead to desperate measures and a small boat trying to get close could always spell trouble.

“When they get close,” he told his crew, “I want everyone to look as mean as possible. Duroc... you do your ugga bugga thing.”

The huge Pig smiled and held his spear in the air as he yelled, “AYE CAPTAIN!”

“We shall cast loose and provide the guns on the receiving side,” The Rabbit continued. “You run out but will not fire unless I give the command. He’s flying a white flag so we will not harm any of them unless I says so. The battle cry for today will be ‘Queen Fran’. When I calls it out we yell it just once and then remain quiet. Now to your stations.”

Looking to the masthead and the white Rabbit hugging the top cross tree, he yelled, “Where away?”

“One point off the larboard bow!” she yelled back.

“Cast loose and provide the larboard guns,” he commanded.

Mr. Flopears now strolled the gun deck, pausing next to this gun or that and placing a paw on its breech, speaking to it in reassuring terms. The crew watched him with curiosity, but did not interfere. Sailors were a superstitious bunch at the best of times, and they had witnessed what the strange little Bunny had been able to do. During the course of things, he had found one gun bearing a pit inside the barrel and had it moved to the stern where it was less likely to be used. When asked why he’d searched the bore with the many fingered searching tool, he’d told them the gun was complaining of a toothache.

“Are you ready?” he asked one of the guns. Nodding his head as if hearing a reply, he patted it on the cascabel and told it, “All will be done soon enough.”

“What did it tell you, sur?” asked one of the gun’s crew.

“It has misgivings; as I am sure everyone on board does.”

“It’ll do its job won’t it?”

“As readily as you will,” the master gunner replied, and then continued his stroll.

Babacomb watched the Rabbit walk as he watched everything that took place on his ship.

King Ludwig and Prince Uric had gone below to the cabin for their noon meal and the Prince had dismissed his troops until they were again needed. This left the Dog alone at the lee rail of the quarterdeck; which he much preferred. When they asked if he wanted

anything to eat, he told them, 'A cup of tea and some hardtack if you please, Your Majesty. My apologies but I cannot leave the quarterdeck now.' They perfectly understood.

The Dog looked to the stuns'ls which were now set, but, with the wind coming across from the aft starboard quarter they were on the verge of stalling. Much of the canvas had taken on a chugging sort of action as they found the wind and lost it again. He did a quick estimate of their speed and direction. Though they were making a crisp fifteen knots at his reckoning, he decided to take them back down again and so gave the command.

"When they are down," he told the First Lieutenant, have the crew secure and get them fed. Make damned sure they do not break into the rum. We'll need every drop of it later for the wounded. After they are fed, allow them to rest until we come about to make our run in."

"Aye, aye, sur," the stocky Dog responded.

Taking out his telescope the captain looked back at The Queen, noting her distance from the man of war. "She should be taking fire about now," he muttered. "Strange that Jackabee hasn't seen that. So tell me nephew... what tricks do you have up your sleeve. You're not that old yet that you should have command of such a vessel... what is your story, eh?"

Turning to the quartermaster, he gave him a message to run up to the top most yardarm.

Vesa expertly maneuvered the brig towards the approaching longboat, having the wind spilled from the topsails in order to slow.

Tabor, standing at the rail and watching them keenly for any strangeness, called to the longboat with his speaking trumpet, ordering them to ship oars and standby to receive a line.

The young navigator, waiting for this, ordered the wind spilled from all of the sails so they could take on the longboat crew without smashing the boat to pieces on their side during the approach. The timing was crucial but his handling of the ship was to perfection and equal to anything a seasoned veteran would have done. When the sails luffed there was a flapping of canvas and The Queen was felt to lose way, giving more to the loose motion of the sea.

Throwing lines were tossed to the longboat and she was quickly brought alongside. Lady Taverness, now back on the quarterdeck, scanned every inch of the boat through Tabor's telescope for possible trickery. She saw that none of the sailors was armed with anything more than a deck knife and the Midshipman sitting in the stern sheets,

immaculate in his uniform, was even missing his sword. His black fur had a shine that belied his months on the ocean.

“He’s a spiffy one,” she whispered in Tabor’s ear after reporting her findings. “What say the two of us give him a try when we get him aboard.”

“You are wicked in your ways,” the pirate told her, keeping a close eye on things, “But I like the way you think.”

“Get the boarding net over the side,” he called out to the deck crew, “And then get a long line on the bow of the boat. We’ll tow it behind. While you’re at it, get the other boats over the side and in towing array. It’s time to clear the decks.”

To the crew in general, he called out, “Anyone falls over the side when the fight begins make to the boats towed behind. The boats are neutral territory! You see a sailor in the water you help him get into one of the boats, no matter which side he fights for.”

The Midshipman, as senior Dog in the long boat, was the first one up the boarding net and on deck. As soon as he came aboard, he turned and knuckled his brow to the Labradorean flag flying from the mizzen. He then promptly lost his hat to Punk’n Cat who snatched it away before he could even protest. The orange Cat took it directly to her Vesa. Grinning, she placed it upon his head and adjusted it as he yelled to the sailors in the rigging.

Midshipman Weedaboro turned at the snatching and found ten of the boarders all armed to the teeth and standing in his way. Taking the hint, he turned back towards the quarterdeck only to run into the naked chest of a huge Swine who promptly picked him up by the scruff of his neck, bringing him to eye level.

“You not make very good soup,” the Pig told him, sniffing at his neck. “Smell good but too skinny.”

“By your leave, sir,” he managed in haltering Rabbit, “I am here to speak with the Captain.”

“He don’t like soup,” Duroc growled, his tusks leaving a lasting impression on the young Dog, “Unless have lots of carrots. Maybe could do.” Pulling the young Dog closer he sniffed at him again and then licked his lips.

While this was going on, the ten other sailors were moved to the far side of the ship and bid sit upon the deck, whereupon the cook was there offering mugs of tea and fresh muffins. “We’re all under the same flag,” he told them affably, “We just have a difference of opinion as to who’s in charge is all.” He then asked a series of discrete questions while offering a pot of molasses to pour over the muffins and a jug of rum to flavor the tea.

Duroc, finished tormenting the Midshipman, turned and expertly adjusting to the ship's movement in the following swell, carried him to the quarterdeck as if he were no more than a puppy. Once there, he stood the Dog back upon the deck in front of Tabor.

"This Dread Pirate Tabor," the Pig said loudly. "You show respect or we ugga bugga the fuk outta you right quick like."

"Captain Babacomb's respects, sir," the youngster stammered, knuckling his brow. He kept his fear in check and showed a remarkable resilience in doing so. "He wishes to know of Queen Fran. Is she truly in the seat of power?"

Tabor and Lady Taverness exchanged glances at the name of the captain.

"She is," Tabor replied, turning back to the man of war's young officer, "And the government supports her, as does the entire country. Now tell me of your captain and be quick. How is it his name is Babacomb?"

"We had a series of captains, sir," the youth reported. "All have died in the performance of their duties. Captain Babacomb was one of the Lieutenants onboard and appointed as a matter of the chain of command. He wishes to know if an accord is possible before we exchange gunfire."

"Is he any relation to Captain Henry Babacomb?" the pirate asked him with narrowed eyes.

"I don't know, sir... honestly I don't. Is it possible to have an accord? The agreement is immensely important, sir."

"It is," Tabor replied, "If he will surrender Gaspar."

"The King must not be harmed," the Midshipman stated forcefully, standing tall and bringing himself to his full height. "That must be part of the agreement."

The pirate captain looked to Lady Taverness and said in a quiet voice, "This is your call my dear. I can handle a boarding, but I will defer things political to you."

Looking at the Midshipman, the former spy said in clear Labradorean, "We agree; tell us what signal to make."

The youth quickly shucked his uniform jacket and revealed two flags wrapped around his torso. One was Red, and the other bright green. Handing her the green flag, he told her, "Fly this from your foremast where it can be clearly seen. The King will reply acceptance by firing a signal gun. Is there a way to alert the frigate?"

The white Rabbit looked at her husband to be. "I think we might have a problem," she told him.

“Signal from Royal Horse,” the quartermaster in The King’s tops reported. “He inquires of your mother, sur.”

Jackobee was about to order a curt message that she’d died broken hearted at the reputation his uncle had earned in Gaspar’s name... but that would take far too many flags. “Respond ‘dead’,” he said aloud to the quartermaster standing by the signal locker. His mind was occupied with a hundred different things at once and the simple signal would explain what it must. The quartermaster took note, and with an ‘Aye, sir,’ began searching the flag locker for the proper flag.

“Green flag at the foremast of the brig, sur,” shouted the quartermaster in the tops.

Hanson slapped Jackobee on the back in a rare show of emotion. “It’s an agreement for the Queen, Captain. I knew Weedaboro could do it... the Queen is in charge by God. Sanity has prevailed!” Turning to the stern chaser, he commanded, “Fire off the gun there!”

“Thank God for the Queen,” Jackobee responded with like relief.

The quartermaster, hearing but part of the conversation, reached in and added more flags to the message, the first of which represented all the tenses of death, the meaning of which would be understood through the translation of the combination of flags hoisted with it. As he pulled at the flag halyard, the stern chaser was fired off.

Royal Horse’s lookout saw the gun smoke seconds before the distant report was heard. A moment later the signal flags broke at the top.

“He’s opened fire on Captain Tabor, sur,” he reported to the deck below. Through cupped paws, he furthered, “ ‘Is signal says, ‘Death to the Queen!’”

Black Dog Babacomb slammed his fist on the railing and cursed.

On the deck of his ship there was a momentary stillness... and then the drummer began playing his tattoo as the Captain had Royal Horse beat to action stations.

When the Sky Comes Crashing Down

“Royal Horse has turned o her heel, sur! She’s on the reach and almost ‘ead on. Damned fine, she is,” called the quartermaster from the tops. “New signal” the Dog continued as he watched through his telescope, ‘Death to the King!’ ”

Jackobee and Hanson looked at each other, shock clearly on each of their faces. Both looked up to the masthead together, seeking the Dog from among the many clinging to the huge ship’s rigging. Hanson was the first to see the flags fluttering at the yardarm. Immediately understanding their meaning he jumped to the signal halyard and pushed the quartermaster roughly out of the way. Un-tethering the line, he yanked the flags back to the deck. Turning to the Dog, he hissed, “You’ve killed us all fool!”

Ripping his sword from its scabbard he made to strike the fellow dead, but a paw restrained his arm. “We’ll deal with this later,” Jackobee told him firmly. “For now we beat to stations. He’ll be broadside on us in but a quarter hour and he’s solidly got the wind gage this time. He’s a sharp old Dog. Have the starboard thirty twos run out. Four broadsides as soon as she’ll bare, and we’ll pull the crews up to the main deck before he can cross. As we discussed, arm them with cutlass and axe. The upper deck twenty fours will take over from there.”

“But we have an accord,” the First Lieutenant began.

“Had an accord,” his captain corrected him. “With both sides now signaled for death, the gauntlet’s been thrown. It’s all or nothing Hanson and I will not surrender Gaspar to a hangman’s noose. No matter how vile he is, he is still the King and I would die for him if need be. Now go below and prepare. You fight the guns and I will take care of the sailing.” He gave the taller Dog a hard look. “Do not fire your broadside before you can hit something. Mind you’ll be hearing a lot of noise from the bow chasers as I shall have them banging away shortly in range or not. Above all else, for the crew’s sake, do not panic.”

Hanson knuckled his brow, “Aye, aye, sir. And what of the brig? Shall we open fire on her as well?”

“No. With her we had an accord. That still stands; but obviously she is not in charge of the squadron. I think she will approach from the larboard side. I will give her as much room as possible, but we’ll be turning into that direction.”

“Jackobee,” Hanson hissed, “Dare we take that chance? We are under attack!”

“Do not run out the guns on that side. I will keep a close eye on the brig. If she approaches too close or looks to be on the attack, you will be freed to blow her out of the water. As close as she’ll have to come to even think of using her little guns, we couldn’t possibly miss.”

He then turned and ordered The King beaten to action stations. “SET THE TOPS AND ROYALS!” he yelled to the sailors on deck and in the rigging. “GET THEM TRIMMED UP AND PULLING PROPER! MAIN SAILS UP IN BATTLE FASHION!”

To the four Dogs at the monstrous double wheeled helm he commanded, “Come a point larboard. I want the breeze out from under our skirts and I want her sucking every ounce of life from the wind. Pay close attention to my commands because the turn is going to be critical when it comes.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” the senior helmsman replied, “One point larboard.”

Taking up his speaking trumpet, the young captain ordered the bow chasers to open fire whenever they were ready.

Captain Hiss shouted commands to the sailors in her tops as she kept up with Royal Horse; back five cable lengths and another three again to the Horse’s larboard side. This gave her some space to maneuver should she need and the Cat was not so keen to be closer for the opening broadsides.

Her decks were wet with spray as the hull cut through the swell; constantly breaking free and then slamming back again with a physical thud. Those of her boarders, who could not take shelter in the hold, had covered themselves with a spare sail in an effort to keep themselves and their equipment dry.

She felt strangely alone since Tabor had fallen away but would never have admitted this to anyone. It was a strange adventure she’d been thrust into and not of her own doing. It had been fun, to be sure, but it was time now to go home. The thought of Ilene’s tavern called to her like an unseen siren. There was also her daughter’s wedding to plan, if she could bring her back from the sea. Perhaps she could conduct a cutting out party on the little sloop one night; take Rosa prisoner. She could blindfold her; bind her limbs if necessary and then drag her back to Kate.

The Cat’s thoughts were broken into as she heard the distant drummer aboard Royal Horse bringing the ship to action stations.

“Attention there!” she yelled to the crew in Cat. “Be ready to tack. We will come to action stations soon. See to our passengers; get them armed. The sooner we are done, the sooner we can go home.”

Looking to the masthead she cupped her paws around her mouth and called out, “Where is the stupid Rabbit?”

“Trailing behind the man of war, Captain,” her lookout responded. “He was fired upon, but only the one time.”

At the statement, Hiss' ears picked up the distant report of The King's bow chasers. "And so shall we all," she muttered, unsnapping her glass to look upon the ship they made to approach. As she watched, four puffs of smoke blew out again from the ship's bow. She was actually able to watch the flight of the balls, which finished by splashing down a half mile short of Royal Horse.

The King was now about three miles distance and fairly facing them bow on. Half that distance would easily range them into The King's deadly thirty two pounders... no more than ten minutes, fifteen at best and the wind would most likely have accompanying shrieks as the living died. Her mind worked out the math of the wind, the ocean, and the distances, telling her that Babacomb should tack again in order to buy them some time while letting his gunners bang away at the man of war's relatively unprotected bow. At this angle, and for now, it would be twenty some guns to but the four.

She spat over the side and cursed all military sailors everywhere. Charge in and fight was all they ever knew how to do. A pirate valued the price of their own lives when it came to such things. You can't spend the gold you steel if you're dead. Better to...

The King's side disappeared behind a huge wall of smoke and flames that seemed to magically appear from nowhere.

The Cat captain was suddenly very afraid.

Tabor had climbed to the extreme top of the main mast in order to see what was going on first paw. No sooner had he made the height and snapped his glass open than he saw the results of the drummer's work on The King. The ship was as alive as a bee hive he'd seen knocked to the ground by a drunken sailor once. The sailor laughed until the stinging began.

"That don't look like no fuk'n accord," he muttered.

Midshipman Weedaboro had alerted the pirate to the signal flags. The young Dog had then gone as pale as his black fur would allow for as he translated their meaning. "I don't understand," he stuttered, sure that the flags spelled his eminent death, "Captain Babacomb said he wanted an accord."

"It's all in the name," the pirate growled as he considered what to do with his prisoners. In the moment it took him to even consider the question, he decided to let them live.

"Pull their boat back in!" he yelled at the deck crew, "And get the other's launched!" Turing to the young officer, he said, "Off ya go, and be sure to stay well clear until things settle back down. If it all goes bad and there's nothing left afloat when we're done, steer due North and you'll arrive back at Saylavee. You have a compass?"

The uniformed child dug into his pocket and produced a silver inlaid instrument presented to him by his father when he joined the navy.

“That’ll have to do,” Tabor told him with a wink. “It’s small so keep it away from any metal when you used it. Sorry I can’t slow none to help you on your way but there’s work to be done. If you and yours aren’t off this vessel in five minutes, I’m throwing you over the side.”

To the ship in general he yelled, “That goes for all of you lubbers wait’n to board that big bastard ship. Get off The Queen or I’m throwing you overboard! My plans have changed and they go no room for any of you!”

“I’m staying!” shouted Sergeant Blue from among those packed upon the deck. “Whatever you have planned you’re going to need help and by God that’s what I intend to do!”

There was an immediate chorus of voices echoing this feeling.

Tabor felt something stir in his chest. Ever since he’d had to leave the majority of his bunch back in Saylavee he’d missed the camaraderie of a good ship’s crew, Rabbit or otherwise. There wasn’t any time to waste in arguing. “All right then,” he told them in his best Bosun’s voice, “You’re all now pirates!”

“I’d like to stay too,” Weedaboro told him. “The Captain said we would have an accord, and I’m sure he meant it. I know the signals, sir.”

“Fine,” the Rabbit growled at him. “Stay, but you renounce your navy and swear allegiance to this ship, here and now... and that goes for your boat crew too,” he furthered loudly so the Dogs would hear him. “All of ya! Everyone! You boarder’s included. Everyone swears! Grab yor cods, spit on the deck, and yells; ‘I’M A QUEEN!’”

“Does that mean we’re supposed to have sex then?” Sergeant Blue called back to the accompanied laughter of everyone present.

“Only if ya wants ta!” Tabor replied with a wink, “NOW SWEAR!”

There was touching... there was spitting... and in one voice, all claimed the title of Queen.

Turning to Duroc, Tabor told him, “Cut down that Labradorean rag and run up the Skull’n Bones. I don’t want any more mistakes and I damned sure don’t want to be following in Black Dog’s wake like some fuk’n nursemaid. We need to let The King knows this is The Queen and she don’t take orders from nobody.”

The Pig snorted and gave the Rabbit a good natured hug. Though Tabor tried his best to dodge that cannonball, he got squeezed to the whaler's bare chest. His urge for a hug sated, the Pig set about doing as commanded; letting the Labradorean eagle flutter off and into the ocean ahead of the brig.

Tabor, now straddling the main topgallant's cross tree, judged the distance and figured his brig to now be no more than a mile behind the huge man of war and closing quickly. Smaller and faster was sometimes a good thing. Though he'd heard the cannon blasts of the chasers and seen the resulting smoke, The Queen had not yet been opened upon so he took that as a good sign her captain was an officer of his word; though it was obvious they were being closely watched. As he observed the ship through his telescope, her tops were shaken out and trimmed even as her mains were being pulled up in preparation to battle. As he watched, The King slowly began to turn, attempting to meet her attacker with a broadside, though the pirate instinctively knew she would be well behind Royal Horse every step of the way.

Leaning a bit, he yelled to the deck below, "Helm! Follow her lead. We'll steal a bit of her wind when we go by and that'll help us round on her bows."

Lady Taverness, standing next to the wheel, blew him a kiss and smiled at him. She had her arm around Weedaboro's shoulder, apparently deep in conversation with him. He was about to yell down that her mind was again in the gutter, but he was interrupted by the Wolverine standing just below him.

"Where do you want me, and what do you want me to do?" Sergeant Blue called from the main mast's fighting top.

"Right where you're at," the pirate replied, turning back to his telescope. "You have both of the seven barrels with ya?"

"Aye, sur, and two good brother's in arms to load'em fer me. What are my orders?"

"Make yourself comfortable shoot'n wise. My plan is to take The King as a prize. That means she belongs to me and nobody else. When we round the front of the big bastard, we'll be taking the opposite tack to Royal Horse. We'll be coming close alongside, putting us between him our prize. If Black Dog don't back down, I want you to kill him."

With that, there was an enormous stuttering explosion as The King's broadside of thirty two pounders sounded out. The smoke rising up made the ship look as if it were on fire. It also momentarily blocked Tabor's view of Royal Horse and the Caveat Noir.

When the wind finally cleared it away again, the Caveat Noir was gone.

Friends, Enemies, and Convenient Allies

A normal person might have yelled. They might have sucked in wind, fainted, cursed, or any number of things that could have been expected upon seeing such a sight; but the pirate remained mute. They were fighting a sea battle and the death of a ship or a friend was expected and yet not expected. Tragic and yet accepted, at least until later when there was time to grieve and you were still alive to do so.

Taking the telescope from his eye, Tabor regarded The King which was now less than half a mile distance. Wood and crew suddenly flew threw the air as Babacomb's chasers finally ranged home. Even as this happened, there were more puffs of smoke from the guns left on her forecastle as they attempted to strike back.

At The Queen's foremast, signal flags were hoisted from below and allowed to flow well forward like kites in the wind. Midshipman Weedaboro gave them the combination required to send the message, which proclaimed; 'Strike your colors to me and I will protect you.'

"Do it!" The pirate whispered. "Come on Babacomb... more will die if you don't; strike your damned colors."

On the deck a trumpet played out one long note announcing the signal.

In response, The King's larboard gun ports opened and forty tons of ordinance moved outboard and into firing position.

Jackabee stood unflinching on his quarterdeck observing the damage done to his forecastle. Two of his twenty four pounders had been disabled in the blink of an eye, and three of his sailors were killed outright. The ship now resembled an ant hill that had been stepped upon. Everywhere he looked were sailors busily tending to the art of naval warfare. Weapons were being passed around, cannons loaded and primed, damage parties both working and waiting in readiness.

Four of the forecastle crew were being carried below to the surgeon as their mates attempted to set things right. One of the guns was knocked completely from its carriage while the other was being set upright by the concerted efforts of no less than thirty sailors. Most likely the next time the young captain would see the injured, they would be missing limbs.

"Standby to put the helm over!" he yelled out, alerting the crew to the forthcoming maneuver.

Hanson's broadside had been incredibly lucky. He'd watched through his telescope as the ship following Royal Horse was struck and sunk in one fell swoop. She had a full press of

sails and the effect of this suddenly unleashed power of the wind simply blew her rigging apart. Her hull had ripped open as if it was made of rotten wood.

They now had a fighting chance when the frigate came along side even after their bow was crossed so long as he made the mistake of keeping his aim low in order to incapacitate the lower deck thirty twos. That would make them equal in firepower, but the King's crew was crackerjack good, and that was something his uncle was not figuring into the equation.

He heard a trumpet in the same moment he heard the lookout sing out of a signal from the brig. Turning, the young Dog observed the flags now flying at the brig's fore. Before he could raise his telescope to read it, however, there was a rumbling sound. He expected this but not so soon after the broadside. Even The King's crew was not that good. His ears also detected the rumbling coming from the opposite side of where it should be coming from. Turning forward again, he leaned on the quarterdeck railing and yelled, "I gave no order to run out the larboard battery!"

"The order came from below, sir," the Midshipman yelled back. "I assumed it was from Mr. Hanson."

He would have had the guns hauled back in again immediately except there was no time.

"Get down there and tell him; 'DO NOT fire on the brig'! Then tell him to get the starboard battery serviced and back out. Have him send half the crew up as soon as that's done. We may not have the time to get another shot and he's to get the rest of the crew out after that."

"Aye, aye, sir!" the child officer replied, running immediately to the main deck companionway. As he ran there was an additional rumbling of gun trucks as the starboard battery began moving back out. This was interspersed with the grunts and shouts of the pikemen trying to get their guns aimed to the extreme forward angle.

"Upper deck!" he yelled, "Run out and train forward! Prepare for the broadside!"

Turning, he commanded, "Helm, all the way over larboard side!"

As soon as he'd said this, he turned again and raised his telescope. The broadside was but a futile gesture. Judging the angle of the oncoming frigate against the position of his own ship, he knew it would fall in her wake. Smoke blossomed from Royal Horse's forecastle and a few seconds later two balls passed through the fore royal sail putting holes in the canvas. This he could live with.

As his remaining two guns on the forecastle spoke in reply, he finally turned and regarded the message flying at The Queen's foremast. Lifting his telescope, he first read the flag's meaning, and then moved his eye back to the flag now flying atop the mizzen.

The oddity of the skull and bones waving in the wind almost went past him until it dawned on him that the brig was no longer flying the Labradorean Eagle.

“Now that’s ballsy,” he muttered.

He read the message again and then turned back to the frigate, looking for any signs of difference. The Royal Horse was still flying the Labradorean Eagle as well as her ‘Death to the King’ message. It was also drawing closer by the second. His mind quickly assessed the battle conditions. The pirate offered protection while his own countryman and uncle offered only death.

“And how could a little brig protect a ship of the line from an attacking frigate?” he asked out loud.

With an enormous explosion, the starboard battery fired as one. This caused his ship to lurch and shudder from the recoil of so much weight moving inboard in the same moment. The air was filled with the smell of acrid gun smoke and for a moment he couldn’t see a thing. Lowering his glass, he waited for the report from the masthead. As he predicted, the shot fell far behind the frigate... something that surely must have elated her master.

“Mr. Hanson to the quarterdeck!” he called out impatiently. “Lower gun deck crew to the main deck!”

His order was relayed quickly from one yelling Midshipman to the next until the First Lieutenant was seen hastily seen climbing up the companionway. The usually calm Dog was fairly frothing. “What is it... what’s amiss?” He yelled to Jackobee as he approached the quarterdeck. “I’ve guns to attend to, sir!”

“Come and see,” was his Captain’s reply. The young captain then ordered the upper deck larboard battery to be hauled in.

Prince Uric and his father were standing on Royal Horse’s poop deck observing the battle as it developed. Both were landsmen and good soldiers, but sailing a ship was far beyond their understanding. The most either understood about the wind was that it moved them along and you could not sail directly into it, though Royal Horse was almost defying this thought on her present course.

When the bow chasers were given the order to commence firing, they watched fascinated. Though they’d watched Mr. Flopears’ instructions in the preceding days, that was practice while this was battle. To the soldier’s eyes, the servicing of shipboard guns versus the guns of field grade was the same with the exception that the gun’s carriage and manner in which they were restricted and aimed was quite different. In the field there were no lines and hawser’s attached, and aiming was much easier to accomplish as you

simply picked up the carriage's tail and swung it around on the large wheels. Shipboard, it was the raw muscle of the pikemen that did the trick.

During the first exchange the pair had alternately ducked when four balls passed low overhead, tearing holes in the main sheets; killing one poor sailor as they passed. His body splashed down on the starboard side. There was a moment's quiet, and then the crew was cheering as it was reported their own volley had hit home.

Then had come the huge cloud of smoke; erupting and obliterating The King from the naked eye. A moment later the distant thunder like roar found their ears.

Noting the obvious, that the broadside would not find them, both son and father turned and watched as the Caveat Noir suffered her horrific fate. It was over that fast and both Wolverines gripped the stern rail tightly.

"Henry," Prince Uric called back to Black Dog, "Captain Hiss is gone."

"What do you mean gone?" Babacomb demanded, turning from watching his ship perform his wishes. He blinked once, and then unsnapping his glass, looked the four cables behind them and immediately swore. "We can still do this with Captain Tabor boarding at the stern," he said in cold assessment. He then swung his telescope to locate the brig.

Ludwig and his son looked at each other and then back to the sea captain.

"Henry," Uric called to him, "Should we not go back and look for survivors?"

"If we did that," the Dog replied acidly without lowering his glass, "The King would sink us just as quickly. On this line he cannot bring his guns to bear before we strike him at the bows. We have to press on or be buggered bloody just as Hiss was."

As unsavory as it was, what he told them was exactly right.

The two bow chasers spoke again and the entire crew paused to track the flight of the balls; disappointed when they only passed through sail cloth.

Babacomb noted The Queen was but a short distance now from the man of war. She was pressing in, trimming her sails to accommodate the directional change of the wind as she matched the larger ship's turn. Flags fluttered at her foremast, and a black flag now replaced the red and blue stripes of the Labradorean Eagle.

"What in hell is he playing at?" the captain asked out loud. Lowering his glass, he looked to the quartermaster in the masthead who was busy watching The King. "WHAT DO THE FLAGS READ AT THE QUEEN'S FORE?" he yelled angrily at the Dog.

The fellow immediately shifted his glass, regarded the fluttering colors for a moment and then yelled back, “Strike your colors to me and I will protect you!”

“The hell he will!” Babacomb said to no one. Turning towards the bows, he ordered, “PLACE YOUR NEXT TWO SHOTS OVER THE BOW OF THE BRIG! IF YOU HIT HER FINE!”

“Henry!” Prince Uric said loudly, moving the short distance to stand next to his friend, “You can’t do that. Tabor is our friend. We have fought side by side with him.”

“I don’t wish to hit him,” the Dog retorted curtly, “I mean only to warn him off. I said what I said so the gun crews would not be afraid.” Babacomb knew the explanation was weak at best, but he didn’t care. With the loss of the Caveat Noir, Tabor’s actions severely reduced his chances of obtaining his goal. “The closer the ball splashes down, the clearer the message,” he furthered.

“BROADSIDE!” the lookout warned as The King’s bulk again disappeared behind a curtain of smoke. With the distant thunder finding their ears, the entire crew watched the black dots hurling through the sky like an angry flock of harpies. A moment later there was a large splash six cables back. This was followed quickly by a rounded and quite loud ‘huzzah’ called for Captain Babacomb.

Hearing a particular noise above all the others, and ignoring the cheer, Black Dog looked upwards, pointed, and yelled, “Trim up the fore royal, damn it! She’s flapping like your grandmother’s bloomers!”

Turning back to Uric, he asked him calmly, “If you had a soldier, and during a battle he refused to fire upon the enemy, what would you do?”

“A Wolverine would not do that,” the Prince replied calmly, his attention now drawn by the bow chasers being hauled out. As he watched, Mr. Flopears moved forward and doused the breach of one of them with water. He was immediately grabbed by the gun’s crew and beaten to senselessness. As he was tossed to the side, the remaining chaser fired off, recoiling backwards; bouncing slightly as it reached the end of the breeching line.

The gun’s aim was good and the ball landed squarely between the brig and the man of war.

Jackobee slammed a fist on the poop deck railing as he and Hanson watched the shot fall between The King and The Queen. “That clinches it!” he said loudly. “If Uncle Henry is so worried that he fires off such a warning, then the brig disobeys and is acting on her own.”

Whirling, he yelled to the battle Quartermaster, “Raise this signal; ‘To the pirate; at your command’. As soon as it’s up, strike our colors.”

“Strike our colors, sir?” Hanson asked in shock.

Jackabee turned back to the taller Dog, his eyes hard. Having to explain his orders even to his close friend suddenly angered him; command suited him well.

“We had an accord with the brig that protected our King,” he reminded. “We have sunk the third ship and he still offers to protect. The frigate is not happy about this, and to me that is all the confirmation I need. We strike, and the odds go from two to one against with the frigate poised to rake us stem to stern, to two to one for us. If the brig can gain The King time to complete our turn then we are in good position to use our broadside to effect.”

“But you will have struck!”

“And so I will follow the commands of the one I struck to. If he is attacked by his former ally then we are free to attack; as we would have in any case. Go... inform the crew the brig is now our friend. Get the lower deck manned again and rearmed. We shall maintain our turn so the starboard battery can be brought to bear. Get the larboard guns back in and run out the entire starboard battery. You will stand by and await my orders. You will not fire unless I give the command.”

Hanson knuckled his brow in new found respect for his friend. “Aye, aye, Captain.”

As he spoke the words, the signal flags were hoisted aloft. As soon as the line hit the stops, the tightly balled flags popped open in good military fashion. The Quartermaster then went to the flagstaff at the stern and with but one look to his captain for confirmation, slowly took down the Labradorean Eagle.

Pirates – And It Ain't A Musical

The ball fired from Royal Horse was a remarkable shot. It whistled through The King's rigging en route to The Queen and then splashed down right between the pair. This made Tabor less than happy. There was a somber moment among his crew and then The King hoisted her signal. As Midshipman Weedaboro loudly announced its meaning, her colors were struck and the entire crew cheered. The Queen was now a scant five hundred yards off, though sailing two fathoms for every one of the larger ship and marking her position in order to round the bows as she turned. As the brig tracked her course, and with Vesa's encouragement from below, Tabor's sailors continuously trimmed the sails to keep the wind's energy as efficient as possible.

The pirate now estimated his ship would be along side in no more than fifteen minutes. Once again bringing his telescope up, he looked past the lumbering man of war to the lithe frigate bearing down upon them in a long reach from downwind. It would take some skillful maneuvering on his part, but, if he was lucky he would be able to meet Royal Horse before she crossed. If that luck continued, he would convince Babacomb to break off his attack. If he wasn't lucky, then he would suffer the same fate as Hiss, though the Black Dog would be pounded in kind as the man of war, guns already loaded, crossed his bows in turn.

The Rabbit's mind raced, wondering if that would be enough of a trump card to turn the trick. The thought of the Cat pirate had suddenly shoved a cold barb into his heart and he could hear her saying, 'Ewe Ra'bits are fucking crazee,'. "We are indeed," he mumbled in response.

Looking down at the Wolverine Sergeant now settling into The Queen's fighting top, he asked loudly, "Ain't you comfortable yet? Yer acting too much like a lubber."

Sergeant Blue moved one of the seven barreled muskets to a more comfortable position on his lap and then pointed for one of his loaders to move slightly more to the right. "I'm settled as good as can be expected, Captain," he called back with a laugh, "And I am a lubber, or did you forget that? What are your orders, sur?"

The Rabbit thought about this for a moment. "We can't out gun the bastard; not that I would want to try with Ludwig, Gulo and the prince on board." He looked through his telescope again at Royal Horse. Babacomb hadn't run out her main battery yet. That was a small reassurance. If the guns were sticking out through their ports it would make coming alongside riskier even if they weren't fired off in the process. As heavy as they were they would assuredly poke holes in his hull.

"I'm going below," he told the Sergeant. "We'll move to block him long enough that The King can finish her turn. That broadside staring him in the face should be enough to dissuade him all by itself. If he runs his main battery out; that'll be your signal to shoot

the bastard less'n I says otherwise. For all of our sake's don't miss; The Queen won't be float'n after he fires on us from that close in."

"Aye, aye, sur," the Wolverine replied with a wink.

Tucking his telescope into his belt, the pirate captain took hold of a nearby stay line and slid the distance to the deck.

Governor Gulo stood next to his brother and nephew at the stern rail; watching events unfold. The Wolverine was still groggy from being drugged. His pain had been such, after his transfer to Royal Horse, that Ludwig had secretly ordered it in an attempt to give his brother some needed rest. In the confusion of the last hours, they had forgotten about him and with the lack of another dose of the drug, he'd awoken and was presently very angry.

"What do you mean Hiss is gone!" he growled. "That's impossible; she couldn't possibly have left us! She wouldn't do that! Damn but she was good in the sack." He then hesitated, realizing he'd let slip with a very private secret.

"She was sunk, Uncle," Prince Uric explained again, ignoring the remark about Hiss. He was actually worried for his elder's wild look. Gulo's shoulder wound was now festering where under Duroc's care it had shown signs of healing. His comment about Hiss making love to him obviously showed the extent of his madness. No one he knew was better at keeping secrets than his uncle. "Her ship took a full broadside and came apart."

"I had sex on that ship," the Governor said, looking off over the horizon and thinking about a certain barrel. That memory, too, hurt. "She couldn't be gone. She's a damned fine sailor; too fine to allow herself to be caught out like that! Where are our soldiers?"

"Besides the few here to protect the quarterdeck," Ludwig informed him, "They are all in the tops, brother. They are at their action stations and armed to the teeth for the coming action. Perhaps you should go below and freshen yourself."

"No." The Governor replied, staggering slightly. "I'm as fresh as I could possibly be no matter what else I might do." He righted himself, and then asked. "What about Tabor?"

Ludwig pointed in the direction of the man of war. "He is there on the far side of trouble, and apparently working towards a treaty of some sort. Our Captain has been assessing the situation, and placed a ball across his bow to warn him off."

Gulo blinked, his eyes appearing glassy. "He what?!"

Prince Uric was about to explain it again when the masthead called to the quarterdeck. "Deck there! Message at the man of war's mizzen; 'To the pirate; at your command.'"

Black Dog Babacomb cursed more wickedly than he had ever cursed in his life, and all eyes went to him standing alone on the quarterdeck, but for Scatter Brained Bob. That one was ever near, ever quiet, and yet always in the black Dog's shadow.

The Wolverine gripped the rail with his good paw and began to laugh harshly. This caused everyone present to seriously doubt his sanity, including Babacomb, who turned to look at him. The sailors present, superstitious as ever, said prayers to the sea wishing for a deliverance of some sort.

And then The King's colors were slowly lowered.

The black Dog Captain took this very badly. He had the wind gage, he had the firepower; the advantage was totally his. He was ready for this and would not allow for it to be snatched away. With this, came the thought that he and the pirate were now straight back at the beginning. This time, however, there were no big boobied Sirens flying about and his crew was much more disciplined.

“CHASERS MARK YOUR TARGET AND HIT THE FUCKING BASTARD THIS TIME!” he roared.

“Which target, sur?” the big Bosun asked.

“THE QUEEN!”

When The Queen drew abreast of The King, Tabor hailed her through his speaking trumpet.

“Ahoy The King... you are now the prize of The Queen and Captain Tabor Rabbit. Who is your Commanding Officer?”

Jackobee stood at the rail and taking his trumpet from his ear, raised it up and replied, “Captain Jackobee Babacomb Dog at your service Captain Tabor. The King is at your command. I accept your terms in the name of His Majesty King Gaspar. In return for striking to you, I also accept your protection.”

Tabor and Jackobee both looked at each other with a measuring eye and then the young Dog yelled further, “What are your orders sir?”

Reversing the trumpet and placing it to his ear again, he waited for the Rabbit's reply from near a hundred yards distance.

“Do you have a black flag?” Tabor yelled to him.

“No, sir, I do not!” he replied.

“Heads up then!”

The pirate gave a nod to the huge Swine standing at the brig’s larboard rail. The Pig nodded back, and then taking several deep breaths, ran towards the starboard rail and launched his huge harpoon. Around its shaft was a tightly wound flag. It was not as large as Tabor’s personal colors, but it would do. Everyone watched as it arched high overhead and then came down to impale itself in the wood of man of war’s quarterdeck. The sailors there quickly unwound the fabric and took it to their Captain who promptly told them to hoist it to the flag yardarm on the main mast.

“Let me round your bow and then continue your turn,” Tabor instructed Jackobee. “I will go and meet the frigate. If I am sunk, you are free to proceed as you wish. If I am successful, I will return and you will render me honors.”

Jackobee was about to reply that he would kiss the pirate’s bloody arse should that happen, but remembering his place as Captain and Royal Officer he only waved in assent. The young captain found it truly ironic that his huge ship named The King would find its hero in the guise of a portly brig named The Queen.

No sooner had the skull and bones flag been raised to the main mast, than two twenty four pound balls arrived, announcing someone’s distinct displeasure. One struck solidly home on The King’s main deck, while the other splashed down close enough to The Queen that the quarterdeck was sprayed.

Though he now suffered more dead and wounded, the screams of which were terrible to hear, Jackobee ordered his crew not to fire back.

Gulo made his way to the quarterdeck rail, where he watched the busy main deck as the sailors on the forecastle re-loaded their guns. “Are you going to fire upon that ship?” he asked Babacomb, pointing at the man of war. His speech was slurred and he wobbled slightly. “I’m told she has struck her colors.”

“I’m going to fire on any ship that opposes me,” the black Dog replied acidly, “And that one now bears the skull and bones. You tell me Governor; you have a reputation of upholding the law, shouldn’t I sink an obvious enemy to all good seafaring folk?”

“Tabor’s a pirate,” Gulo replied with a smile, “And he’s a true friend to the House of Gulo.”

“CHASERS,” Babacomb bellowed, “WHAT’S TAKING SO FUCKING LONG? FIRE AS YOU BEAR!”

The Wolverine pointed to the crumpled figure of a Rabbit on the forecastle. “Whose that?” he asked.

“Flopears,” the Dog replied flatly as he watched the guns being worked. “Perhaps you should go back and stand by your brother Governor. It’s going to become very interesting in a very short while. You should enjoy their company while it is still possible.”

“Fascinating!” the Wolverine exclaimed, pointing at the guns, “Absolutely fascinating. My guns at Saylavee are larger but fewer and they take a much greater crew to service them. I’ve never seen what it was like on a ship.”

Babacomb was about to turn on the Wolverine and threaten him with a beating when the Governor turned on his heel and staggered back to the stern rail. The Dog hawked and spat over the rail. He then turned forward again just as the chasers were fired.

Gulo looked at his nephew and winked and then to his brother hissed quite clearly, “He has lost his mind.” The family elder suddenly appeared very cold and sober. “He intends to sink Tabor and take on The King by himself. He will get everyone killed when there is no need. Tabor actually did what we could not without firing a shot.”

“I shall order him to stand down,” Ludwig hissed back, moving to do so. The Governor’s good paw clamped on his brother’s arm, stopping him.

“He will ignore you and by the time you can organize our men in the tops the battle proper will have begun,” Gulo replied, pointing to where The Queen now showed her head around the front of The King. As they watched, double balls splashed down close alongside.

“Uric,” he whispered, turning to his nephew. Taking hold of the youth’s pistol, he withdrew it from his belt. “Alert the men on the quarterdeck to cover my back and keep their swivels ready to do damage on the main deck; then climb to the tops and tell our soldiers to shoot the gun captains on my orders... no... first shoot anyone holding a firing punk and then the gun captains.”

The Prince nodded, understanding. “The pistol pulls to the right, Uncle,” he whispered, “Aim six inches left at twenty yards.”

“At the distance I shall be using it that won’t matter,” he replied, grinning evilly and giving the lad a wink, “Go now and wish me a clean death.”

“Put your weapons away,” Tabor told his crew, though after the closeness of Babacomb’s shot he was as pissed as cuckold finding out for the first time his wife had been sharing her goods with the village priest. “We’re going to do a boarding, but it ain’t going to be the way we been practicing it.” He looked at them seriously, taking in the overcrowded deck... gazing upon those who swore to follow him, even unto death. The least he could offer was allowance to face that death with a cutlass or boarding pike in paw. “We’re

going to do this unarmed and when we swarm them... all I want you to do is give them hugs.”

“I like hugs,” Duroc told him from the back of the crowded deck, “But don’t get so many anymore.” Everyone laughed and even Tabor smiled nodding in understanding that the Swine was referring to his father.

Lady Taverness hugged him from behind, understanding as well. “Did I ever tell you I loved you?” she asked in his ear.

“I don’t believe you ever did,” he answered, turning in her embrace so they were face to face. “Did I ever tell you as much?”

“I don’t believe you did either,” she replied simply.

“Vesa!” he said loud enough for his navigator to hear him, “Run up a white flag and then get her head straight on to the frigate. I don’t want Black Dog to misunderstand a thing. If he don’t reduce sail, when we come up to him, we’ll cut across and force him to veer into the wind. That’ll slow him to where we won’t be having a head on. At the speed he’s going we’d both probably end up sunk if that were to happen. I want you to then spear the frigate with our bowsprit. We’ll tie the bows together with the grapples and then let her rump swing around so we’re starboard to larboard.”

Vesa, with Punk’n Cat’s arm around his shoulder, knuckled his brow. “Aye, aye Captain.”

Tabor nodded to the Wolverine, and then leaning close to the white Rabbit’s ear, he said, “I love you.”

All Tied Up

Jackobee watched from his quarterdeck, giving orders to spill the wind from the sails in order to let the brig round The King's bow. As the smaller ship passed, he saw a white flag being run up... the general signal of non-aggression. Those using the signal as a means of trickery were universally hung, as it was one step worse than flying false colors. There was also music floating across the distance and for a moment the noise of a ship at war subsided as all the sailors on board strained to hear. Even the wind, which was causing the huge sails to luff and flap seemed to still itself. From the forecastle chicken coops one of the few remaining cocks crowed as if wishing to sing along and more than a few of his sailors laughed.

Overhead the whistle of steel balls interjected, bringing him back to a sudden and cold reality.

"Be damned," the black Dog said under his breath. "Be double damned."

Twin geysers shot up on either side of The Queen's bow, spraying the crowded deck with water. For a moment the music stopped and then Tabor was clapping his paws, creating rhythm where there was none in order to dispel the fear of death. A moment later, everyone on board was clapping their paws in the same manner.

Less than a mile distant and clearly visible to the naked eye, Royal Horse approached, at full sail; reaching on the wind and staying closer to point than any ship Tabor had seen sailing. The Queen, for her part, had the wind no more than a point off of following. If the two ships continued on their course, they would pass closely larboard to starboard. The brig would steal the frigates wind if only momentarily. During any other time this would be both a good joke and a rude gesture in its devices. During a fight, however, it would be seen as advantageous; but in this case of such a size difference the advantage would make little difference.

Now it came straight down to who carried the most metal.

"MAINS'LS UP!" Babacomb bellowed, **"CAST LOOSE THE LARBOARD BATTERY! LOAD AND RUN OUT!"**

Governor Gulo watched Prince Uric climbing the ratlines along with the trimming crew. Though he was heading for the main fighting top, the crew stopped just short at the main sails of the fore, main, and mizzen. There they spread out along the yards where they bent over the huge pieces of wood, their feet gripping the ratlines precariously, to pull in the sails. He would rather have had the youth all the way up and not lagging behind the

sailors. Indeed the Wolverines stationed in the tops were watching him climb, but timing was now critical.

All eyes then went to the distant ship as the mast head lookout announced the small bit of white fluttering at The Queen's foremast. The rumbling of the gun trucks grew loud as the crew began preparing for the battle. Frowning, Gulo said levelly, "Captain Tabor is flying a white flag Captain Babacomb. Does that not mean anything to you? Call off your Dogs."

The veteran mariner didn't even look at him; his eyes were everywhere else as he watched his crew perform their duties. "He is a pirate, Governor, which means he is a liar by nature. If you look closely, you will see that he is also still flying the skull and bones. I would say the one negates the other in spades."

"As you are still flying your signal for 'Death to the King'," the elder Wolverine countered.

The trucks of the bow chasers squealed at the crew heaved upon the tackle, pulling their snouts back out through the gun ports. The main battery too was now but a deacon's fart behind the two quicker gun crews. Royal Horse and the Queen were now no more than half a mile apart and well within the deadly range of the twenty fours.

"CHASERS FIRE AS YOU BEAR!" Black Dog yelled. "MAIN BATTERY WHY ARE YOU NOT OUT YET?!"

Gulo leaned into the Dog, his body covering the pistol he now shoved into Babacomb's ribs. "It's over Henry; have your crew stand down now!" he growled. "If the chasers fire, so do I."

On both sides of the pair, King Ludwig's soldiers slowly swung their swivel guns around and pointed them in the direction of the main deck, while six others moved to the stern rail and fixed their bayonets, keeping an eye on the crews of the two larboard quarterdeck twelve pounders. Their backs ramrod straight, the immaculately uniformed Wolverines checked the priming in their musket's firing pans. Though their muzzles didn't directly threaten, the weapons and soldiers were now poised for action.

As yet, the sailors, busily manning the guns had not even noticed.

Ludwig came up on Babacomb's other side. "Captain," he said evenly, "If you were to turn, you would see that your sailors have been quietly relieved at the helm. On my order, the soldiers now there will put the wheel over. I told them to turn to the left. Now... being a landsman, I have no idea what that will do to the ship, but I can guess it would not be a good thing. You will stand down now; it is not a request."

The Black Dog Captain didn't flinch, nor did he look left or right. And so it was that he and the pirate he'd chased for so long were back to the beginning. The only difference

this time was that the distance between them was quickly shrinking. In his heart he was sure that, somehow, Tabor was to blame for the destruction of his plans. With that thought, he cast the die.

“MR. FORSYTHE!” he bellowed.

“Here, sir,” the ex-Bosun called from the main deck.

“IF I AM DEAD, YOU ARE TO CARRY ON IN THE NAME OF THE QUEEN! YOU WILL SEE OUR MISSION THROUGH TO THE END!”

“Of course, sur!”

“CHASERS! MAKE THIS SHOT COUNT OR I’LL HAVE YOUR EYES!”

Governor Gulo cocked his pistol.

King Ludwig glanced at the two soldiers manning the helm and raised one paw in the air indicating his preparation at having the wheel put over.

The gun captains of the two chasers bent low, looking out over the muzzles after priming their vents. Sighting on the brig was far from difficult and this caused them to smile; at this distance she was an easy target. They’d already primed their guns, pouring the fine black powder into the opening and back upon the firing pocket from the horn carried around their necks. The gunner’s mate, in turn, stood just a bit off to the side, blowing ever so gently upon his glowing slow match to keep it hot. The pikemen at the gun captain’s direction, now shoved their long pikes under the guns and lifted; moving the guns slightly inboard on the one and outboard on the other as directed by their captains. They made grunting sounds as they put their backs into the effort.

“Ready,” said the one.

“Steady, lads,” said the other, “Almost there. Steadyyyyyy...”

Just as he dropped his paw, water sloshed over the firing pan of his gun, and then the other. Before he could utter a word, there was a Rabbit’s terrible shriek and the Dog was shot between the eyes. The closest gunner’s mate then lost his entire arm as a heavy cutlass slashed downward. As the bloody chaos began, the ship suddenly tipped precariously to the starboard as her wheel was spun rapidly to the larboard. By the time she came into the wind six of the chaser crews were dead and the rest had abandoned their guns to Mr. Flopears, who promptly took the bayonets from two fallen muskets and spiked both guns.

“What in the hell?!” Tabor muttered as The Queen approached Royal Horse.

At no more than a quarter mile's distance, the other ship had suddenly veered into the wind. At first, her masts dipped outwards from the turn, causing her to list in that direction by a quick and good fifteen degrees. This multiplied ten fold at the end of the masts. In the rigging soldiers and sailors alike held on for dear life. What equipment that was not being held on to or tied in place dropped into the ocean, followed by several sailors.

On the deck, the guns of the starboard battery began to roll backwards towards their opposite side. Their gun crews immediately grabbed onto the tackle lines, giving it their best to hold them in place. Of the guns already hauled out and chalked at the trucks, two jumped loose and rolled all the way back to the end of their breechings. One hapless sailor, losing his footing while trying to keep his charge from rolling, had 5600 pounds of cast iron cannon run square over his legs. The main deck quickly became bedlam.

When the frigate came directly into the wind, her sails and rigging began flapping like wild things seeking their escape. Before they could be pulled in or at least trimmed to minimize what was to come, the wind caught them full on and they filled from the front; the canvas coming taut with a sputtering cannon shot series of sounds. For a moment the masts bowed dangerously backwards like wet matchwood, held only in place by the strength of the standing rigging. Many were the screamed commands, though silent now was the voice of her captain.

Through the shear impetus of her moving weight, Royal Horse's head continued in the turn drawing herself out of the stalemate of wind versus ship. Once her bows came past the heads on wind, she was pushed in the opposite direction as her fore and aft sails came under the full press of the wind. This tipped the ship again but now in the opposite direction.

The two guns that had rolled back to the end of their tethers now rolled outward, smashing through the bulkhead and tumbling overboard, taking six sailors with them. The deck continued to tilt until all along the entire length of the main deck the entire battery had their barrels dipped into the sea, and each gun drank of the salt, killing any possibility that they might again fire without reloading.

“Vesa!” Tabor shouted as their small band ceased playing. Everyone aboard stopped dancing in order to watch dumbfounded; every one of them knowing Black Dog Babacomb was too fine a sailor to let something like this happen. “Take us a point larboard and come up on his starboard side. Start spill’n the wind... we need to approach slow. By God if it’s a sea monster we’ll want nothing to do with’im!”

To the crew on his main deck he called, “GET THE GRAPPLING HOOKS READY! WHEN I SAYS SO GET US TIED TOGETHER AT THE BOWS. THE REST OF YOU GET THE FENDERS OVER THE SIDE AND THEN STAND BY FOR A COLLISION! IF HE CONTINUES GOING DOWN, USE THE BOARDING AXES AND CUT US THE FUCK FREE!”

Vesa began shouting orders to the sailors in their tops and amidst the chaos of a sailing ship came disciplined order.

Standing next to him, Lady Taverness asked, “What do you think it is luv?”

“I don’t know,” he answered, “But I’m guessing we’re going to find out in short order.”

Using his speaking trumpet, the pirate called up to the Wolverines in his fighting top. “Sergeant Blue, can you tell me anything of what is happening aboard the Horse?”

“There’s a tempest loose on the forecastle Cap’n,” he yelled back happily. “Can’t tell what’s happening, but the crew’s abandoned their posts. I can also see Wolverines a hold’n the quarterdeck, but mostly they all seem to be just hold’n on. There’s definitely a couple of graybacks on the wheel. What are your orders?”

“Put up your piece,” Tabor called back through the conical device, “But keep it handy all the same and watch my back. If I smell trouble I’ll be giving you a wave with both paws.”

As The Queen approached Royal Horse from up wind, the frigate had already turned far enough around that her stern was well presented and she’d righted herself. Tabor now found bedlam to be an understatement as the ship was quickly becoming a battleground with the former allies easing into the killing fields as a maid will wade into cold water... not wanting to, but knowing she must.

The helm was being physically held over by two stout looking Wolverines, while another six were formed up at the forward part of the quarterdeck, their bayoneted muskets pointing threateningly at the main deck. Four other Wolverines stood ready on the quarterdeck swivels, as King and Brother bent over the prone figure of Black Dog Babacomb. Next to the captain was another black Dog that the pirate recognized as Brainless Bob. His mind remarked at how strange that one was, always close by, but he dismissed his thoughts as adrenaline took over his actions.

With a snap and clatter, the Horse’s main mast’s main sail yard crashed to the deck; its thick yards cut by the Wolverines in the ship’s fighting tops. There was the pop of a musket, and a black Dog sailor fell to the deck from the foremast, his own musket falling close to the body. Both hit the deck and rolled downhill to the scuppers which were again awash with the ocean.

As Vesa yelled his orders to the trimming crew and the helm, Tabor put his speaking trumpet to his mouth and yelled over to the frigate, “Center your helm ya blasted lubbers! She can’t right herself with you holding her over like that!”

They were now approaching the larger ship bow on to her midships which made things a little more difficult. As it was, with both ships riding the up and down motion of the swells, there was nothing but discord in their perilous dance.

“BORDERS TO THE FORCASTLE!” Tabor yelled. “GRAPLING HOOKS FIRST AND TIE THEM OFF WHEN YER HOOKED! SHIFT THE FENDERS TO THE LARBOARD SIDE!”

To Vesa he ordered, “Fuck the bowsprit, stick it dead across her deck. It’ll probably snap off, but when we’re tied, get the helm hard over to the larboard and let her rump swing back.”

“Aye, aye, sur.”

“NO WEAPONS!” he yelled to his company when he saw a few of them with cutlass in paw. “I SAID HUGS AND HUGS IT’LL BE!”

Lifting his trumpet again he yelled out, “ON THE HORSE! CEASE FIRE... CEASE FIRE... WE’RE HERE TO HELP!”

With a jarring crunch The Queen’s bow found the other ship.

“AWAY BORDERS!” the Rabbit ordered.

With a cry, the borders swarmed over the bow and flowed forth onto the already crowded decks of Royal Horse. The first Dog to meet them did so with a cutlass, swinging it broadly and in a manner to decapitate. The Ferret it was meant to hit stood seemingly transfixed by the threat of this sudden death, but as the weapon came to meet his head, he ducked and dove between the Dog’s legs, laughing as he did so.

Duroc, who was nearest to the pair, swung around and gathered the sailor up in his arms. Wrenching the heavy blade from his paw, he first tossed that overboard and then, lifting him over his head, threw the Dog clear across the deck where he tripped a good six of his fellows.

“I GREET YOU WITH LOVE IN MY HEART!” the Swine yelled to the sailors. Seeing the commotion at the ship’s forecastle, and the lone Rabbit frantically keeping an entire crew at bay, he calmly headed in that direction, followed by several of his fellows.

As The Queen slowly swung her rump around to consort with the Horse, their back and forth motion began to match as if their goal was pure and simple fornication. More and more of Tabor’s borders made it over the bulkheads of the closed gun ports on their way to give hugs to their brethren. Though there were more than a few broken heads arrived at during the course of this show of love, all would be made better later by a ration of rum divvied out liberally with a serving of biscuits.

Only after the ships came side to side did Tabor cross directly to the other ship’s quarterdeck, paw in paw with Lady Taverness. Turning to Vesa, he told him, “Cut loose now and go find Hiss; I’ll handle this lot.”

Picking Up The Pieces

Captain Jackobee Babacomb, now sailing under the forbidden and condemning black flag of a pirate, stared through his glass in astonishment. Indeed, as he watched so did most of his crew, hanging out from the open gun ports to see exactly what would happen. All had witnessed the verbal exchange between their Captain and the pirate. None was the number of those wishing for the fight to go on. Most, if not all, realized their attempt to turn before the frigate was folly. All did understand they would have been gutted like a trout under the fishmonger's knife had Royal Horse crossed their bows; which would most likely have happened.

Unlike those captains before him, Jackobee Babacomb was a thinking Dog. Weighing his choices he'd wisely capitulated to another vessel offering protection. In and of itself this gave The King time to finish its turn, thus setting up a good defense against the frigate. He had his crew spill the wind, slowing their vessel further in order to allow the smaller ship to pass. Most of the crew agreed with the wisdom of the move.

As in all things to do with a ship, those who had not seen Duroc's superb harpoon throw were quickly informed of both the event and what the harpoon carried. It's been said there are no secrets on a ship, and on The King this couldn't be truer. As it was, much money exchanged paws as those with nothing to lose, wagered all they had on the outcome of the brig's confrontation with the frigate.

"Babacomb'll run the brig 'ore like a piss assed little swell," one sailor growled. "Gor but the Rabbit's got balls, I'll give'im that. I know'd a fella who'd seen Black Dog in action and he's a cold fish that'un is."

"Did ja see old Bollycock Weedaboro stand'n next to that fine white doe?" another asked. "Lucky lad, him, what with her arm around his shoulder and all. I felt certain she was going ta cup 'is cod right there on deck. Dang if'n I wouldn't spill should she have just looked at mine."

Another spat upon the deck and countered to the first sailor's arguments, "That's The Dread Pirate Tabor his'self you moron. Ain't no one holds a candle's chance to a gale confront'n the likes of'im; not this ship nor that frigate. We're just plain lucky he asked us to join'im nice like, you asks me."

The Dogs gathered around the huge guns, quickly pressed this fellow for details and there followed a whole series of stories of embellished truths and absolute lies; but as the two Rabbits were seen stepping across the space between the ships paw in paw, one quarterdeck to the other, they were all believed.

Jackobee, observing this phenomenon through his glass, quickly ordered the ship secured from action stations, reduced sail further, and then adjusted his course to stay close to the two ships.

He could have put The King back before the wind and run... but he'd given his word. Honor ran deep in the Babacomb line; of which he did not consider his uncle a part.

It took but a moment for Tabor and Lady Taverness to match the ride of the frigate's deck. With the sound of Vesa's orders to the crew, boarding axes began cutting away the grapples, and then the wrenching noise of wood hull on wood hull lessened. The Queen slowly drifting from the frigate, at first seemed reluctant to leave. A moment later, with her sails again filled with the wind, she was off to find what was left of the Caveat Noir.

"ON DECK AND IN THE RIGGING," Tabor bellowed, "TAKE IN ALL BUT THE JIB AND SPANKER!" He looked at the two soldiers manning the ship's large double wheel and added, "AND FOR THE LOVE OF SALT GET SOME REAL SAILORS BACK ON THE HELM!"

The two Wolverines tending to the ship's steerage smiled when they saw him wink in their direction.

Lady Taverness left his arm and went to the two Wolverines standing next to the inert figure of Black Dog Babacomb. Oddly there was also a Labradorean sailor sitting on the deck next to the captain, vacantly looking at the belaying pin held in his paw. King Ludwig, gripping the quarterdeck rail, nodded to her, while Governor Gulo standing opposite his brother, grimaced in pain. The elder Wolverine's body swayed with the motion of the ship. His right arm hung limply at his side, while his left held a pistol which was pointed towards the deck. She noticed the hammer was back; as yet it had been unfired.

"You look unwell Gulo," she told him with a note of concern.

The Wolverine made to put the pistol to his head but swayed. His eyes rolled to the back of his head and he collapsed to the deck, the pistol clattering across the wood to Lady Taverness' feet.

Tabor moved to the fore of the quarterdeck rail where every sailor on deck could see him. As soon as he did so, there was the sound of a pistol shot and a ball passed close enough to his head that it clipped his whiskers, and notched his left ear, carrying away one dangling ear ring.

Wincing with the sudden pain, he looked to the source and saw Forsythe, the big Bosun, standing with the smoking pistol in his paw.

"YOU'RE TO BLAME FOR ALL OF THIS!" the Dog snarled at him. Dropping the pistol he snatched a cutlass held by one of his shipmates and made to charge the quarterdeck's starboard ladder. The pirate calmly let him do this, meeting him at the top.

Pulling a belaying pin from the railing next to him, he deftly parried the two sword strokes of the Dog's uphill attack and then struck him soundly over top of the head.

The Bosun staggered backwards stunned but quickly recovered. "HORSES TO ME!" he bellowed as he made to attack again.

There was a second pistol shot and the Dog's chest geysered blood. He stood for a moment not seeming to comprehend his own death as he watched his life pouring forth to the deck and from there to the scuppers. Slowly he collapsed like a large tree being felled. With his demise, any fighting still going on ceased and all eyes went to the quarterdeck where the white Rabbit, dressed as if she were ready for a simple summer's boat ride, stood holding the pistol that Governor Gulo had dropped.

"I was aiming at his shoulder," she told Tabor quietly when he gave her a questioning look.

A moment after that, the pirate found himself in the clinging embrace of Mr. Flopears. As he did his best to console the Bunny, he said quietly, to those on the deck below him, "Secure from action stations. Once the guns are bound in place, I want all their vent holes solid spiked. There's been enough unwarranted bloodshed for the day. It's time to pull'er teeth."

When no one moved, he ordered in a louder voice, "Get'er shipshape... all of ya. This ship now belongs to me... any sailors among ya that don't want to be here will kindly take a cannonball and leave himself slip over the side. Anyone staying who disobeys a single order will be run up to the yardarm on new line."

Looking for and finding Duroc standing at the forecastle railing, he bellowed, "DUROC! TAKE CHARGE OF THE DECK! WE STAY WITH THE KING FOR NOW AND I WANT THE SAILS SET TO DO EXACTLY THAT AND NO MORE! ANYONE DISOBEYS, THROW'EM OVERBOARD!"

With Flopears in tow, he moved to Lady Taverness and the three hugged. The gunner, in his sobbing tones, quietly told how he had tried to keep them from firing upon The Queen. Taverness silently cried as she saw the blood trickling down Tabor's ear, but she knew better than to try and staunch its flow. It was the mark of who the pirate was, making him look even more fearsome than he was in the eyes of those he now commanded.

The three were given their moment and then the noise of the ship slowly coming back to life imposed itself upon them. Where all they had seen in those few moments was each other, now there was a cacophony of noises slowly edging in on them.

From somewhere outside of their existence, one voice or another kept calling, 'Captain Tabor... Captain Tabor, signals from The King and The Queen, sir. Captain, sir... Captain?'

“I think I might give up this life,” the pirate muttered, holding the doe and his best friend close. “Pirating used to be fun. Now life is so damned serious all the time.”

“I almost lost you,” both the white Bunny and the Gunner whispered in the same breath.

“Ain’t no one gonna lose anyone,” he assured them both, “Not at all, no way and no how. We shall finish this now and then we will all go home.”

“But...” Lady Taverness said, “Where is our home to be, my love?”

Tabor thought about this very hard for the few seconds he was given. “I don’t know,” he finally answered, “I really don’t know.”

Standing tall, he asked without looking, “What is the message from The King?”

“Captain Babacomb’s regards,” a voice told him, “And he wishes to know if you need assistance.”

“That would be the other Captain Babacomb,” he remarked, “Tell him ‘no’. He’s to stand down and stand by. What is the message from The Queen?”

“Wreckage sighted, one mile distance. Small boats readied to pick up survivors.”

“Good... there’s at least that,” he replied, again without looking at the Dog. For the moment, he cared not to look at anyone except the Lady Taverness. “Signal them to keep us advised.”

“Aye, aye, sur,” replied the quartermaster.

The pirate pulled both Rabbits close again. Putting his head next to theirs he said, “I love you both. Now we will finish what we must and at the close of this day, we shall hold one another and grieve. For now we must appear to be strong or things will fall apart faster than the Caveat Noir did under that broadside.”

Hearing a sudden outburst from forward, the pirate turned and looked in that direction. Duroc was standing at the larboard rail holding a stout line in his paws. There was a mixture of cheering and angry shouting around and about the Pig.

“DUROC! WHAT IN THE NAME OF HUMPY BACKED WHALES ARE YOU DOING?!”

The big Polynesian looked at him, and smiled. “PLAY DUNK THE DOGGIE!” he called back.

“Captain Tabor,” King Ludwig called to him. “My brother is not breathing well. His shoulder wound has worsened.”

“Captain Tabor,” Prince Uric called out as he climbed the ladder to the quarterdeck, “It is so very good to see you, sir. What shall I have our soldiers do?”

‘Captain Tabor,’ called other voices, ‘Captain Tabor... Captain Tabor...’

Lady Taverness took Mr. Flopears by the paw and stepped back from the pirate. “Your ship needs you, my love. Do what you have to do. We will have later.”

“Deck there!” yelled the lookout, “The Queen signals, sur! Captain Hiss has been found!”

The Rabbit looked aloft at the Dog in the rigging. “IS SHE ALIVE?!” he yelled upwards.

There was a moment’s quiet as the lookout stared hard at the signal. “Dead, sur!”

For a moment all was still on the decks of Royal Horse as what small hope had been held out for...

“Dead ahead, sur!” yelled the lookout, correcting himself, “Deck there, the signal reads; Hiss sighted dead ahead!”

The mixed crew cheered at this news of a lost comrade found. It became the crucible that poured balm on the open wound and restored order from the hostile chaos of battle.

Tabor was suddenly unable to speak. He felt a lump in his throat, and his eyes teared up. Turning slightly, he placed a paw upon the rail and rubbed them with his free paw. With that one motion of relief, he found himself looking upon Henry Babacomb sprawled out upon the deck with Scatter Brained Bob sitting next to him; his face wet with tears equal to pirate’s own.

“Is he dead?” The pirate asked the sailor.

Bob shook his head. “No, sur, he ain’t. I clocked him a good’un on the noggin though.”

“Well, he soon will be,” the rabbit remarked. “Soon as things get back to being somewhat manageable, I intend to stretch his neck.”

“But he was your friend, sur,” Bob said, attempting to counter the captain’s decision.

“Seems he kind of forgot that and went back to trying to kill me. He had his chance... now it’s my turn, and I’ll be rid of him once and for all.”

The Dog slowly rose from the deck, coming to stand right before the pirate. “All that Henry did, sur, he did fer me. If you are to hang anyone, Captain Tabor, I’m your Dog.”

The Rabbit was puzzled by this show of loyalty, but not surprised. Loyalty to a friend or one's Captain could run very deep. "I'm not exactly following you Bob... not at all."

"All that Henry did, he did for me, Captain. Mostly he was following my orders, though he was a bit head strong in doing so." The sailor fished into his shirt and brought out a signet ring worn on a gold chain around his neck. "Ya see, sur, I'm the reason his father died. Captain Babacomb senior was my uncle, and given charge of me by my grandfather who was also trying to protect me after my mother was murdered."

Duroc, in the middle of pulling his 'Labrador on a rope' back on deck and also getting the guns secured, called to his captain. Tabor turned to the Swine and held a finger up, indicating he should wait a moment. Giving his full attention back to the sailor, he told him, "Tell me plainly what it is you're trying to say, Bob, and be quick about it."

Scatter Brained Bob held the signet ring up as if it were a talisman. "This is Gaspar's ring," he said clearly. "He gave it to my mother the day they were secretly married. It wasn't secret enough though, cuz his father saw to my mother's murder. Grandfather told me it was so and cursed the old King's name. He knew that if I wasn't hidden away they'd come for me too... which they did anyhow."

"Balls," Tabor rumbled.

"Aye, sur, Balls Rabbit, bought and paid for, as well as my father who was Captain of the escort with orders to sail away if any pirates should show up." Scatter Brained Bob came to full attention, and knuckled his brow to the Rabbit. "I will ask you now again, sur... please spare Henry. All that he did, he done for me, and most 'o that at my insistance."

Father and Son

From the journal of Vesa Dufva:

I am so very tired that even making love to my wonderful Punk'n was not possible. I would tell this to no one; not even her. I was asleep when she came to join me. I stirred, but did not wake from my loud snores... on purpose. Fortunately she is very trusting and I believe is as tired as I. It has been a long and difficult voyage.

Yesterday seems so long ago. Captain Hiss now resides in Captain Tabor's cabin. She has not spoken since we found her among the dead and wounded floating in a group of four small boats. We plucked a few more from the wreckage of the Caveat Noir's rigging, but more than half of her crew were not found. The resilient Captain has a deep gash on her head from a splinter wound. Punk'n tends to her and this is probably the reason she did not insist I awake to service her. It is a pity we cannot have children together. I would like that very much.

Yesterday was a day of death. Today we mourn the loss of our many fallen comrades. Perhaps one day the events that happened here will be recorded in a light of adventure masking these ignominious killings in wondrous glory; but for now our friends and loved ones are still dead and we still mourn.

Governor Gulo now resides between heaven and hell, sharing the Captain's cabin with Hiss. I am told that he was instrumental in reining in Henry Babacomb; though the telling blow actually came from the fellow's own Dog.

Being the stout soldier he is, Governor Gulo stayed in the fight until past the point of dying. Most certainly he would be dead already but for the great Swine Duroc, whom Captain Tabor called to the quarterdeck to tend to him. The Pig no sooner arrived than he bared Gulo's shoulder and lopped it off with one stroke of a cutlass. This exposed two bullets lodged there. These he plucked out with his bare fingers and then threw both bullets and arm overboard chanting something in his native language. If the aged commander had but stayed in the Pig's care, perhaps things would have been different for him. No... not different, simply healthier and perhaps further mended to what he was. Gulo would not shirk his duty nor try to excuse his actions, as reckless as they might have seemed.

With all that has happened I expected Captain Tabor to hang Henry as soon as he laid his paws on him. Oddly this did not happen though the Dog is currently held in chains within The Queens belly. The crew is wont to even feed him and I question whether he shall live so long as to even make the mutineer's rope.

All the ships of our flotilla have now gathered and we slowly make our way to Saylavee. Rosa Cat has been sent ahead to prepare the way. It would not do to come back to the port, only to be sunk by the fortress guns upon trying to gain entry. Certainly they will

recognize The King. Rosa was very distraught at her mother's condition, but she understands and is a good sailor. In the end, we shall all probably sail on her little sloop back to Blueportdoggie, as I intend asking dismissal from King Ludwig's army. I will also ask Captain Tabor's blessing on my decision to leave the sea.

Captain Tabor is presently on The King with His Majesty Ludwig, Prince Uric, and Lady Taverness. The King's Barge came for them; though Tabor chose to take his own boat crewed with The Queen's own sailors. Oddly he sent Lady Taverness on the barge with the others. Duroc attends them as bodyguard, while Sergeant Blue commands the contingent of our soldiers dressed and presented as their Honor Guard. He now carries the huge seven barreled musket as his personal weapon. For some odd reason, the Captain also insisted that the Dog who struck down Henry Babacomb attend the party visiting The King; though he took that one on his boat.

There came a soft knock on the small cabin's door. Putting his pen down, Vesa turned towards the entry and bade the person enter. The door slowly creaked open and Punk'n Cat stood looking at her mate. Her expression told him much before she even spoke.

"What is it my love?" he asked her.

"Governor Gulo has died," she told him softly. The hardened pirate was on the verge of tears. "He presented ewe to me wh'n we were mated. E was your father on these voyage my husband. Eye am so sorree for ewe."

She had never before called the Wolverine 'husband'. With this, Vesa knew immediately the depth of the emotions his chosen mate was feeling.

"Capitan Hiss she no speak a word, but she cry for heem. I am afraid for her too."

Vesa moved the short distance to hold her in his embrace. "If the Governor is my father," he whispered in her ear, "The good Captain is your mother. It is right that you have these feelings my love."

Pulling her into the cabin with him, he closed the door and they held each other, both crying for their loss... both crying for each other. As soon as he could, Vesa returned to his duties. Visiting the corpse, he placed two large coins upon the eyelids to hold them closed. He then asked the ship's Bosun to place a cannon ball at the old Wolverine's feet and sew him into his hammock. The Bosun, good pirate that he was, and making sure no one was watching, put the two coins into his pocket just before sewing the final stitching.

Tabor stood in the 'Admiral's Quarters' on The King, looking at the figure lying in the huge bed. The room's heavy curtains were drawn tight, and the compartment was gloomy dark. The jet black Dog was not breathing. He had not been breathing for some time. The

Rabbit's anger now flowed over as he put the puzzle pieces together. The picture it formed chilled him to the bone. How could he have been so stupid?

Upon being received with honors by The King's crew, exactly as Captain Jackobee had promised, Tabor and his small entourage were personally shown to The King's Royal Quarters by the young Dog. As the two guards in the short passageway were summarily dismissed, Jackobee said politely, "I'm very sorry for the inconvenience, but King Gaspar had an accident just before the battle began and has been kept under sedation by the surgeon. I felt it best that he not be disturbed until this very moment in order to..."

"Keep him quiet," Tabor growled. "You don't have to gloss it ov'r none. Gaspar was the reason we came. He is also the reason a lot of my friends are now dead." He nodded to the young captain and winked. "Panic is a difficult disease to control aboard a ship. It's worse than the Scurvy, Shingles, and the Shakes, all rolled into one. I'm pretty darned sure he was good and panic'd; just the way we planned it ta be."

Jackobee regarded the pirate in the light of this new information. "He was actually not too bad," he replied quietly, "Until he received a message in the middle of the night. I found it odd that the packet making the delivery disappeared before we were able to question her captain." The young officer thought it best not to mention that the Duty Watch Officer had also disappeared; though the evidence there suggested a suicide.

"It wasn't odd at all," Tabor countered. "When you gain more experience Young Sir, you will find that battles are not all won by bullets and cannonballs. If they fears ya before the battle begins yor more than half the way there at the start of things. What was Gaspar's final disposition; and tell me truthfully."

"Pretty much he was his usual self," the youth replied, "Though he had us run before the wind rather than set a course for home. Other than that all was fairly normal until he learned my last name was Babacomb... coincidently that is also the name of the captain making to attack us; which His Majesty seemed to expect. Where is my uncle now Captain Tabor?"

"In chains," the Rabbit growled, "Where he fuk'n belongs. Open the door and announce us now, beginning with King Ludwig, then Prince Uric, then the Lady Taverness, and finally me. Don't bother with the Pig and the Dog, though they'll be in the room with us."

As the young captain reached for the handle of the door, Tabor added softly, "Later we'll discuss what's to become of you and your ship. Mind I've a notion to burn her to the waterline just because I can. She's got a dark bad feel to'er."

Jackobee's only reply was a nod. It was a simple truth; he'd surrendered his ship to the pirate. If Tabor wanted to burn her, it was his decision. Knocking on the door, he led them into the foyer of the King's chambers. Calling out softly to announce himself, he was surprised when the only reply came from the cabin boy.

“He’s asleep, sur, and won’t stir none. I tried to get him to wake and have a cup of tea but he seems to be very tired.”

Jackabee peered through the gloom at the bed and the covered figure lying there. He felt a chill pass through his body. “What’s your name, boy?” he asked, not remembering for the moment and mentally cursing himself for it. His father’s voice spoke in his mind, ‘A good Captain knows all the names of those in his care.’

“Runson, sur.”

“Runson, go down to the ship’s galley, and tell Cook to prepare tea for His Majesty and our guests, please. Be sure to tell him that it’s to be perfect and served with fresh biscuits.”

As the lad raced out of the compartment, Tabor stepped in behind Jackabee. “What’s amiss?” he asked softly, “Is the beggar hiding under the bed?”

“No, sir, he is not. The boy told me that he couldn’t wake him,” the Labradorean whispered back.

Ignoring those coming into the room on their heels, the Dog and the Rabbit moved directly to the bed. Jackabee placed a paw on his sovereign’s shoulder and gently shook him. Gaspar moved limply back and forth and then rolled onto his back. In the dim candle light, they could see his eyes were open and glossed over in death.

Jackabee straightened as if kicked in the buttocks. “I shall summon the surgeon,” he said absently.

Tabor moved in front of him as he turned, preventing him from bolting. “Count to ten slowly,” he instructed softly, “And breathe deeply as ya does so. Let your heart settle and your mind relax its grip on what ya just saw. We see death every day and this one is no different than any other.”

Turning, he told Duroc, “Step out, close the door, and guard it. Absolutely no one comes in. If the cook comes, send him away.”

The huge Swine did as he was told without comment; closing the door behind himself and then pressing his ear to the wood.

For a moment there were only the shipboard sounds of a vessel at sea, and the ticking of the chronometer mounted on the bulkhead. For that moment no one spoke. Tabor looked at each of them in turn and then said, “Gaspar is dead.”

Turning to Jackabee he ordered, “Tell us how it happened and don’t lie.”

The young Dog wore his shock and absolute shame in the same expression. "I am no better than my Uncle," he said in almost a whisper, "I did this." His eyes went to each person in the room. There was true remorse in his expression. "Your ships were approaching and it was obvious to me who would hold the wind gage during the battle. I needed absolute concentration if we were going to survive. I did not need a meddling monarch telling me what I should or should not do."

He hesitated a moment and blurted out, "I arranged a diversion, and then struck Gaspar over the head with a belaying pin... God forgive me."

"Why should he?" Tabor asked him flatly. "I believe when you pull one of my kind up to the yardarm by the neck you don't rightly expect forgiveness for the poor fella get'n his neck stretched; though you always says a pretend prayer for 'im."

Jackobee made to move past but the pirate caught him by the arm. "And where might you be going, young sir?"

"To place myself under arrest," he replied weakly. "I shall be tried and hung as is proper; I could expect nothing less."

"What does it say of Gaspar in the ship's log?" the Rabbit asked him.

"I'm sorry?" Jackobee's eyes looked out of focus and Tabor positioned himself so if the puke came it wouldn't splatter him.

"Listen close," the pirate told him softly, "Because I'm not in the habit of repeating myself. What does it say happened in the ship's log?"

Jackobee blinked, and looked at him. His knees were shaking and he was suddenly afraid he would dishonor himself by falling face forward to the deck. "His Majesty swooned and struck his head on the stern railing."

"Mind what I'm about to tell you; there ain't no truth except what's writ in the ship's log." He paused, letting his words sink in. "If the book says he swooned and hit his head, then that's what happened... and best you remember it that way cuz the other never happened."

Jackobee blinked again and looked around the room at the other's gathered there. One by one they all nodded, except for Scatter Brained Bob.

"Is he really dead?" the sailor asked, his expression cold and calculating.

"As an empty bottle of rum," Tabor replied flatly, turning to look at him. "Come forward Bob, this is the moment you've always dreamed of, ain't it? You wanted ta see Gaspar stretched out n'stiff like, so have at it, cuz I'll be hanging you shortly."

The sailor slowly moved to a place next to the bed and stood staring down at the corpse. The pirate never took his eyes off of him.

“Tabor,” Lady Taverness whispered in his ear, “Love... you’ve been acting strangely ever since the boarding of the Horse; what’s affecting you so badly? Did I do something to upset you so?”

He quickly turned to her, anger flashing in his eyes. “I’m tired of being manipulated,” he growled at her, “That’s what’s affecting me. I’ve lost a lot of my friends and even my father; and for what... someone else’s grander schemes? I’m tired of being played the fool Robert.”

He pointed at the figure in the bed. “Who we came to confront was dead before the battle even commenced; at the paw of his own kinsman... another fuk’n Babacomb! I’m beginning to think this sort of treachery is inbred among you Royals.”

There was a quiet moment and when she again whispered his name he simply cursed her. “You were working for them,” he hissed nodding at the Wolverines, “And all along you were being played by him,” he said, pointing to Bob.

Lady Taverness’ look of hurt and confusion almost softened Tabor’s resolve. “Tell them who you are, Junior,” he commanded the sailor sternly.

The Dog stood straight and without taking his eyes from the corpse, said evenly, “I am Gaspar’s son.” All trace of a commoner’s accent had suddenly left his voice.

“You are his bastard?” Lady Taverness asked, looking to King Ludwig. Ludwig made a gesture that said he had no idea what was going on.

“No,” Bob replied. “Gaspar wooed my mother against the wishes of his father when he was young and headstrong. He then did the honorable thing and married her when she became pregnant with me. It was probably the last honorable thing he did in his miserable life.”

“Your mother is Queen Fran then?” Prince Uric asked.

The Dog turned to regard the Prince and said hotly, “My mother is not Queen Fran. My mother was of a noble family and most foully murdered when I was but a child... long before Queen Fran. Her death was arranged by this Dog’s father,” he said, pointing to the corpse of Gaspar, “And he did nothing to stop it. I have wanted my entire life to kill him for that. In the end my whole family was wiped out to preserve the secret. Grandfather was heard to say it was to punish those who had dared disrespect their sovereign. The blood of my family is on my Grandfather’s paws and because of his inaction; on the paws of Gaspar as well.”

“And Henry Babacomb?” Tabor asked him.

“As I told you when you boarded Royal Horse, Captain; Henry was acting upon my orders,” he replied defiantly. “The game was over. I did what I did to preserve his life if only for a little while. He was always a very loyal Dog. Unlike my father, I always appreciated that. He deserves better than a rope.”

“And how was it Captain Tabor became embroiled in our affairs?” King Ludwig asked from across the room.

“I wished Gaspar dead,” the sailor explained, “As Henry wished for the pirate to be dead because of the death of his father. The Queen was a notorious ship and bringing her to justice would have gotten us close enough to the King to enact what we wished. It was a simple beginning to something far more complex. It did not help that he fell in love with the Lady Taverness, but I was able to use that as well.”

He looked at the others in the room. “Henry and I met as children, never understanding the full meaning of my mother’s father giving me over to my uncle, Thelodius Babacomb. He believed I would be safe aboard ship, far away from the turmoil he saw coming. He was not aware of the long arm of the old King. Uncle Thelodius had to die as he’d been told of the secret marriage. A pirate was hired and told to attack our ship.”

He paused and looked at Tabor, and sighed. “I was but the cabin boy and Henry an apprentice Navigator,” he finally muttered. Some of the fire seemed to go out of him.

“Those were good times for boys learning to be sailors, and then our escort vessel left us. I remember Henry remarking on this to his father. The escort was commanded, of course, by Midshipman Gaspar the Black. This was another arrangement made by his father. The intention was to make him equally guilty in what was to transpire.” He turned to regard the corpse again. “I have always hated him for being a ball-less coward. If he’d stayed and fought, things would have been so much different now.”

“Henry was the brawn and you were the brains then?” Tabor asked him.

“Henry has always been a superb sailor, but he never had foresight enough to see beyond the tide and the wind. Those things he could read like no other sailor.”

“And Lady Taverness?”

Scatterbrained Bob looked to the white Rabbit. He smiled at her, and nodded. “Robert was a convenient though unwitting ally. She... or he, if you will, was always sharp enough to cause trouble, but not smart enough to see the larger picture. It was all too easy to pit Gaspar against the Royal Wolverines, especially when it was found out Queen Fran’s favorite lady in waiting had the equipment to properly service her.”

“I should hang the whole bunch of ya’s,” Tabor growled. Turning to Ludwig and Uric, he asked them, “Do you two have anything to add? Perhaps you’re the third and forth

cousins twice removed over the humptydoo? You can't possibly expect me to believe you simply just got sucked into this fracas? Monarchs are not that incredibly stupid... they couldn't be; they have entire countries to govern."

The pirate spat upon the deck in disgust and then back handed Bob, knocking him to the deck. "My guess," the pirate declared while looking down upon the Dog, "Is that; the idea someone was trying to kill him finally got Gaspar to wondering who was behind things. Exposing the one sent along to diddle his wife would make for ideal suspicions since she was on loan from the Royal Wolverines."

Looking back to King Ludwig, he furthered, "Thus what happened to you, and the following occupation your people were pressed into. I will ask you plainly Ludwig, were you involved in the murder plots on Gaspar?"

"No, Captain Tabor," the Monarch replied softly. "I only wished for things to be back to the way they were. Because of all that happened to me... to my wife... to my people; I did see Gaspar's death as inevitable. That said, I will add that I... we..." he said, indicating his son, "Were not a part of a larger conspiracy. We did not intentionally use you."

"I might beg to differ," the pirate shot back acidly, "If you haven't noticed my arse is damned well bleeding."

Turning back to Bob, he told him, "My father knew nothing about you. He was paid to sack a ship. He always taught me, 'We board, they give up, we take what they have and then we leave again'. You go around killing people and they won't give up no matter what you threaten. My father was a great and feared pirate. If he had been paid to kill you, then you'd be dead."

Tabor cursed loudly, his body beginning to vibrate with the anger he felt.

"All that has happened to everyone in this room," he yelled at the Dog, "Has been your doing... your great plan; just to get even with your father."

"I wanted to rake the bastard's ship from stem to stern," the Dog hissed from the floor, "And then watch his pride and joy burn around him. That was my plan. It would have pleased me to no end seeing it through to culmination; but... The Dread Pirate Tabor interfered as he has done time and time again."

He got up to his knees and then said, "We tried to warn you off you stupid bastard, but you couldn't take a hint, could you?"

The Dog moved his position again, as if struggling to regain his feet, keenly aware of the knife in his boot.

“By all means,” he continued, “I will even grant that Henry resisted my insistence of killing you. He actually admires you, the imbecile. He finally agreed we would sink The Queen but only if it was required.” He spat upon the deck, clearing his mouth of the bloody drool. “If it hadn’t been for your fucking Gunner, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. Henry could easily have accomplished my dreams with the ship you provided for him, all by himself.”

He paused, rising to sit upon his father’s bed, placing his feet behind him and bracing them upon the bed frame. Looking at the pirate captain, he reverted to his seafaring accent and told him coldly, “Not all things are accountable to me, though, sur. Some things did happen just because they happened.”

Wiping his bleeding lip with his fingers, he examined the red of his own blood. “But most were.”

He then pointed at Lady Taverness. “Other things happened because Robert there was a good little spy; pity he fell in love with you, silly twit that he is. Love is blind, eh?”

He spat red phlegm on the deck, and smiled. “All I had to do was point him in the right direction and he took care of the rest, including recruiting you and the Cat to the cause.” He laughed harshly. “Oh yes... the cause of Blueportdoggie. They hated Gaspar equally. It was great fun inciting them while I was there. People can be so gullible. Life can be like that, don’t you agree?”

The sailor winked at Tabor. “And all I had to do to get Henry to act as he did was arrange for Lady Taverness’ beating at the paws of Lord Pugwash. He rushed to her side upon hearing of it. He confessed to me that they made passionate love, bugging and all. Smart little spy that she is, she secured his sworn vengeance upon the little bastard just to prove his love for her a final time. Poor Henry was devastated when he realized it was all for naught.”

Tabor resisted the urge to shoot him between the eyes. Instead, he looked at Lady Taverness, the pain of betrayal clearly written within his expression.

When he did, Bob made his move.

Duroc and Sergeant Blue had been standing with their ears pressed to the door when it was yanked open.

“Get out of my way!” Tabor yelled, as he pushed past them. There was blood running down the front of his shirt from an open wound.

The Wolverine and the Swine looked at each other, and then at the Rabbit’s back as he stalked out to the quarterdeck.

“Let’s go,” the soldier told his friend, “Before he leaves us behind.”

“You go,” the Pig told him quietly. “I have bad janunga to take care of first.”

“Janunga?” the Sergeant asked him.

“Tell later,” he hiss whispered with a serious look. Gripping the soldier’s paw in his own he said, “You go... make sure Captain not do something stupid.”

“Oh sure, like I could keep him from doing anything...”

“GO!” the huge Swine yelled, “BOAT LEAVE! GET IN BEFORE TABOR OR YOU GET LEFT! HE NOT TRUST ANYONE BUT RABBITS NOW!”

As he yelled this, lady Taverness pushed between them and hurried after the pirate. Prince Uric was fast on her heels followed by Captain Jackobee.

Sergeant Blue, his huge seven barreled musket slung over his shoulder, quickly ran after the group. When the white Rabbit caught up to the pirate, she placed a paw on his shoulder, forcing him to turn and meet her.

The Sergeant quickly pushed past them both, yelling at Private Poz to take over his duties. He then climbed down the Jacob’s ladder to The Queen’s waiting boat where he positioned himself in the bows.

“You’re not going to believe that bastard are you?” Lady Taverness hissed at him.

“I just been stabbed in my body by that sick bastard and stabbed in the back by you and all you care about is if I believe you?!” He yelled at her. Dragging his paw down his front, he then wiped the wet red on the front of her dress. “There’s my blood; it’s all of what you’re gonna get of me. So tell me... was he a good toss?! Was it worth it?!”

With that he stalked to the Jacob’s ladder and climbed down to the waiting boat.

When he saw Blue sitting in the bows, he yelled, “Get off of my fuk’n boat!”

The Sergeant dutifully cocked his weapon and growled, “I’m a fucking pirate now; make me.”

For the briefest moment Tabor smiled; and then he told the boat’s crew to unship their oars and shove off.

Gaspar's Lament

(Refrain)

Silly stuff
Silly stuff
Come and get
Your silly stuff

Spin around
Hop up 'n down
Come and get
Your silly stuff

The old gent'l man
Walked his dog
Fer th' lonesome night

The litt'l old woman
Walked her dog
In broad daylight

They met
In the middle
The dogs
Stopped to piddle
And they gave each other
A kiss (shouted)

Refrain

Lord Whiskered White
Rode 'im forth
In the pour'n rain

Lord Stubbled Black
Waited for it
To bleed'n drain

They met
In the middle
Their horses
Stopped to piddle
And they gave each other
A whack (shouted)

Refrain

The pretty young Queen
Rolled along
On the ocean swell

The old fat King
Reached long
In winds stiff as hell

They met
In the middle
Their crews stopped to piddle
And they gave each other
Much love, much love

They gave each other
Much love

Refrain

Things ain't near
What ya think'em
To be

What do ya think'em
To be? (shouted)

Things ain't near
What ya think'em
To be

It'll fool ya
Ever time

So stops in the middle
And takes ya a piddle
Cuz
Life won't be what
You think's it'll be

Refrain

Bad Jununga

As soon as Sergeant Blue headed for the quarterdeck, Duroc stole into the Royal Quarters. Moving directly to the back he pulled the heavy curtains open hard enough that a majority of the silver curtain hooks failed. Normally something like this would have delighted the Swine to no end. He probably would have pulled them all down with one enormous yank; but this time he was all business. Bright morning sunlight flooded the room exposing two corpses and a blinking Sovereign. King Ludwig sat in an overly decorated chair clutching a bloody ornamental dagger.

“Oompalahala Duroc,” he muttered and then blinked again, squinting his eyes against the bright light. The old Wolverine was suffering from shock, his mind working but slower than it normally would. He harrumphed, and then said, “I didn’t know I could still move that quickly.” He looked down at the dagger. “I have never killed before. I had rather hoped I never would have to.”

“Not Oompalahala,” the Pig told him as he pushed the huge stern windows open.

His friend gave him a quizzical look. “Not Oompalahala? But I thought you said... I mean... what exactly are you telling me?”

“Lied,” the Pig replied simply. “Sounded good at time. Balls just dead... mind not right...” he shrugged, “Make it up.”

Ludwig blinked again. “You are wrong, my friend,” he responded, “You are Oompalahala Duroc. I am a King in my own right and so declare you such. No one can argue with a Royal Decree.” He looked at the bloody dagger again and sighed. “If I was holding a sword instead of this tin stick, I would tap you on the shoulders with it and have it written into law. For now, I’m afraid; you will just have to take me at my word.”

What the Swine was doing finally caught his curiosity and he asked, “Why are you about there?”

Turning from the open windows, the Swine took in the room at a glance. King Gaspar’s body was in still the bed where it had been left. Scatter Brained Bob lay on the floor, a bloody knife still in his paw. His eyes were open but unseeing in death. King Ludwig sat in his chair watching him.

“Bad jununga here Ludwig. Have to...” he searched for a word, and finally said, “Must do this quick. Turn back please.”

“I just killed that fellow,” the King replied pointing the dagger at Scatter Brained Bob’s body, “Why should I turn my back now?”

Duroc crossed the room and picked him up chair and all. Turning him around so he was facing the entrance to the quarters, he set him back down with a thump. "So when asked where bodies go you can say you don't know... truthfully," he said into the Sovereign's ear. "Father Ugga and Mother Bugga do not like lies. In the end they always know truth."

Taking the dagger from his friend, he tested its edge with his thumb and then set to work. A few minutes later, when King Ludwig did not receive an answer to the question he'd just asked of the Swine, he turned to find both bodies missing and no one else in the room with him.

On the heels of this, a breathless Prince Uric came back into the room to check on his father. "Tabor has left Robert here and gone back to his ship," he reported. "He was bleeding quite badly." He stopped, surprised to find his father sitting close to the rooms entrance. Taking a quick look at the room his mouth opened to speak but no words came. Finally he asked his father, "What happened... where did the bodies go?"

Ludwig looked at his son, and then truthfully told him, "I don't know."

Tabor had his boat rowed to the Black Packet first; though the small vessel more came to meet him than it did wait for his arrival.

"What Ho?" Captain Jacob called out to the boat. "Good to see you again Captain Tabor. Is there another chore you'd have me do that might add a little more weight to my purse?"

"You're released from my service," Tabor called back to him through cupped paws. "Go away."

When the two vessels were no more than ten feet apart, Captain Jacobs put into the wind and drifted so they might speak. "That's not exactly a friendly good bye," he said just loud enough to be heard. "What might be eating at your soul, friend pirate?"

Tabor scowled, and then relented just a bit. The Dog meant him no harm and had been very instrumental in all that had happened. "Talk to me of the weather friend smuggler," he replied, "And I will reply in the same. Just do not speak of what we've been through these past weeks. I'm aggrieved in my soul and I mourn for the loss of many friends to no purpose."

"There was a purpose," Jacobs responded cheerily. "There is always a purpose, Captain Tabor. Individually we may be no more than one grain of sand in the hourglass but we are among the many grains of sand, a few of which we will call friends. We all fall the same until the glass is empty and has to be turned again."

"And what the fuk is that supposed to mean?" the pirate growled at him.

“It means,” the packet Captain responded, “That I am released from yur service and I will now return to my smuggling ways. Tell me, sur, who now owns Saylavee and Blueportdoggie?”

“Gaspar is dead,” Tabor responded, “Ludwig is alive.”

“So Saylavee is still of Wolverine dominion but for now Blueportdoggie is free of a monarch’s yoke,” Jacobs observed with a wink. “Safe haven is hard to find, so I will accept that as a journey’s fair wages. I think I will pass by The King and then head there next before beginning my rounds again. Perhaps that is something you should think about too, eh? Every ship needs her dry docking and every mariner needs the same. ‘We are forever tied to the shore by butterfly threads and bumblybee buttons.’ ” The Dog quoted with a smile. “My dear old mother used to tell me that when I would occasionally return home before heading off to the sea again. She always kept my bed for me. Eventually I returned home only to find an empty house and a cold hearth.”

“She moved on?” Tabor asked him, suddenly feeling very tired.

“She’d died,” the packet captain replied simply. “I wish I’d known her better.”

“I will consider your words,” the Rabbit told him. “When you get there, please tell Ilean Cat I’ve got Hiss with me and will deliver ‘er safe. Should we meet again you will have safe passage.”

The packet Captain reached down between his legs and pulled a bottle from a sack; tossing it over to Tabor. “I will deliver your message personally. Should we meet again,” he replied, “I will give you another of these, sur. It’s good whiskey, not rum. Rum has never treated me well.”

With that, Captain Jacobs ordered his little vessel about and Tabor continued on to Gabriel’s Sara where he collected Toby.

“You’ve gained weight,” he grouched at the fat Bunny as he climbed down to join them.

“Aye, Captain,” Toby agreed affably as he looked for a position among the crew. He finally ended in the bows with Sergeant Blue. The launch, the good Sergeant noticed, was now dangerously low in the water and down by the bows. “The cook was regular good,” the plump lookout informed his Captain, “And being that I was Skipper for the Day, he right treated me like a king. I could get used to that, but I was missing your company fierce like.”

“How is Queen Ludvica?” the pirate inquired.

“Fat as me and twice as fit,” the sailor responded and then loudly broke wind. “Pity the poor bastard who crosses her, though, because she’ll slap the snot out of his head. That might be the reason good King Ludwig took another ship.”

Everyone aboard the boat laughed except Sergeant Blue, who struggled to lean over the side where the air was fresher; muttering curses over the passed gas.

“Push off,” Tabor commanded, putting his rudder over. “You wanted to be a pirate, Blue, now ya gotta deal with those of us ya just joined. We’re off and home to The Queen next, but it ain’t too late to swim back to The King if you’ve a mind.”

“Never,” the Wolverine gasped to the tune of another fart. Taking a scented handkerchief from his dress uniform pocket, he held it over his nose. “I’m a pirate,” he exclaimed, his voice muffled behind the pretty rag, “I’ll deal with it.”

Pulling the cork from the bottle Jacobs had provided, the pirate took a deep drink and then washed his wound with it, cursing soundly against the pain as he did so. Blood continued to run down his front as he did this. After that he passed the bottle among those in the boat with him. Each sailor took a drink in turn, always mindful to leave enough for his fellows.

Sergeant Blue passed his handkerchief back to him and advised he pack the wound with it. “You need to stem the leakage,” he explained.

Tabor followed his advice without comment.

After an hour of pulling and several shanties sung, they made The Queen’s side where they were greeted by a solemn faced Vesa.

“What’s the matter?” the Rabbit growled at him from his place in the boat. His eyes flickered, and his body wavered slightly. “You look like you just lost yer mother.”

“Governor Gulo has died,” the navigator replied, looking down at him with fresh concern. Seeing the blood on his Captain’s shirt, he asked, “What happened?”

“Nothing happened,” he replied grumpily, “They got sloppy painters hanging off the side over at The King. What did you do with his body?”

The boat’s crew, keeping a sharp eye on their captain, steadied the small vessel against The Queen’s side while he spoke with the Navigator.

“Laid out on deck and sewn into his hammock, sur,” Vesa told him.

“Have anyone who’s not a Rabbit or a Cat take him over to The King,” Tabor managed, having obviously given this plan some thought. It took advantage of the grand soldier’s death, but it was a good means to an end. Keeping his voice loud enough to be heard was

now suddenly a struggle and this surprised him. “Tell them to stay there and pay their respects on our behalf. Leave word that if they wish to bury him at Saylavee they should put him in a keg of rum for preservation. As soon as they arrive at The King, crack on every sail we have left and make to Saylavee so we can pick up the rest of the crew and get the fuk away before they can show up.”

“Aye, aye, sur,” the Wolverine replied. Seeing Lady Taverness was not with him, he asked the obvious, “What of your Lady, Captain?”

“Fuk ‘er...” he replied with a weak laugh, “Everyone else has.”

Sergeant Blue carefully tied a line around his heavy weapon and tossed its end up to the sailor who had tossed it down to him. “When did the Governor die, lad?” he called up to the Navigator.

“A few hours ago,” Vesa told him. “Punk’n told me he went peacefully.”

When Tabor did not make a move to get out of the boat, the young Wolverine quietly ordered the deck crew to swing a boson’s chair over the side. Two of the boat’s crew helped their Captain get situated on the swing like wooden seat and then tied a line around him just in case. The pirate did not protest as this took place and his left arm now hung down as he was lifted aboard.

Hearing a crunching sound in his ear, Vesa turned to find Duroc standing next to him eating a pickle. “Do you never tire of those things?” he asked a flash of anger in his expression. His world was falling apart and the Pig only thought of eating pickles.

“Uh uh,” the Pig managed. Popping the last of the green treat into his mouth he caught his Captain’s legs and slowly spun him about as he was gently lowered towards the deck. When the height was right, the huge Polynesian signaled the line handlers to hold their position while he gently untied and lifted his friend from the contraption. Without a word, he carried the pirate back to his cabin and closed the door.

Sergeant Blue, having climbed the Jacob’s ladder to the deck while Tabor was being hauled in, stood next to Vesa watching. When Duroc disappeared behind the door, said softly, “Resilient fellow, that Pig. Last I saw him he was on The King. How in blazes did he arrive here before us?”

Vesa looked at him, his expression blank as he considered the truth in the soldier’s statement; and the mystery. “I don’t know,” he finally answered.

Lady Taverness stood staring out of King Gaspar’s stern windows at the distant Queen. The brig had but two top sails set as their convoy did little but keep station. The curtains

framing her in the windows were still hanging half down in disarray, but there had been no time to right things.

In the room with her were King Ludwig, Prince Uric, and Captain Jackobee. They had been the only ones allowed to enter and for a reason. Where she was distant and cold in appearance, the others were huddled around the polished dinner table looking exactly proper and very regal as they fulfilled their roles as leaders. Had she been a painter, the opportunity for the creation of a famous painting based upon an historic event would not have slipped by her. Blueportdoggie was being declared a 'freeport'; neutral of all sovereignty and safe haven to all, forever defended by both Labradorean and Wolverine Dominions.

Upon the table were two documents; the ship's log, and a Royal Decree which had been written out on parchment by Ludwig's own paw. The ship's log had already been gone over and the crucial events of that day recorded; that being the death of King Gaspar and the reconciliation of the Wolverine Royal family with the Labradorean Crown. Captain Jackobee Babacomb, with his family ties to the Labradorean Royal Family, was now acting on behalf of his country.

All three 'royals' were presently signing the Royal Decree concerning Blueportdoggie; the King in his official capacity as the Sovereign of the Wolverine peoples, Captain Jackobee Babacomb as representative of the Labradorean Monarchy, and Crown Prince Uric Graypaw Wolverine, Lord of The Norththumberland, Grand Duke of the Rustian Ocean as witness to both signatures.

"I truly hope this smoothes things over for you Robert," the King said to lady Taverness. "I am so very sorry for all that has happened. To have been played by that black hearted bastard the way we have all been played... can you imagine..."

"What was confessed to us by that 'person' never happened Father," she replied without taking her eyes off of the other ship. In the distance she could see Tabor being hauled aboard. This was not a good sign and her heart ached that she was not there to tend to him. The pirate would never have allowed for such a thing if it would not have been totally necessary. "Royal Horse's log will show that particular sailor was lost overboard during the battle." Shifting her gaze to Jackobee, she asked, "How much gold do you have aboard, Captain?"

"Five times what I would normally have had being that Gaspar was aboard. I would say perhaps thirty chests."

"You will deliver twenty of them to Gabriel's Sara immediately. I would tell you to take them to The Queen, but Tabor will be leaving us shortly and there is no time. She is to take them to Blueportdoggie where they will be placed into the town's vault. All those people hailing from that port will be sent along. We will send Royal Horse as escort as soon as they have their guns back in order. She has her old officers back minus her old

Captain, of course, since he legally stood trial and was executed. Do you have a trustworthy officer left to send as her captain?"

"I will send Mr. Hanson, though it will leave me with no officers save the Midshipmen. I would trust him with my life."

"Take a few of Horse's officers to help you. Most likely this would be in our best interest in any case."

"Aye, aye, ma'am. What will be your instructions pertaining to the gold?"

"Eight chest for Tabor, Eight chest for Hiss, and four chest for the town. They will have to replace most of the garrison, and I am sure there will be many other needs. Also, after the gold is delivered, Royal Horse is to be returned to the Vulpine people. It will carry word to them of Blueportdoggie's Freeport status and an invitation will be made by both crowns to join in this treaty."

All three of the royals nodded to her in ascent. It was a mark of respect that she appreciated, but it still did not make her smile.

"Would you please have the Black Packet signaled to come?" she instructed Jackobee. "I will be needing fast transport if I'm to catch the pirate before he departs."

"I will send you on The King's barge with my best oarsmen," he responded.

Bending, Jackobee finished signing King Ludwig's document, and then placed the pen on a small rag. Reaching over, he shook Ludwig's paw. "I am so sorry we did not meet under more favorable circumstances Your Majesty. I look forward to better relations between our peoples."

Taverness saw signal flags fluttering to the yards on the brig. Though she didn't know their meaning, she knew their importance. Tabor was highly pissed at the world in general and at her in particular. That he would signal...

There was a knock at the door, and the Marine stationed there as a guard yelled out, "Message from The Queen, Captain; Governor Gulo has died. They are bringing his body."

"Thank you," the ship's captain replied loudly, "I will be right there."

Prince Uric placed his arm around his father's shoulder. "It's all right," Ludwig told him. "I owe my brother a great deal. We shall morn his loss and bury him at sea in a military fashion. He would appreciate that."

In a lower voice, Jackobee asked Taverness, "What shall I do about our missing King?"

She turned and faced him fully, the red of Tabor's blood standing out upon her blouse. "You have dead below, do you not?"

"Aye."

"Use one of them. Sew him into the Royal sheets, and cover that with a flag. You will do this yourself as a mark of respect. For the funeral service, place that one in the middle of all those fallen, along with Governor Gulo. You will then slip those two over the side first and together. No one is to know except for those of us in this room so see to the tipping of the bodies personally. Tabor was right that there is no truth except for what is written into the ships log; and we have already seen to that. Now see to the rest of it and duly record what you need to record."

She looked back out the window and saw five boats being put into the water by The Queen. "I will be taking the Royal Decree concerning Blueportdoggie with me, so I will need that boat now, Captain Jackobee. When you get home again, please give Queen Fran my regards. Tell her I will be sending her a letter at first opportunity."

Turning from the window, she looked directly at Captain Jackobee. "Queen Fran is a young woman, Captain. She now holds total power within your Kingdom. She will need a strong King and you are of the Royal House. You should remember that and act upon it accordingly."

Nodding to her father and brother, she told them, "I will miss you both, now please leave me. I need some privacy so I can think clearly. Call for me as soon as the barge is in the water."

"Do you think he will take you back, brother?" Prince Uric asked her.

"I don't know," she replied softly, never taking her eyes of the brig. "I truly hope so."

Home

It felt as if the heavy curtains in The King's Royal Quarters had been pulled again and Tabor was left alone groping within the murky darkness for his sanity. At times he felt free of encumbrance, and yet, at other times it felt as if he was knee deep in excrement. Awareness, for him, faded in and out like a magical pixie; taunting him with brief yet vivid pictures of his surroundings.

"Eye tell ewe what make heem better," someone said in a hiss whisper, "Eye weel cuddle weeth h'eem and maybe g'eeve h'eem a good suck."

The voice was Rosa's, but somewhere in his memory the pirate knew she shouldn't be there, having been sent ahead to announce their planned arrival. He smiled inwardly, wanting to tell her he'd rather have Toby's plump rump in his bed than her scrawny female parts; but he couldn't speak.

"You get away, stupid kitten," Duroc growled. "You not even supposed be here. He lose much blood. You kill him if do that."

"Eye go where Eye want and here ees there." A paw groped the pirate's cod. "He die w'eeh a smile on his face no?" She squawked suddenly as the Pig grabbed her and there was the sound of a small fist hitting a big chest.

"Here," the huge Polynesian responded, "Ees there." There was a corresponding sound of someone being placed roughly into a chair. "Eat pickle... good for you. Hit Pig again and you have it up backside."

Then, but for the crunching of a pickle, things became quiet again.

The curtain rolled its darkness back across him again and all he felt was the gentle rolling of the ship. He wondered if Vesa had done as he'd instructed and hung all the sails on their yards. A mental image of strangely brown and tattered sails found his mind and he saw his old friend Smithe at a strange tiller while Kelly held his sextant up trying to shoot the stars in a completely black sky. Commander Pablo and Governor Gulo were there too, both in immaculate dress uniform. The one was attempting to exam the vessel's single gun which appeared to be rolling around the deck at will, while the other was practicing musket drills. The Navigator swore, the Ferret looked sad, the Wolverine 'kept his eyes in the boat', and Smithe managed a smile while waving a slow hello.

He wanted to wave back but the pain in his shoulder was too great. He did manage to smile and yell out "Ahoy there ya fuk'n lubbers!"

"E says something," Captain Hiss called to Duroc from very far away. "E maybe wake now... ewe should geeve h'eme rum."

“No rum,” the Swine told her. “He need carrot juice... maybe soup, but not till fully awake or choke to death.”

“E is a pirate,” she yelled at him and banged her fist on an unseen table. “E needs rum like a f’eesh need thee salt water!”

The Cat sat at the cabin’s small dinette, having finally overcome the shock of losing the Caveat Noir and most of her crew. Duroc, realizing her condition was a tricky one, had taken his time in nursing her back to health. He’d kept all but a chosen few out of the cabin.

Vesa now informed him that the brig was now half way to Saylavee, but The Queen was wallowing slowly in a wind of no more than one knot with a following sea swell of no more than a foot. This was just enough wind to keep way on the ship which made the ride at least comfortable.

“We will lift him in little while,” the Pig told her. “Try to get him to whiz out window. Wound look like it heal good. I stitch with sail twine.” He looked at the Cat. “When last time you whiz?”

“Eye w’eel pee when Eye f’eel the need and ewe are not ‘ere,” she fairly shouted at him.

“Pee now,” he told her. “Need see color.”

“EYE AM NOT GOING TO PEE FOR EWE! THAT EES SICK!”

The Pig chuckled and tossed her a pickle which she promptly threw back at him, bouncing it off of his head.

Duroc only smiled, enjoying her ire. Leaning over his captain he pulled one eye open, and watched the pupil for a reaction. It shrunk with the light and he was satisfied for the moment.

Tabor saw a brief flash of light and made to grab for it, trying to force himself through the sudden opening into the world; but he was not fast enough.

“You do that,” a voice growled at him, “But ya better be faster than what I jest seen if you hope to ever leave this place.”

Turning he saw Balls seated at a table. There was a jug of rum and two glasses in front of him. The old pirate patted the chair next to him and nodded.

“Da?” Tabor asked.

“That’s Captain Da to you, punk’n head.” He smiled his ‘half sober and up to something’ smile. Tabor felt a little easier for it. “You’re not dead yet,” his father told him, “So there’s hope fer ya.”

The younger Rabbit replied, "You always did tell me; 'Where there's a wind and a flowing tide, there's always hope.' "

Both intoned the words out loud and then both laughed... the similarities of the pair incredibly striking.

Tabor turned the chair around and sat on it using the back to rest his forearms.

Balls poured for both of them. Picking up his glass he waited for his son to do the same. When Tabor didn't touch the drink, he frowned, downed his and then picked up the glass meant for his son. "Not like you to refuse wet'n yor whistle," he grumbled.

"You're not supposed to be alive and breathing," Tabor replied quietly, "I'll wait thank you and keep a clear head about me... just in case."

"Who says I'm dead?" his father countered.

"Why am I here?" Tabor asked. "I'm sure I didn't just dream you up for no reason. Last I remember was sitting in the boat next to The Queen. What happened?"

"You tell me." Balls rumbled. Downing the rum he poured himself another. "Dam but this is good stuff. I certainly don't know where you were last but I'm think'n maybe ya got yor head unscrewed and maybe I'm here to help ya twist it back on. Why the fuk did ya get so mad at Taverness? A slice off'n a cut loaf is n'ere missed. She done you no wrong that you haven't done yourself."

"I was play acting," Tabor growled back. "We needed to make the Royals feel they owed us. At least that was the plan as she explained it to me."

"Sure ya was," his father replied, "And I'm really Queen Fran; God bless me and my kingdom 'o fuk'n Dogs."

Tabor's anger flared and got the better of him. Gripping the table he screamed an obscenity and flipped it over.

Balls, neatly picked up the bottle of rum and his glass during this outburst. He winked at his son. "Saw that one coming a good league off," he laughed. "What else ya got up your sleeve? You gonna try and punch me next? Best you settle down some. You're stone cold in love with her ya silly twit. Can't say as I blame you none either." He looked at his empty glass and then at the bottle as if trying to decide what to do. Not being able to decide he let his paws fall, and then looking up at Tabor, told him, "Tell the silly Pig I miss him."

The curtains closed back in again and Balls faded from view as if he'd been swallowed by the night. Tabor was now left drifting in a small boat with no oars and no compass to

steer by. But for the pain in his shoulder he felt well enough, though he had such an urge to urinate. Carefully standing, he pulled his cod piece aside and let fly, delighting in the tingling sound his stream made as it splashed into the dark waters.

“That good Captain,” Duroc whispered in his ear. “Piss it all out into ocean. Father Uggá like salt.”

The Swine watched the color of the stream and saw no tell tale red of blood. The scent, too, did not hint at an infection. This was an excellent sign.

“You do good,” the Polynesian told him when he’d finished. He jiggled his Captain up and down to get rid of any drops and then repositioned the cod piece back over his scrotum. “Now we get you back to bed... real bed not hammock cuz sea is calm. Have magical cure waiting for you there.”

“Magical,” Tabor muttered, trying so hard to open his eyes.

Duroc walked him slowly over to the bed he’d prepared so carefully. In reality, it was a far cry from the royal divan on The King; nothing more than a mattress on the floor with clean sheets and a blanket. This was The Queen, however, and furnishings were far more Spartan. Within the folds of the sheets, however, was a naked white Rabbit who he’d forbidden to come into the cabin before this moment. The Stoat had specifically warned her not to speak a word, though she was allowed to cuddle so long as she stayed aware of the wound which was now wrapped in a large bandage.

When his charge was situated, he covered them both, then went to the wardrobe and pulled Rosa from her hiding place. Clamping a paw over her mouth, he lifted her from her feet and left the cabin, quietly closing the door behind himself.

The heavy curtains keeping the pirate so isolated changed to the color of fog at sunrise. The emotional sensation of his captivity changed too, becoming less oppressive than before. He was now imbued with the feelings of life... and of love.

As Taverness wrapped her arms around him, pressing her body to his as tightly as she dared, she silently wept for all of what she’d done over the past months that caused her love his sadness.

His cheeks were no less wet than hers.

The following morning Tabor woke, his eyes opening fully. The pain in his shoulder was tremendous and he groaned. There was a gasp behind him. Unable to turn, he quickly sniffed but his nose was blocked as if he had a cold.

“Who are ya?” he croaked, “And what are ya doing in my bed?”

He felt a soft kiss on his cheek and knew immediately who was under his sheets, though she said not a word.

When the pain in his shoulder subsided slightly, he managed to whisper, “Did they fall for the ploy?”

“Aye, they fell like a fat merchantman to The Queen,” she told him. The white Bunny brought a cup of water to his lips. When he’d drunk, he continued, “I kinda laid it on heavy with how bad the Royals are. Gaspar dead at Jackabee’s paw was just too convenient. I felt pretty rotten doing that to Ludwig; and him then saving my life the way he did.”

“Guilt is a fair strong tool, my love. I told you this. Guilt, this time, became your cannons. Blueportdoggie is free.” She paused as if afraid to go on, and then asked softly, “Are you still angry with me?”

“No,” he finally managed, blinking hard against the pain, “I am not angry with you; though that fella Bob knew exactly what to say to make me fight’n mad. I’d kill him again if he weren’t already dead; and bless Ludwig’s quick reflexes for that.”

“He was very good, my love; good enough that he almost succeeded in destroying all of us.”

“And that’s something I don’t exactly understand,” Tabor replied, his voice cracking slightly. “I think I shall always remember his expression as his life slipped away like an untied dory... and me, his target, still afloat. He looked so disappointed. Why would he do what he did? Even he would have died in the carnage he sought; and him blaming me for preventing it.”

“If he’d had a goal other than total destruction,” she explained to him, “He would have succeeded. Every spy will tell you that you must have mission goals and intend to live. If you do not expect to live beyond your goal you become sloppy in your ‘end game’.”

Her paw drifted over his thigh and found its way to his cod where it remained. It was a moment of love’s touch and not sexual. Its feel caused the wounded Rabbit to relax just a little bit more. In the distance, his ears found the sounds of Squeezebox Rabbit’s concertina playing the same song he’d played for Kelly’s funeral. This coupled with all the rest of the noises of a ship under sail creating a truly harmonious undercurrent for the music... and then the notes turned to the happier and rejoicing refrains of the song’s ending. He remembered his old friend dancing under the shower of gold coins in the brig’s hold and couldn’t help but smile.

“Hatred will do that to you,” she replied, pressing into him. “I know this to be true in the deepest part of my heart as I truly hated you once.”

“As I hated you,” he replied, meaning it; “Though I presently can’t seem to remember why.”

Two signet rings on a golden chain were slowly lowered in front of his eyes; the original belonging to Scatterbrained Bob and the other the one Gaspar had been wearing.

“Father and son,” he muttered. “Our proof that both are dead and we know the truth.”

She kissed his cheek again. “I believe we shall never have a use for them, my love, though they shall ever be held against the day when that truth might be needed. I also placed the additional thought in Jackobee’s mind that Queen Fran was of his age and would be needing a new King by her side. I wrote a letter of introduction for him as her ‘favorite’ Lady In Waiting.”

Tabor chuckled through his pain, “I think he might just make a good King. He’s had good training already in what not to do, considering what has happened in his life.”

“I also have the signed Royal Decree declaring Blueportdoggie a ‘freeport’,” she told him. “It will forever remain neutral territory to be protected by both the Royal Wolverines and the Royal Labradors. I so informed Captain Jacobs, and then employed him to take the news there.”

“When I passed by the packet to release him Jacobs said he would accept that as a journey’s fair wages because safe haven is hard to find.” Tabor’s words were becoming slurred as he fought unconsciousness. “He told me, ‘We are forever tied to the shore by butterfly threads and bumblybee buttons.’ He’s an odd one that Dog, but that’s what makes him a successful smuggler... he just seems to know.” The pirate sighed and closed his eyes. “We have a home,” he managed before sleep took him again.

“Yes, my love,” she whispered in reply, cuddling into him as deeply as she could, “We finally have a home.”

From the log of The Queen, Navigator Vesa Dufva on watch:

The wind is from the south southeast at one knot gusting to three. The sea has swells of one foot coming from the south. We have been underway for two weeks and making but slow progress. The King’s topsails can still be made out on the horizon so we know they follow. Otherwise, we are alone on the ocean. I estimate Saylavee to be yet another hundred miles distance. I watch for her light during the night, but so far it has not shown.

“This is the life of a pirate?” Sergeant Blue asked in their native language. “I’m bored. So far I have done nothing but eat, sleep and shit. Oh yes, occasionally I help trim the sails or man the pumps. On the bright side, I’m getting good at climbing in the rigging and my stomach appreciates the cook’s good works.”

Vesa did not turn to the voice. Instead he watched the crew hanging out laundry to dry. It rained the night before and the canvas water catchers had gathered a surplus, so any spare clothing and blankets that needed washing were brought on deck and scrubbed. He also noticed the duty Bosun sounding the bilge for water. Pulling his stick out of its hole, he measured a hand span at its end; six inches of depth. This was not too bad, but all the same the Rabbit signaled four of the watch sailors to man the pump. As they began, they sang a quiet shanty to mark their pace.

Near them, Mr. Flopears was working on the number one gun. The young Wolverine recalled that the gun's name had been Bess, but they'd renamed it Balls. Number two was now Pablo, number three was Ureha, number four was...

"You're too much the soldier," the Navigator finally replied to the other Wolverine. "As you may have noticed, there is hardly time enough to do what we must without being bored." Turning to his fellow, he said, "Boredom is for the dead."

"So what does Duroc have in mind for us this sunset?" the soldier asked with a wink.

This caught Vesa out and it showed in his expression. "Duroc? No one told me anything."

"What?" Blue asked, switching to Rabbit. "There's to be a trial, and a cleansing, and a wedding too." His brethren Wolverine punched him lightly on the arm as he cheerily told him this in a hushed tone.

Vesa was suddenly beside himself. He was second in command on the brig and his own Captain hadn't told him...

Blue, seeing the sudden flash of anger, laughed and slapped him on the shoulder. "Don't worry your little head none, son," he hiss whispered, "I wiggled myself back to steerage and pressed my ear to the overhead. Weren't no one meant to know," he touched his nose, "But I smelled something a cook'n did I."

A bucket of cold water was splashed on the sergeant from behind. As he spun, a pistol was pushed up under his nose and the hammer thumbed back. "We shall see that never happens again now won't we Pirate Blue?" Tabor growled softly.

"Aye, sur," the soldier managed. His battle hardened demeanor kept him from stammering and for this he was grateful.

"Did you spill the beans to anyone else?" his Captain asked softly.

"No, sur," the ex-soldier whispered back.

Tabor nodded. "Good; go forward and call up the crew. I want everyone assembled on the main deck to witness punishment." He hardened his voice, "And be grateful it's not yours."

Blue was quick to do as ordered, wishing to be away before something worse might happen. As he moved, he cursed both his bad luck and his stupidity.

Tabor placed his pistol on half cock and tucked it back into his sash. "I'd intended being the one to tell you the good news," he informed the young Wolverine. Coming forward, he bent slightly and gave him a hug. "You're like a son to me, Vesa. Taverness and I are going to officially tie the knot today and we wanted you to do the honors of passing us the line."

"Bowline or square knot, sur?" the Wolverine managed through his shock.

The pirate laughed and released his hug. "You never cease to amaze me. What was it you said when you first came aboard?"

"THANK YOU, YOU'RE WELCOME AND EVERYTHING GOOD!" they both shouted together. The pirate grimaced from the pain this caused his shoulder.

Everyone on deck looked to the quarterdeck, not sure exactly what was happening. To a pirate, they were all very happy with Tabor's near miraculous recovery. His strange but happy behavior was a welcome relief to them.

Putting his arm around the navigator's shoulder the Rabbit walked him to the lee side of the deck where their words would blow out to sea. In this way they could have a small bit of privacy as the Captain explained exactly what would happen this day. By the time he was done, Vesa was smiling broadly.

"That is fantastic, sur!" he exclaimed. Grabbing his paw, he pumped it up and down. "I am so very happy... so very very happy indeed!"

"Good," Tabor growled at him, "Now get your best helmsman on the wheel." Looking forward, he whispered, "I've next to speak with Flopears. To him we owe so very much... so to him we will leave the choice of the gun used to banish the bad jununga forever."

The sun was moving towards the horizon when Henry Babacomb was brought on deck by Captain Hiss and Rosa. Mother and daughter were dressed in identical outfits. But for Rosa's shorter stature and missing fingers, they could have passed for twins.

The Dog, stripped of his clothing in the brig's hold, had a bucket over his head. His paws were bound to the front so he could still use them to climb the required ladders. When he

was directly amidships Hiss told him to stand firm and Rosa removed the bucket. Carrying it to the ship's side, she tied a line to it and tossed it over so it could fill.

The Dog blinked and then squinted in the late afternoon light. His position had him facing the bows, while the assembled crew stood to his right, moving back and forth slightly to the motion of the ship. Tabor, standing on the forecastle, faced him from an elevated position as if standing at a Judge's bench. Lady Taverness attired in a white dress and matching parasol, stood beside the pirate. The black of the white Rabbit's eye patch contrasted finely against the white of her outfit and fur. Both Rabbits had a piece of line tied around their middles with three feet of one end hanging down.

Though Henry couldn't see him, he knew Vesa stood on the quarterdeck behind him where he almost always was. The ship's log was open on the large Navigator's table and he was ready to write.

"Captain Henry Babacomb of the Royal Labradorean Revenue Service," Tabor pronounced loudly, "You have been called before the crew of The Queen this day to face trial. Do you wish representation?"

"I do not," the Dog replied in an equally strong voice. He hawked and spat over the side, careful not to hit the ship. Under the circumstances, spitting on the deck would have been seen as an insult. He was gaunt looking; thinner than he was normally from not having been fed on a regular basis since being placed in the brig's hold.

"You are accused," Tabor intoned, "Of sailing against your brethren pirates and of intentionally firing upon The Queen during our last action, how do you plead?"

Henry looked at the pirate. His expression was not defiant, nor was it cowardly. "Before I plead," he called out, "May I ask to the disposition of King Gaspar?"

"You may," the Rabbit responded, "He is dead."

Babacomb nodded, satisfied with the answer. "And may I ask of the disposition of the sailor who goes by the name of Scatterbrained Bob?"

"You may," Tabor told him. "He is the one who struck you down on Royal Horse. He spared your death at that moment claiming you to be a good and loyal servant. He showed proof that he was the son of Gaspar the Black and confessed to his deeds. He is now dead at the paws of King Ludwig."

The Dog nodded in understanding, "The oath I swore to my father on his death bed," he declared loudly and with a clear voice, "Has been fulfilled. I am guilty of all you wish to accuse me of. I accept your judgment with a clear conscious as I accomplished all I swore I would do."

“Vesa Dufva,” the pirate called to the Navigator, “You will enter into the ship’s log that Captain Babacomb has confessed to his crimes. The sentence handed down by Captain Tabor Rabbit is that he be hung by the neck from the yardarm.”

For what seemed like an eternity, Vesa wrote in the large book. Finally he reported, “It has so been entered, Captain.”

Tabor nodded and Captain Hiss came forward, placing a dark bag over the Dog’s head. A new rope was then lowered from the main sail yardarm, the end of which had been tied in the required thirteen loops. This she placed over the Dog’s head, pulling it snug.

“Hoist him up,” Tabor commanded.

Hiss, now assisted by Punk’n Cat, personally pulled on the rope, gently lifting the former Revenue Service Captain but six inches off of the deck.

“Let ‘im down,” the Captain commanded a few short seconds later.

This being done, the rope and the bag were promptly removed and the former Revenue Captain’s paws cut free of his bonds.

Before the shocked and angry Dog could utter a word about unwarranted torture, the pirate called out, “Vesa Dufva, you will enter in the log that Captain Henry Babacomb was duly hanged for his transgressions.”

Babacomb, his mind obviously having a hard time grasping the situation, was about to speak when a smiling Rosa sloshed a bucket of sea water over him.

“Vesa Dufva,” Tabor called out again, “You will enter in the log that The Queen was blessed with the miraculous birth of a seadog; the first ever mixed species. The babe appears to be part Dog and part Rabbit.” He smiled at Henry’s confused look. “The ocean,” he continued, “Has seen fit to wash the blood from his body and has left him breathing. Captain Tabor Rabbit and Lady Robert Taverness have chosen to name this seadog Black Dog Henry Babbit in honor of the one just hung for transgressions that were understood but not to be tolerated by the laws of the sea.”

There was an immediate cheer from the crew, all of whom rushed forward to pound the former captain on the back. Squeezebox Rabbit struck up a happy jig and within seconds most everyone was dancing to it. While the cook pressed the Dog with hard boiled eggs and rum, the sail maker pushed forward and handed him a fresh set of seaman’s clothing complete with a new deck knife. When the ensuing cacophony of happy noise subsided, Tabor and Lady Taverness climbed down from the forecandle and came to congratulate the newest member of their crew.

As Black Dog pulled his pants up and tied the holding rope, Tabor slapped him on the shoulder and said, "We did it Henry, Blueportdoggie has been declared a 'freeport'. We couldn't have done it without you."

The former enemy was about to say something, but Taverness pushed her way in and hugging him hard, planted a kiss on his cheek. "You have been forgiven Henry," she whispered into his ear, "The old you is dead... leave him dead. The oath you swore to your father and to your cousin is no more; like Blueportdoggie, you are truly free."

There was a loud cry and the huge body of a Swine slid all the way to the deck on a main mast stay line.

"UGGA BUGGA!" Duroc yelled at the top of his lungs when he landed. He was dressed in nothing more than his loin cloth, and had strange designs painted upon his body. In his right paw was clutched a small doll with a very ugly head.

"UGGA BUGGA!" the crew yelled back at him.

He shook the doll at them, its little stitched together head looking perfectly horrible. "BEHOLD GASPAR... FATHER OF BAD JUNUNGA!" he roared at them.

"FUK GASPAR!" the entire crew yelled and then roared with laughter.

Tucking the doll into his loin cloth, the Pig danced around, making music by slapping at the different parts of his own body. He stopped suddenly, freezing in place and making a horrible face by sticking his tongue out as far as he could. A second later, he again danced about, making the same music and then stopped. Ripping the doll from his loin cloth he again held it above his head. Flipping it over, the little skirt reversed itself, revealing a different head.

"BEHOLD SCATTERBRAINED BOB!" he yelled, "SON OF GASPAR AND VERY BAD JUNUNGA!"

"FUK BOB!" the crew roared and again laughed themselves silly.

Duroc responded to this like a fire responds to a dry sail. Making more horrible faces, he danced even harder. His body slapping rhythm was quickly picked up by the crew and Squeezebox matched it with his concertina.

Finally the Swine stopped, freezing in place a final time with his arms fully outstretched and his legs splayed. He was carefully keeping an eye on the sun as the timing for the ritual was most critical.

"Bad Jununga witness now the making of Good Jununga," he declared. "Captain Tabor and Lady come forward and stand before Father Ugga and Mother Bugga."

Tabor and Robert came forward and stood before the huge Pig, facing each other.

Duroc held the doll in front of his face and yelled at it, "Look Bad Jununga and see good thing happen. Tabor Rabbit, do you take Lady Rabbit as mate?"

Tabor looked at Lady Taverness, and smiling said, "Of course I do."

The Swine flipped the doll over, and yelled at it, "Father of Bad Jununga, watch good thing happen. Robert Rabbit, do you take Captain Tabor as mate?"

Lady Robert Taverness looked at her chosen mate and said, "I do."

"Come tie knot!" Duroc commanded Vesa as he flipped the doll sideways so both ugly little faces could watch.

The Navigator came down from the quarterdeck then and stood before the couple. "Left over right," the Wolverine intoned as he took the lines dangling from their wastes and flipped the one line's end over the other. He then completed the knot by reversing the order saying, "Then right over left."

"And pull tight," the Rabbits said together.

The crew began to cheer, but ceased quickly as Duroc yelled for them to be silent. When he had their attention he yelled, "Before kiss, must witness Uggá and Bugga kiss. Everyone look to sunset! When Mother Bugga get ready to sleep, she bring lips down to Father Uggá's. Sun is her lips... and ocean water his."

He turned and pointed the doll at the sunset so it too could watch. As the sun came down and kissed the ocean, there was a green flash as the yellow of the sun mixed with the blue of the sea and a new color was created.

Turning to the crew, he told them, "That the meaning of Uggá Bugga. Now you always remember!"

Tabor and Robert looked at each other and smiled, both saying, 'Uggá Bugga' before they kissed.

The crew cheered wildly. Within moments, the music, the rum, and the well wishing began to flow like an ocean current. In the middle of the celebration, Duroc again stopped and holding the doll aloft exclaimed, "MR. FLOPEARS... IS GUN READY?"

"Aye, sur, it is!" the strange little Bunny yelled back. "We shall use the larboard number one, which I have renamed Henry Babacomb after the deceased!" He waved at Henry as he made this announcement. Black Dog nodded back, giving the Rabbit a smile. "Though I was powerless to stop myself," he called to the Gunner, "I knew I could count on you

Mr. Flopears.” The Dog stood straight and knuckled his brow. “Thank you, sur, you did not let me down.”

“T’was my pleasure, sur,” the gunner called back with a wink.”

“GUNCREW!” Duroc roared, “CAST LOOSE AND PROVIDE!

In record time, the gun now known as Henry Babacomb was hauled back, loaded with powder and primed. Moving to the cannon’s maw, the Swine pushed the doll in while making little screams of anguish for the thing; all to the laughter of the crew. Using the rammer, he pushed it all the way down the bore. Standing back, he commanded, “RUN OUT!”

The crew heaved on the lines, and the gun trucks rumbled on the wooden deck as it was hauled outboard to poke its belled muzzle through the gun port. Tabor and Robert were brought forward by Rosa, tugging upon their now tied lines. Mr. Flopears, smiling, handed them the glowing slow match.

“May you have a blessed and loving life together,” he told them softly. Standing back, he then bellowed, “NOW BLAST THE BAD JUNUNGA WAY FAR AWAY, FOREVER THE OCEAN TO KEEP!”

Two paws, holding one slow match, touched the gun’s primed vent hole.

BOOOOMMMMMMMMMMMMM.....

The old man opened his eyes. It took a moment for him to separate reality from dream. As all sleepers will do, he blinked, yawned, and then stretched.

Hearing a dog’s fusing growl, he turned and observed a dark blob next to the bed. Tossing off his covers, he slowly sat upright and then reached out to scratch the Labrador behind his ears. “Good morning Henry, nice to see you. What brings you inside this morning; was that thunder I heard?”

The animal snorted lightly and then sneezed indicating that the man was not even close to the reason he’d come to his inner sanctum.

“Not thunder,” the old fellow replied, clearly understanding the nuances of dog speak. Reaching out he took his glasses from the night stand and placed them on his face. With a surprised look, he said, “There you are! And here I thought you were just a shadow.”

The old black dog slowly rose, wagging his tail and licking the fellow’s fingers.

“You’ve always been a good friend Henry,” he told him. Rising, he pointed to the bedroom door. “OK, lead the way.”

In the hallway they passed the new fangled teleophone hanging on the wall. Its wooden box was large and had a long speaking trumpet sticking out from its middle. On the side, a black bell shaped listening piece hung in its cradle. As the dog and the man made to pass, the gadget burred out a ring from the bell on its front. The old man stopped and looked at it, and then at the dog. “Did I sleep that late or is someone else up early?” he asked.

As if in response the bell on the box burred again.

Picking up the receiver, he held it to his ear and said, “Blueportdoggie Wildlife Refuge, can I help you?”

His eyebrows went up. “Why yes Mildred, I got the paperwork yesterday. It was a struggle, but the mortgage is paid off and we’re now free and clear. Yes... Royal Bank held the note. What? Oh, yes, my intentions are to write this into perpetuity.”

He listened a moment and then said, “Why thank you. I would be pleased to attend a party to celebrate this event... yes... thank you; I didn’t know the woodland creatures meant that much to you. Goodbye now.”

He placed the receiver back into its cradle and looked at the ‘marvel of modern living’. “Pick up the receiver, turn the crank, and then talk to someone. How absolutely convenient for all the gossips,” he grumbled. Looking at the dog he told him, “News spreads fast. At least this time it’s good news, eh? She actually pledged a dollar. That’s a whole day’s wages, by golly.”

Moving out into the kitchen, he stopped at the refrigerator for a drink of ice water. This was another of the modern gizmos and right up there with the gas range he now used in lieu of the old wood stove. On the refrigerator’s door was a small plaque proclaiming it to be a product of the ‘Cold Harbor’ Refrigeration Company.

The Lab, moving to the kitchen door, looked to make sure the man was going to follow before pushing through his ‘doggie door’ with a grumble.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” the man told him as he placed the glass water jug back in the cold box.

Out on the porch, the sun was just rising. It cast an orange light over the area. On the porch swing the small and quite dirty boy from the previous day lay fast asleep. He had two cats laying on him as if they were intentionally trying to keep him warm, which they were.

“Good morning Hiss... Rosa...” the man told the pair quietly. “Looks like you both did a fair job last night. You could have come in and woke me up you know.”

The cat he'd called Hiss smiled at him and raised her head up to his scratching fingers, purring softly.

“I said he'd be back when he got hungry,” he whispered to her, “Maybe I'll go and whip up some pancakes to surprise him. What do you think? I bet there's some cream in the cold box for you and Rosa too.”

He was about to do this when he noticed a scrap of paper held in the youngster's hand. Bending down, he gently removed it from his grasp so he could examine it. Holding it up to the sun's orange light, he saw that it was a treasure map meticulously drawn out in ink. It was complete with skulls and crossed swords. He recognized the location the map was indicating by the 'X' right where he and his boyhood companion had buried the chest the youngster had apparently found and brought to him. Turning the paper over, he was surprised to find a note on it addressed to him.

My Dearest Tabor,

I have sent young Gabriel Raccoon along to keep you company. I hope you don't mind that I gave him our treasure map, but I figured it was the best way to get your attention. When you are ready, he will show you the way back to The Queen.

We do have to take Duroc home yet. After all; we did promise.

I miss you, as does the entire crew.

Your mate for life,

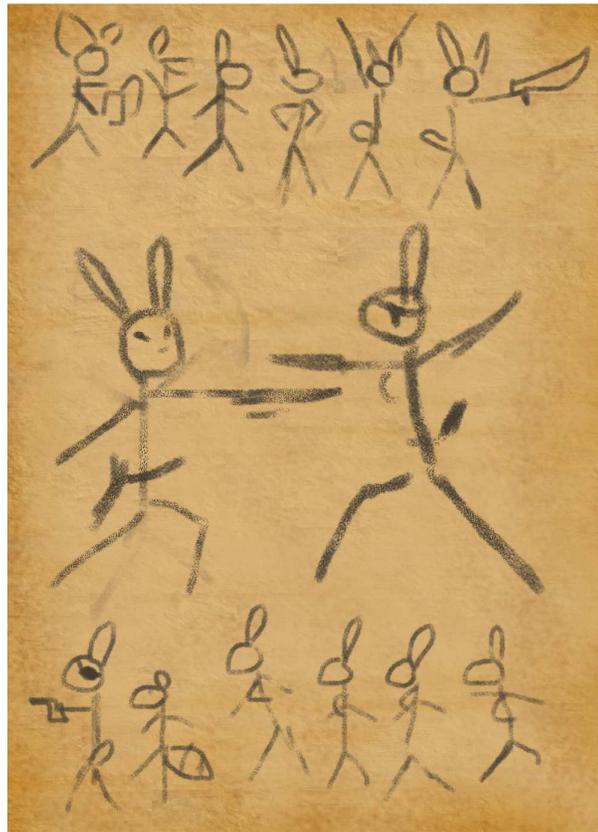
The Lady Robert Taverness

The old man looked from the treasure map note to the little boy sleeping on the porch swing and then understanding came to him and he smiled. “Come to think of it,” he said softly to the animals, “I don't recall Gabriel being at the wedding. Dang but that spy bunny is good.”

And so we shall end our story much as a movie might end. Art does, after all, reflect reality does it not? Or is it that reality reflects art?

We begin the closing music as the camera moves from the porch out to the rising sun and then continues to play as the credits begin rolling up. Little stick figures of the old man and the young boy playing pirate decorate the background, continuing to grow in definition the further along the credits go and the music plays.

They slowly change from human to rabbit and raccoon.



Their arrival at Blueportdoggie finally happens and they are seen running down the pier to the ship; where Tabor crosses the gang plank and is again in the arms of the one he loves.



The End