

The Journeyman: At the Bluffs of Sinjin Trell

Michael F. Flynn

"I long to journey endlessly, always in search of something new."

—Enrique Vila-Matas

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A strategic bluff

Teodorq sunna Nagarajan the Ironhand sat astride his horse at the head of his regiment and studied the situation before him. His regiment, the Roy's Own Savage Archers, was arrayed on the extreme left of the Royal and Imperial Army of Cuffland, well-placed for a sweep around the enemy's flank. But that worked best where there were flanks around which to sweep.

Instead, he faced the twin Bluffs of Sinjin Trell, which shouldered over against a salt-water bay and blocked the direct route to the enemy capital. Teo did not believe there was worse ground for light cavalry anywhere in Yavalprawns.

Most of the Cuffland Field Army was concentrated farther west, where the land flattened out and provided a more open, if rather more roundabout, route to the objective. Unfortunately, all the bridges across the River Sane had been blown down, and the Prawn Home Army was entrenched opposite Dolorous Ford.

That would have been a fine location for his regiment, with scope for its special weapons and tactics. Which raised the fascinating question of why General Haddafahm had posted him here, where his troopers were practically useless.

Teo had lined his regiment along a low ridge, facing the Bluffs across a scrubby flatland. The Prawns had thoughtfully cleared this land of obstacles and festooned it with distance markers for the artillery that crowned the heights beyond. It was a good field for a cavalry charge and would have been even better had it not ended against two sheer bluffs. They were called *beauts*, but Teo did not think they were especially pretty.

He studied the obstacle carefully through his look-glass. As the Lays of the Great Grass had it, *The purpose of an obstacle is its removal.*

"It don't go all the way through, does it?" he asked his assistant colonel, Lar Rigo della Hep-lewhite. "That there canyon. It looks like it might, but I don't think it does."

The Lar shook his head. "The Prawns were never much for sharing maps with us. Probably thought we would use them to invade their country one day."

Teo chuckled. "Do we at least know its name?"

"They call it *Belay dla Morth*, 'The Valley of Death.'"

Teo lowered his glass and looked at his Number One. "That can't be good." Then he glanced toward his chief of scouts, Sammi o' th' Eagles. "Hey, Sammi. Why'n'cha skulk it out over there on the left and see if'n there's a way around them Bluffs. I'm somewhat mindful of charging down that canyon with all them guns up on top; but . . ."

"Might be trap?" the hillman suggested. "You think general order you there?"

"He wouldn't dare," said Lar Rigo. "It's near treason to throw away a regiment like that."

"Yah, and it sorta makes me wishful o' being around for the court-martial."

"Does it 'make you wishful,'" Sammi said, "that you hadn't sampled his wife?"

A clatter of hooves announced the arrival of Jerry sunna Ranuuj the Implacable. Like Teo, he had wandered out of the Great Grass in search of adventure, or at least to evade the price on his head. He shouldered his mount into line between Teo and Lar Rigo and studied the bluffs. Finally, he spat on the ground and said, "Tell me we ain't ordered to climb straight up them cliffs."

"We ain't ordered to climb straight up them cliffs."

"That's good."

"We'll be ordered to charge straight into that there canyon."

"The one with all the thundertubes a-top . . ."

"That would be the one."

Jerry pursed his lips and bobbed his head side to side. He wore a broad-brimmed plainsman's hat and doffed it to shade his eyes while he checked the sky overhead. "Well . . . it's a good day fer it, anyways."

"A good day for what?" asked Lar Rigo.

Jerry looked at him. "Fer dying." He seated his hat, adjusted it. When he was satisfied, he said, "Hope she was worth it."

"He's kidding, right?" said Lar Rigo.

"That's my baby brother," said Morningstar dorra Rain, who had also joined the command group. "Always poking into things without thinking it through." The greenies were not accustomed to women in battle harness, let alone such an exotic woman as Teo's sister. Like Teo and the other plainsmen, she was tall and bronze-skinned in contrast to the green-hued Cuffs and Prawns here on East Continent. The ancient wizards of the long ago had altered the bodies of men to sundry ends, and the greenies had been given a ruff of skin around their necks that enabled them to "drink sunlight." The wizards had undoubtedly altered Teo's ancestors as well, but to what end—other than splendid good looks and martial prowess—he did not hazard a guess.

Morningstar spoke to Rigo: "No, he ain't kidding. I seen warriors die on real crummy days."

"It's what we call a 'bummer,'" Jerry supplied helpfully.

"You gonna poke into that there canyon, Brother? Or you gonna tell the general where *he* can poke it?"

"What's the First Rule of the Hunt?"

Morningstar rolled her eyes. "Men."

"What's the First Rule?" Teo insisted.

She sighed. "First Bow is always right."

"First Bow?" asked Lar Rigo.

"Yah. Y'see on the Great Grass, whenever a gang gets together for a hunt or a roundup or sumpin', one of 'em gets named 'First Bow.' And whatever he says, goes."

"And what if he makes a bad decision?"

Teo and Jerry and Morningstar exchanged glances. "Well," said Teo, "that's the Second Rule."

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A butte in a beholder's eye

The general had known that "a big, bronze savage from the westlands" had lain with his wife without his permission, but all those savages looked alike, and he had not gotten a close study before Teo had cold-cocked him. So in retaliation he had sent ruffians to deliver beatings to any plainsman they could find in Cuffland, a revenge so dilute that Teo had not at first realized that he had been its target.

Given that the honey trap had been planned, the outrage was feigned. But Teo's escape and the repeated failures of the Lar's hirelings had kindled a white-hot fury in the general's breast.

And so he had exacted petty vengeance. On the march south, despite being cavalry, the Savage Archers found themselves posted to the rear of the left, or eastern, column, where they could eat the dust of the foot regiments plodding ahead of them. Plainsmen called it the "drag" position. Teo, Jerry, Morningstar, and Srinivas the Bowyer showed the troopers how to tie their kerchiefs over their noses and mouths to cut down on the dust; but complaints from the regiment increased and morale dropped.

Consequently, the regiment missed the battle of Pyorkeno Ford, where the hastily mustered regiments of eastern Yavalprawns contested passage. Teo had wanted to see what a battle between two thunderpowder armies was like, but the general's orders kept him in the rear.

Afterward, the Archers rounded up stragglers and deserters, and Sammi put together enough scraps of information to learn that the Ford had been held long enough that the Prawnish Reserve Army had pushed General Haddafahm back against the river and toward the Bay. Had the other two columns not forced crossings upstream at Pattern Bridge and Simonstown, and threatened the Prawns with envelopment, the column would have been in Dire Straits, a narrow sea between the coast and the Bay Islands. It had been named after an ancient settler, Ujean Dyer.

The territory along the route of march had been thoroughly gleaned by the foot regiments, so despite orders to stick close to the assigned road, Jerry and Major Feinwuarth, who was major-ji four, sent troopers farther off cross country, not only to forage for supplies but to practice horsemanship and archery. They came across a squad of the Twenty-Third Foot that had commandeered a cottage and its inhabitants and from all appearances had been prepared to await the conclusion of the campaign in comfort. Three of them had assaulted the cotter's daughter, and those Teo hanged. The remainder he ordered hog-tied and dispatched with a polite note to Colonel Krathi of the Twenty-Third.

In addition, Srinivas the Bowyer had been compounding bows and instructing selected troopers in the craft, so the Savage Archers came to the end of the trail better armed and more practiced than at its start. But when *Don* Minnie Schoenny'ess, who was the general's lieutenant, delivered their deployment orders, they found themselves facing two buttes, which, though not very high, were remarkably steep. Between the buttes ran a canyon known as the Back Door.

You couldn't *not* probe up a canyon with such a name.

Which was why the Heights were crowned with cannon.

Gunning Karl spoke for the major officers. "Does the general know nothing of the roundelay or the arrow-storm or any of our special tactics?"

Teo remembered the early doubts of these same officers and smiled. "You underestimate our general's tactical genius," he told his officers.

They looked at him as if he had grown a second head and were waiting to see if it would speak.

"The general has wisely kept us in reserve. By lowering the enemy's expectations, he'll increase the shock and awe when he does unleash us. Besides, for all the general knows, the Prawns keep a regiment of elite cavalry in that canyon, all primed to swoop out and hit his flank when he moves on the Ford."

The officers brightened under Teo's pep talk, and they dispersed to their tents in a more cheerful mood. Lar Rigo accompanied Teo a little way toward the commander's tent. "I think I figured out what the Second Rule is," he announced.

Morningstar, Jerry, and Srinivas looked at him, then at Teo, who said, "Awright, what is it?"

“When First Bow is wrong, find a way to make him right in spite of himself.”

Jerry said, “Well, that’s a little wordy.”

Srinivas added, “We just say, ‘When First Bow is wrong, read First Rule again.’”

Teo clapped his Number One on the shoulder. “Yuh woulda made a good plainsman if’n yuh wasn’t so prim and proper. I gotta teach yuh to spit an’ scratch yerself.”

Lar Rigo smiled. “I’ll work on it.”

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An entry in a log

In the morning, flashes of light and claps of thundertubes off to the west announced that the offensive had begun. The major officers gathered around the regimental banner, and Lar Rigo gauged the height of Red Sun.

“I hate fighting in red light,” he said. “It’s hard to make out details.”

“Yuh ain’t seen Sammi, have yuh, Captain Two Stags?”

The lieutenant-commander of the scouts was a forestman from West Continent and had served with Sammi and Teo in Tiger’s Foreign Legion. He shrugged. “Sammi took a squad out on the left flank yesterday like you told him. The others come back, but not Sammi. Maybe he got caught.”

Teo thought Sammi too ornery to be caught. “I don’t like goin’ in blind,” he said. “Major-ji Three? Are them plans finished?”

Gunning Karl handed out packets to the other majors. “We expect the general will order us to charge up the Valley of Death.”

“We should charge up General Haddafahm,” said Jerry, but Teo waved him silent.

“Obstacles to the likely line of attack?” he said.

“Well,” said the horse major, Kohdam Huan, “he’s usually pretty well guarded.”

“I meant the canyon.”

Belepo said, “The Heights of Sinjin Trell are crowned by artillery. These are pushed forward to cover attacking forces. The stakes in the ground likely tell the gunners the ranges. Should we reach the bottom of the bluffs, they cannot depress the tubes enough to fire on us. But we don’t need to worry about that, because we’ll never get that far.”

That’s a relief,” said Kohdam Huan. The others chuckled, though without much humor.

“Belepo, can your people creep out at night into the killing field and move the stakes toward the cliffs?”

Lar Rigo grinned. “So their gunners will think we’re farther out and overshoot? Might work for one round.”

“Ride fast, and they won’t have time for a second round.”

“Why not just pull up the stakes?” said Jerry.

“They’d see that right off, long before we charge,” said Gunning. “Then they’ll fire by memory, and they might remember lucky. Nope, they prepped the ground and they’ll trust their preparations, leastwise till they see their first volley is off, and it may take a while to adjust their thinking. What do you hope to gain, Teo?”

Teo pointed. “The base of the left-hand bluff. They won’t be able to depress their tubes enough to reach us if we hug the base.”

“They won’t have to,” said Don Pful, the major-ji for recruiting and personnel. “They can just roll rocks down on us.” When Teo looked at him, he shrugged. “Just thought I’d mention it.”

Morningstar had been silent until then, but women did not customarily keep silent in councils among the plainsmen. “What yuh thinking, Sis?” Teo asked her.

She stood from the council table and walked to the front of the line. The others followed. She held her hand out, and Lar Rigo slapped a look-glass in it. With it, Morningstar studied the crest of the bluff.

“They pull them thundertubes with horses, don’t they?” Jerry and Srinivas perked up, and Teo listened attentively. Morningstar continued. “Must be tolerable hot and dry up there, yuh think? I climb a tree back a ways and I ain’t seen hide nor hair of no cavvies.”

“Might could be they’re shaded up,” Jerry suggested.

"Yah? Where at? There any trees up there, I'll chop 'em down with a whittlin' knife and make toothpicks for everyone."

Teo pulled on his jaw. "Meaning what? Without horses, they can't shift their guns?"

Gunning said, "It may be a permanent emplacement, and they never thought about shifting them."

"Maybe they got themselves a nice shady spot with cool, fresh water down the back slope."

"Or on east side of bluff toward Bay," said Sammi.

Everyone except Teo jumped a little. Teo said, "Sweet breath of Awāchi, Sammi, yuh look like crap. Where yuh been all night?"

"Find nice pool of sweet water at base of bluff. Seeps from rock, collects, and flows into Bay. Thundertube men come down from bluff, fill canteens for everyone. And chat. And natter. And sit on log and smoke chickweed."

"So they got no water on top the bluff and gotta come down to water up . . . Where was you?"

"Under log. With spiders. Did you know Prawns eat beans? Should be outlawed. Sammi hear come, duck under log, wait for group to fill canteens for all many friends. Then, before they go back up, new group come down and start backslapping and chatting like they never met before and start trading lies about girlfriends. And so on through night."

Jerry covered his mouth with his hand. Morningstar looked to the heavens. "So is there a way up onto the bluffs?" Teo insisted.

"Stupid plainsman," said Sammi. "If way down, is way up." Sammi was a hillman from the mountains west of the Great Grass, where people had pale skins and slanted eyes. Although hillmen were the hereditary enemies of the plainsmen, he had partnered up with Teo back on the Short Grass, and the two had journeyed together ever since.

"Did you scout it? The path?"

Sammi gave Teo a look. "Been there, done that, brought souvenir."

Don Pfuil said, "Souvenir?"

"That him, hog-tied on horse. Want ask questions?"

Teo and his major officers gathered around the souvenir, who was less than delighted to find himself the center of their attention. He glanced uneasily from face to face, especially the strange western complexions. Teo's two ironman bodyguards in their half-armor, longswords, and basket helms frightened him; but Belepo Two Stags, with his scalp lock flanked by painted antlers seemed to strike him as especially ominous.

"He doesn't look very comfortable," suggested Kohdam Huan.

"Not supposed to be," Sammi explained.

"I was talking about the horse," said Huan.

Teo had the man unshipped and stood upright. Morningstar pinched him here and there. "Looks tasty," she said.

"Too fatty," suggested Sammi. "Bad for heart."

Jerry said, "Yuh think we should put melons under his arms?" a remark that puzzled the greenie officers, though they tried not to show it.

Morningstar nodded. "Yuh do catch more flies with honey," she remarked.

The mention of melons and honey convinced the prisoner he was being considered for some cannibal feast, and he turned to the greenie officers and pleaded with them, "Mercy, my sirs! But you cannot allow these savages to dine on me! It is expressly against the usages of war!" The Prawns had never met any folk from the western continent and might believe them capable of any savagery. That was the whole idea behind the Savage Archers. Teo made a sign to his lieutenant-colonel.

Lar Rigo spread his hands and said to the prisoner, "These men are very hard to control once they get their blood up. It might be best if you tell us what we need to know." He, the major officers, and even the guards managed to look very concerned. The two ironmen, Bourse and Tunny, chose to raise the visors on their basket helms, and the sight of their golden faces further unnerved the prisoner.

Gunning Karl, who had understood Morningstar's reference to catching flies with honey, sent

Sergeant-Major Jestapul to fetch a tankard of ale and a pipe of weed and retired with the prisoner into the command tent, from which shortly drifted the sounds of conversation.

Morningstar flexed herself. "Think a woman might help relax him more?"

Lar Rigo shook his head, "I think you scared him more than the rest of us put together."

"Hell, Sissy," said Teo, "Yuh scared *me*."

Major Feinuarth said, "Your people don't actually eat prisoners, do you?"

Jerry smiled and said. "Naw. Not usually."

Srinivas said, "Sometimes we skin 'em and make drumheads."

Sammi o' th' Eagles looked thoughtful, "Taste like chicken."

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Afterward, Major-ji Three told them. "He's a-holding something back. He's a-feared of that canyon, thinks it's a trap."

"Wait. What? *He* thinks it might be a trap?"

"That wonders me," said Morningstar. "If'n it's a box canyon like everyone is saying, why bother with such defenses? Why not just let us charge in, then pop us when we try to escape?"

"To get us coming and going?" suggested Don Pful.

Gunning Karl shook his head. "No, it's like the lady has guessed. The prisoner told me the Back Door be a secret way into the capital, 'warded by ferocious guardians et cetera, et cetera' of which they are scared spittleless. If we awaken them, they will 'destroy us with no more than a flick of their wrist.'"

"So they never went through it themselves," mused Teo "due to them aforesaid ferocious guardians."

Jerry grunted. "Yuh'd think they'd welcome the help."

"Boys," said Morningstar, "no one welcomes *overwhelming* assistance. Power that great might easily turn against them."

Teo and Sammi, who had seen that sort of power before, exchanged glances. They knew exactly what the dorra Rain meant. The ghosts of the old Commonwealth of Suns had their own ends, not always compatible with those of their modern descendants.

Which was too bad, since the Commonwealth had possessed puissant weapons like the rapid stone-thrower that warded the buried shuttle and the *lésars* that had defended the underground city of Phanklar Noi. However, these ancient weapons sometimes malfunctioned in unpredictable—and deadly—ways.

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Afterward, Teo and Major Karl worked out the tactics for the attack. "The tactical problem," Teo explained to the others, "is how to carry out a suicidal order without actually committing suicide."

"So, I skulk up Sammi's secret path with two troops," said Jerry, "and sweep the eastern bluff, which we think is held only by an artillery battery. I can see how that solves half the problem. But yuh still got them guns on the western bluff."

"So we'll only get mowed down from the right as we charge up the canyon."

"Half-suicidal charge better than all-suicidal?" Sammi suggested.

"Nah. Captain Yarmoot, you'll take the horse artillery up the bluff with Jerry."

"Ah don't have no guns," the artilleryman pointed out. "Field Artillery taken 'em. Said we wouldn't be needing 'em."

Teo shook his head. "Yuh won't. The Prawns have a bunch of guns up there waiting for you. If Jerry's fast enough . . ." The other plainsman snorted. ". . . they won't have time to spike 'em all. Sammi, you and your scouts guide 'em up on the bluff. Use stealth, maybe capture a couple guns before they know you're up there. Turn the guns against the western bluff and give 'em something to think on besides horsemen riding into their box canyon. I got it in mind to take a look at this Back Door of theirs."

Sammi snorted. "Old granny already know egg-sucking."

"Oh, and one other thing," said Major Karl. "Maybe it means nothing. The Prawn dialect is a bit different from ours, but our 'souvenir' weren't a-calling that canyon the *Belay dla Morth*,

what we would say *Fell della Mirth*, the Valley of Death.”

“That’s good.”

“. . . they call it *“Belay das Mors.”*

“The Valley of the Dead?” said Lar Rigo.

Kohdam Huan scoffed. “A difference that makes no difference.”

Morningstar scowled. “Is it?” she said. “One means a valley where death lurks, and that’s irritable as hell. But the other means a valley where the dead lurk, and that does bother me considerably.”

Teo agreed. “That can’t be good.”

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The valley of the dead

The orders came when the yellow sun was high and the red sun in the afternoon quarter, so that the sky had an ill-omened tint. Sergeant-Major Jestapul appeared with a message packet. He touched his temple with his fingertips and snapped, “Sor! The general’s compliments. These are the regiment’s orders.”

Teo broke the seal and read the instructions inside. His major officers waited expectantly. He handed the orders to Lar Rigo, who read them and passed them along to Don Pful and the others. One by one, their faces hardened.

Teo spoke to them. “My friends, our general has devised a brilliant strategy. We’re to penetrate the Valley of the Dead, as we s’posed. This will draw Enemy’s attention to his right, and since our own right will remain inactive, it will be made to seem a blunder. Enemy will draw forces from his inactive front to meet us, thus weakening his line along the river for the general’s masterstroke. This may seem like a suicide mission . . .”

His lieutenant colonel and the major officers laughed. The troop captains scowled. One of them turned his head and spat on the ground.

“But this order don’t dictate *bow* we execute the battle. *Archers!* Today will test you as no other day! Some of you—many of you—may not return from this Ride, but will gallop into the songs on the lips of your companions! Major-ji Four!”

Feinwarth brought himself to attention.

“Nethdor, you will keep the commissary troops and guard the wagon laager. Only combatants will charge.”

“Begging your pardon, Colonel,” the major for supplies answered. “But in the Roy’s Own Savage Archers, there are no noncombatants. If we remain behind while the rest of you go a-charging into glory, what will our children say about us? And it would be right lonely without your ugly faces at the mess.”

Teo and the other officers remained silent for a moment. Then Teo said quietly, “The regiment needs its supply train, Major. Safeguarding it is important.”

“Then may I suggest I move it to someplace more secure.”

“That would be . . . ?”

Feinwarth pointed. “I figure atop the left-hand bluff with Jerry’s division would be less exposed.”

Lar Rigo laughed and clapped his hands. “That’s the spirit, Nethdor.”

“Sammi, can this path of yours accommodate our wagons?”

“Tight. May have to zigzag. Wagons go last.”

“Awright. Sammi, Jerry, Major Feinwarth. You have a fist of time to get yer wing up on the bluffs. I can’t delay the main attack any longer than that in the face of direct orders.” He held his fist out at arms-length to where the yellow sun stood in the sky, collected their nods. “Sergeant-major, you have experience with artillery, so you go with them. Once they have taken the mesa-top, infantry tactics must be used.”

Jestapul nodded. “Sor!”

“Jerry, yuh’ve lived yer whole life a-horseback, so listen to Henerick here when yer afoot.”

Jerry turned his horse to the rear. “Let’s fade, boys. Troops A and B, on me. Horse artillery, scouts, and commissary. Move in silence behind our lines to conceal what we’re up to. Teddy,

I'll see yuh when I see yuh." He and the other officers in his division drifted to the rear of the battle line, behind the ridge.

"Lar Rigo," said Teo, "take the second line. Round up all the best archers. When the first line reaches the first row of stakes, the Prawn artillery will let loose, but they will overshoot because Sammi's people done moved the stakes last night. They'll get all curious-like and look over the bluff to see what happened. That's when yuh loose an arrow storm at the gallop and see how many yuh can feather."

His number one nodded. "Done and done, sir."

"By that time, we will have achieved the base of the bluff and be in the shadow of the thundertubes. Jerry should clear the summit before the rock-and-roll begins, but the gods laugh at folk who assume. Be wary of stone confetti. Once Captain Yarmoot places fire on the western bluff, we will execute left file sweep into the canyon, and then . . . And then, we'll see what we will see."

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Half a fist later, Don Minniel himself arrived, saluted, and presented the general's compliments, and asked why the charge had not been carried out. Teo replied that the general had told him what to do but not how, and the preparations were now nearly complete, and did the lieutenant-general mean to ride along as observer? Don Minniel swallowed once, hard, and allowed as he would observe from the rear as instructed.

Lar Rigo said, "Then, you are aware of his intention to annihilate this regiment?"

The second-in-command spread his arms. "What could I do, Rigo? The man won't listen to reason."

The lieutenant-colonel turned grim. "Then, it seems that this will become a matter for the Houses."

"Now, hold yer horses," Teo cautioned them. "Why don't we see how it all pans out before we cross any lines we can't uncross. We gotta flush the canyon. Remember, 'First Bow is always right.'" He turned to his bannerman. "Willit, signal *Prepare for Jump-off*."

Willit had already attached the proper colors and numbers to his bannerstaff. Now he raised it and waited until he saw the remaining troops acknowledge. "All ready, Colonel," he announced.

Teo smiled at the lieutenant-general, "See yuh later, Don Minniel. Willit, wave 'em off."

The bannerstaff wig-wagged, then snapped forward and down, and the entire regiment jumped off silently at full charge. The Prawns, like all greenies, were accustomed to bugle calls, maneuvers, and a build-up of speed from walk to gallop to charge. But the ways of heavy cavalry were not the ways of light cavalry, and were especially not the ways of the Savage Archers. As faux barbarians, they could charge with as much noise and bravado as required to unnerve their opponents; but the Riders of the Great Grass had also learned that silence and suddenness could be equally unnerving, and they could strike with the abruptness of a sidewinder.

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Teo and his officers had devised a clever plan, but like so much else in life, warfare was often complicated by the presence of the other side. Unnerved by the eerily silent charge, one of the gunners atop the bluffs fired his thundertube prematurely and without orders before the oncoming cavalry had reached the first set of markers.

However, since those markers had been shifted during the night, it so happened that the Savage Archers had just reached their former and righteous position when the lone thundertube spoke. The ball rippled through the air and exploded in the ranks of D Troop, tossing men and horses in various directions.

"That's done it," Lar Rigo said, and he faded back to take command of the sharpshooters.

On the bluffs above, the gunnery sergeant swallowed a reprimand to the premature gunner and turned an abrupt query to his battery captain, who added two-plus-two and ordered immediate fire-for-effect, odd numbers.

The captain trained his look-glass on the Savage Archers and noted with some admiration their open order—they did not bunch up to present him with easy harvests. But they must be approaching already the second set of pre-calculated ranges.

"Second markers!" he called. "Prepare!"

The gunners on the even-numbered guns held their slow-matches to the ready. The odd guns were quenching their barrels, and the powder monkeys were fetching the numbered cartridges from the caissons that held the powder charges for the third benchmarks. Another look at the approaching cavalry added puzzle to the captain's admiration. Clever to have so obviously shifted the benchmarks, brave to so resolutely charge the guns; but someone had blundered. Cavalry charging artillery without infantry support? Straight ahead? Did they intend to gallop up the sheer face of the bluff?

Horse archers, in this day and age! But he had heard water-talk that these troops drew special bows from the western continent. They certainly dressed like savages, and their colonel was clearly of a foreign race. He was flanked by two large men wearing strange helmets. Intelligence had reported this novel formation to be a full regiment, but it seemed only a rump regiment. Perhaps two-thirds strength.

Was Haddafahm holding the remainder in reserve? He must be, for he was surely throwing this half away. But certainly! It must be a distraction! The battery captain swept the distance with his look-glass. But he spotted no reserve.

All this, in the blink of an eye. He never had a chance to blink the other one. A part of the ground came alive at his feet. Brush and scrub stood erect and said, "Allo!" and before the captain could marvel at this phenomenon or even give the order for the even guns to fire, the bush had produced a keen-edged knife and ran it across his throat, crying, "Yowie!"

Yavalprawnsi told a common joke about Cuffs and circular firing squads, but this sudden assassin in their midst conjured one from their own ranks as the battery's guards fired on the bush. But the malevolent foliage flattened to the ground, and the musket balls, coming from all directions, perforated the gun crew instead.

Taking out the battery's commander and dropping to the ground proved prelude to the arrow storm that followed. Jerry the Implacable and the Savage Archers' left wing thundered out from the edge of the butte in a chorus of yips and a cloud of arrows that hummed across the bluff top and feathered most of the gunners where they stood. The captain's death had introduced a moment's confusion and hesitation and that was all that was needed. The archers swept the mesa. A few of the gunnery sergeants grabbed their gunner's linstocks and touched off their guns, so that a handful of explosive shots rained down on the cavalry charging across the flatlands below.

At the farther end of the bluff, overlooking the canyon, gunnery sergeants ordered their guns about, and the crews grabbed the trails and the wheels and rotated them to face this new threat coming up behind them. But it was a desperate measure and too slow. Those who realized it hammered spikes into their touchholes to deny the enemy the use of their beloved guns.

* * *

When Teo heard Sammi's *yowie!* cry, followed by the *yip-yip-yip* of Jerry's wing sweeping the bluff top with an arrow storm, he knew that his strategy had worked. Or had worked well enough. His charge had distracted the enemy artillery and given Jerry a chance to take them by surprise. There had been a few bad moments when the premature gunshot had revealed the trick with the stakes and some shrewd captain on the bluff had started fire on spec. There were some gaping holes in E Troop now, and its senior cornet was now acting troop captain. But the bulk of the regiment had reached the bluff and sheltered at its base, waiting for Yarmoot to open fire on the western bluff to distract them from the right wing's glorious charge into the box canyon.

"Willit," he said to his cornet, "Senior officers here."

His bannerman dug into his saddlebags and clipped the appropriate flags to his staff, spun his bullroarer for attention, and wagged the bannerstaff back and forth. Shortly, Lar Rigo, Don Pfuil, Belepo Two Stags, Gunning Karl, and Kohdam Huan showed up along with the surviving troop captains.

"Open order worked," said Gunning Karl. "Felt mighty exposed, I tell you. Like my flap was unfastened and Captain Happy was hanging out. Instinct when the guns begin to talk is to

bunch up and hide in the powder smoke.”

“We’re archers,” Teo reminded him. “We don’t make smoke.”

Gunning shrugged. “Old habits are hard to break. And you always hope the enemy is aiming at someone else.”

Don Pfuil reined in, caught the tail end of it. “I don’t think gunners can aim that precisely.”

“Sure, but in open order you feel like you’re the only man on the field.”

“Maybe so,” said Lar Rigo, “but it also means explosive shells don’t take out as many troopers with one shot. I’m just happy they weren’t firing off cannister.”

“Casualties?” Teo cut them off.

“Heavier than we’d hoped,” Lar Rigo reported. “Lighter than we’d feared.” He handed Teo a slip of paper with the tally. “E Troop is in worst shape. Ten percent killed, wounded, or unhorsed.”

The guns on the forward edge of the other bluff had turned to fire at them, but the angle was not favorable, and only the difficulty of sheltering four troops of light cavalry in the lea of the eastern bluff enabled them to pick off riders who spread out too far.

“I’ve ordered the sharpshooters brought forward,” Lar Rigo continued. “They can’t hit the bluff-top anymore from this angle, and our people are all mixed in there now. I set them to sniping at the Worms and Sponges on the other bluff. They’ve been elevating their guns to fire on Jerry’s wing.”

Teo could hear the “mandolin plucking” of bows around him as his men took turns exposing themselves to the western guns. “Good. That’ll distract ’em from the traffic here below.” A storm of arrows crossed the canyon between the two bluffs, further disabling the Rams on the west side and forcing the Handlers to back their guns out of position.

Teo assumed that Prawn colonels were not especially stupid and infantry was on its way to push Jerry’s Archers off the bluff. He told Lar Rigo to fetch the Twenty-Third Foot, whose colonel owed him a favor, and have the scouts show them up the path to the top. “Already done,” his lieutenant replied.

“Rock and roll!” cried one of the troop captains.

Two large boulders plummeted from the heights above them, and the senior officers scattered from their path. The first boulder struck an outcropping and hopped over their heads to smash into smaller stones and strike half a dozen troopers and their horses. The second fell unimpeded and crushed Gunning Karl in mid-leap.

The other staff officers danced their horses and brought them back under control. A few moments later, two Prawnish artillerists followed the rocks. Teo looked up toward the rim of the bluff and saw Jerry looking down. “Payment,” he called out.

Teo shook his head. “They was only doing their jobs.”

But Lar Rigo demurred. “They knew the wages when they took those jobs.”

A salvo of deep-throated roars cut loose from atop the bluff, announcing that Yarmoot had seized control of at least some guns there. Solid shot smashed against the side of the opposing bluff along the Valley of the Dead. Three balls struck the lip just right and, rolling across the flat top, scattered Prawns like ninepins.

“That’s our cue, Cornet Willit,” said Teo and gave the high sign.

Don Pfuil glanced down at his late comrade. “No safe places on the battlefield. If you don’t get struck down here, you get struck down there. Gunning was okay for an Arandtman.”

The banners wagged, bullroarers groaned, and Teo raised the yip-yip-yip of the Savage Archers. They kicked off at the gallop and executed a left wheel into the Valley of the Dead. They galloped along the base of the western bluff. But while the guns above them could not depress to cover them—most of them were now diverted to counterfire against Jerry and Yarmoot—that did not stop them from rolling rocks or their musketeers from lighting off their thunder sticks. Jerry’s people launched an arrow storm from the top of the eastern bluff to discourage them. Yarmoot was supposed to hold fire once the regiment was in the box canyon, but a late salvo struck the side of the enemy-held bluff, and stone and iron confetti rained down upon the riders. Teo remembered it was called “friendly fire,” though it never

seemed particularly companionable.

Teo's Archers galloped through the clatter of tumbling rocks, the boom and pop of thunder-tubes, and the insect buzz of passing bullets. Above, the concerted crash of volley fire atop the butte meant the reserve Prawn infantry had moved up the south face of the Sinjin Trell. Answering musketry told him the Twenty-Third Foot had joined Jerry.

There was no time to worry about that. Men and horses littered the trail behind him, some still twitching, and while the price was not so steep as it might have been, it was still enough to stoke his fury at General Haddafahm.

* * *

Mallow doors

The charge of the Savage Archers brought them finally to the end in the box canyon, where they bunched up against a fluffy, white cliff face. Captains mustered their troops; Lar Rigo studied the o'erlooming bluffs with concern. Kohdam Huan saw to the horses, most of which were winded. Don Pfuil gathered the tallies from the troop captains and joined Teo at the head of the regiment. Above them, the artillery duel continued between the Prawns on the western bluff and Yarmoot's captured artillery on the eastern one. Musket fire rattled; arrows hissed.

"We ought to get out of here," Lar Rigo said. "An ancient proverb about fish and barrels comes to mind."

As yet, there were no Prawn snipers on the rim above them, but Teo was not inclined to wait for them.

"This here is supposed to be a 'back door' to Yavalprawns," Teo answered, still scowling at the cliff. "But that don't look like no door I ever seen." It looked like someone had melted the largest candle in the world down the face of the cliff. Maybe the door was hidden underneath the mass.

"Looks like guano," Lar Rigo suggested.

Teo grunted. "They must have some powerful big birds in these parts," he allowed. "Don Pfuil! Put a detail to scraping off some of that crap. I want to see how thick it is. And where this 'Back Door' stands."

"That might be a lot of scraping," Lar Rigo suggested, "depending on how big this 'door' is. Assuming it exists."

"Yuh got someplace else yuh gotta be?"

"Pretty much anyplace else but here. Don Pfuil and some of the others are getting itchy. If Jerry's division gets driven off the bluff, getting out of here will require some considering."

Teo gave him a sharp look. "Tell Don Pfuil to take it up with General Haddafahm. This *stunt* weren't my idea."

Uaiqa Phoon, who was lieutenant-captain of D-Troop, approached and saluted. He was covered in a sticky white mass from head to foot. Lar Rigo blinked and said, "Report."

"Sor! I be pleased to be reporting that that there stuff ain't guano, but *wayawizgo*, a medicinal paste made from the roots of the mallow plant, what we use up in, um, 'eastern Cuffland.' It grows in the salt-water marshes, and is right tasty, beside."

Rigo grunted. "I don't suppose we could eat our way through."

"Not without gettin' tummy-aches all round. We pull chunks out, it fills itself in. You stick your arm in, and it gets bounced back."

The lieutenant-colonel thanked and dismissed him.

Teo considered the matter. "I hope he didn't discover it wasn't guano by tasting it."

"That assumes he knows what guano tastes like. What now, Colonel?"

The mallow curtain began to hiss and crackle and voices could be discerned within it. One voice boomed over the others in antique *xhavla*: "This be a restricted area! Authorized personnel only are being permitted!" The regiment stirred in unease, kept from flight by regimental pride and the cannons lining the bluff above them. Teo sighed. This was getting old.

Don Pfuil shouted to Teo, "You have led us to our doom!" A handful of the headquarters troop echoed him.

"Don't yuh mean, 'General Haddafahm done sent us to our doom?'" Teo answered him.

“Besides, let’s wait to find out where we stand before we decide we stand before our doom. Don Pfuil, yuh rode too bravely into the face of the Prawn cannon to quail before a blustering voice!” To Lar Rigo, he whispered, “This could go sundown real fast. We gotta keep the men from boltin’.”

Lar Rigo had turned positively chartreuse. “Don’t think I won’t be in the fore of the bolt. It’s one thing to hear about these specters of yours; another thing to hear them.” He pointed. “Or see them.”

* * *

A snake in the mass

An image had formed within the mallow mass that coated the cliff face. A stern-visaged, thin-featured man with night-black skin stood with hands a-hip, head and shoulders taller than Teo. He seemed both within the mallow and before it. At first, Teo thought him naked, but then he saw that he wore a black coverall garment similar to the pale gold one worn by Jamly-ghost back in the ancient shuttle, where he and Sammi had met. His sigils were silver rather than red.

Teo sighed. Just when you know your day is going badly, you find out the day ain’t over yet. The Savage Archers began to murmur and back away, but Teo muttered, “Screw this shit,” and stepped toward the image.

An eagle’s shear cut the air, and Sammi plummeted from the butte-top. Lar Rigo and the other major officers sucked in their breath. But when the elastic vines tied to his ankles reached their full extension, they retracted, and Sammi’s plummet slowed. Teo told Tunney and Bourse to grab him before he could rebound and bob like a yoyo, though he thought that would serve the hillman right for being a such a show-off.

Lar Rigo pretended to be unimpressed. “How does he get back up?”

“More slowly.” In the hill country west of Teo’s homeland, he knew that Sammi’s people used systems of counterweights and pulleys, but the “bunch cords” were favored for swift descent.

“Hey,” said Sammi by way of greeting, “Jerry steaming. Knows more cuss words than even Sammi; and Sammi know a lot. Says he knew you’d cut him out of songworthy stunt.”

“Yeah? Well, I put him in charge up there, and . . .”

“. . . and First Bow is always right. No rule say Second Bow got to like it, though. Srinivas philosophical, but not real happy, either. Neither is your sister. Rather have Jerry mad at me.”

“Look, Sammi, yuh know the drill. They gotta be authorized personnel first. If we kin get ‘em Commonwealth warrants, then we’ll see.” He shouted to his staff, “Someone get Sammi *nāyakkān* a horse, unless yer waitin’ fer his mount to come down on a bunch cord, which I ain’t expecting real soon! Him and me, we got a ghost to meet and negotiate safe passage for the lot of ye! Wish us luck!” Willit brought a dappled mare up for Sammi, and he and Teo single-stepped their horses before the image. Teo wondered if the being was really a giant or only a magnified image. But he supposed it didn’t matter. “Yuh know, I can take care of myself,” Teo told his companion from the side of his mouth.

“Sammi know this. Sammi come down, take care of everyone else.”

They stood their horses before the image, though Teo suspected that did not matter either. Whatever lay behind the giant black man did not depend on where the image of its eyes rested. Teo gestured to the three red stripes painted on his arm, folded his hands, and bowed over them:

“*Vañakkam!* I hight Teodorq sunna Nagarajan, subadar of scouts for Shuttle Starbright-17, ap-pertaining to Great Ark *Hay Paag* CST 19437, known also as *Bold Vision*, out of Port Huang-don, Tau Ceti, of and for the Treasure Fleet designated as *Operation End Run*,” Since the Folk routinely memorized songs thousands of lines long, it was little effort to recall exactly what Jamly ghost had told him years ago in the wreck of the shuttle.

“The shuttle’s commander, J.N. Raavaneshwaran, was killed in battle with the People of Sand and Iron and command has passed to a talking image—much like yerself, I suppose—calling herself Jamly. She sent my *nāyakkān* and me to locate Iabran and Varucciyamen and send back assistance, for the shuttle was grievous hurt in the battle and now lies buried deep in a chasm on the western continent. We was to be given succor along the way by any other outposts of the

Treasure Fleet. Which would include you. A while back, we helped defend the outpost of Phanklar Noi from, ah, 'mutineers,' and defeated a secret stronghold of the People of Sand and Iron in the cut known locally as Madness Gap. The folk we now lead are the descendants of the refugees who fled the Fall of Old Iabran and are returning to be reunited with their brethren of old."

"One way of describing it," muttered Sammi.

"If ye be scouts," cried a second voice, "why be ye out of proper uniform?" A second figure slowly coalesced beside the first. This one was even taller than the first and of an olive complexion, with high cheekbones and narrow eyes.

Teo said, "The proper machines on the shuttle were not functioning. Don't you want to hear our report? Both Jamly and Phanlar Noi have valuable equipment awaiting salvage."

The two figures laughed. "They have been waiting for thousands of sun-circuits. They can wait a trifle more," said the black one.

"Besides . . ." said the olive.

"The breeds have no need to know," said black. "Be they even so scouts?"

The olive man turned piercing eyes on Teo and Sammi. "I may ask too much of the lesser breeds," he commented. Then, "Recite ye the oath of service!"

It required little effort to recall the oath they had sworn in the wrecked shuttle before the projected image of the boat's intelligence.

*"We, Teodorq sunna Nagarajan the Ironband and Sammi o' th' Eagles,
Solemnly vow our service to the Commonwealth of Suns:*

To Bhaitri and Delpaffonis and Old 82, to New Mumbai and New Vraddy,

To Tao Ceti and the Centauri Suns, and to all their daughter worlds,

And above all to Terra Herself, Mother of Men.

We will support and defend the Commonwealth of the Suns of Terra

Against all foes, human and inhuman; and will remain true and faithful to her.

We will obey the lawful orders of the Assembly

And those of officers duly appointed by them over us;

And we will use with the same justice we demand for ourselves

Those men placed in our charge, and those folk given to our protection.

This we vow by all the gods of all the folk, and by Existence Itself, who reigns over all.

By the blue skies and the green hills, may we never see Green Terra if we lie."

The thin-nosed black image said, "So. They ken the oath."

The olive one answered, "That is as may be; but the strength of the oath depends on their desire to see Terra once more, does it not?"

"Hey," said Teo, "how many sun circuits have you two carried on this debating society? Do you think there is any possibility that *anyone* will see this Terra village ever again, or even that it still exists?"

"Aren't they cute when they do that?" the black one said.

The olive one leaned over and seemed to loom out from the mallow coating of the cliffside until he was nearly at eye-level with Teodorq. "Listen here, breed," he boomed. "If the Commonwealth of Suns be no more, then what weight holds that warrant ye claim to bear? Why should it matter to us any more than the whistling of the wind through the barren branches of winter-shorn trees?"

"What use any oath, oh moving picture, save that a man's word is the man himself and if he tosses it to the wind, he blows away with it? Beside which, there may be remnants of the ancient enemy secreted hereabouts. We encountered one such in Madness Gap and having forced them to reveal themselves, brought defeat upon them."

The two images paused and appeared uncertain. "That distress call we detected seven moonlaps since was not then a false alarm?" said the dark one. "I said as much to thee, O Chandra Langkawi! I said we should scramble the wing! Why stand sentinel if we answer not the call when it comes?"

"And betray our position?" responded the olive one. "Thou art a fool, Onankothi Kazhugu! Our last order was to remain a 'Wing in Being' as thou knowest well."

A third voice joined the quarrel, but no third image formed in the mallow screen, and it spoke in a language unknown to Teo and utterly unlike the Old *Xbavla* employed by the first two.

Bourse and Tunny had also edged up. They had flipped open the visors on their basket helms. Bourse muttered, «*Poochie my*» in the ironman dialect, but otherwise neither man spoke. They rested their right hands on their longswords, but in a manner that suggested profound doubts regarding their usefulness.

Farther behind them stood Lar Rigo, his face contorted in barely-controlled terror. Since his people did not believe in ghosts, he was far more frightened at encountering them than were Teo and Sammi, who took them for granted.

The two images straightened up, and Teo noted that neither was as tall as previously. “We are remiss, scouts,” the dark one said. “We have not accepted your credentials, as Fighter Command hath informed us. Thou art clearly a ranger breed, and thy deputy, an extremophile. Thy wounds nonfatal, o subadar, heal quickly, do they not?”

“What does not kill me,” Teo agreed, “has made a grave tactical error.”

“And thou, o *nāyakkān*, can endure heat and cold that would kill most men.”

Sammi shrugged. “Some folks are wusses.”

“Welcome then to Iabran Base, Home of the Screaming Snake-Eagles and other units.” The olive one scowled and added, “Onankothi be command eyai for the 2391st Hypersonic Interceptor Wing, yclept the ‘Screaming Snake-Eagles.’ I hight Chandra Langkawi, command eyai for the 1837th Bombardier Wing, yclept the ‘Black Kites.’ Our bashful brother, who lost the faculty for projection seven hundred sun circuits ago, is Cheng, command eyai for the 202nd Ground-Air Defense Batteries and has inherited the chain of command for Iabran Base, the Fortieth Deep Space Combined Arms Force, the ‘Undeclared.’ We are all that is left of that once-mighty flotilla. One by one, those units that were not destroyed in battle have fallen to corrosion and disrepair.”

“Nice to see a new face,” added Onankothi. “What bringeth ye by these parts?”

Teo resisted the urge to smack his face with his palm and explained that his “task force” was caught between a rock and a hard place, unable to retreat into the withering fire from the Prawn cannon on the western bluff and unable to advance with the mallow door blocking the way, he plead their indulgence to pass in the name of the Commonwealth of Suns, addressing his plea to the formless commander, Cheng the Undeclared, who appeared to be the adult of the group.

“Hey,” whispered Sammi. “If Cheng so undeclared, why he bunkered up inside cliff?” Teo hushed him.

“Cheng asks, ‘What be *Prawns*?’” inquired Langkawi o’ th’ Black Kites.

“They are descended from the people who lived at Iabran Base who remained behind when it fell to the People of Sand and Iron.” Teo was guessing from what he had learned in Madness Gap. “And the Cuffs are descended from those who fled that destruction. The time has come to reunite the two, but Yavalprawns does not yet see the wisdom of this. They have forgotten their original unity.”

Langkawi seemed skeptical but Onankothi o’ th’ Screaming Snake Eagles bobbed his head from side to side. “Verily ‘tis said, ‘The wise man placeth not his eggs entirely in a single basket.’ There was talk in the civil administration of sending the colonists north into the peninsula.” The black image shrugged and added, “So sayeth Cheng. My brothers and I were otherwise occupied at the time.” Then in a different voice, “Gatmaster Halal, open the pod bay doors.”

The mallow wall split down the middle and began to part with a sticky sound. Teo turned to Lar Rigo and said, “Bring the regiment to order.”

Lar Rigo turned his horse about and shouted, “Mount! By troop, mount! The Roy’s Own Savage Archers will proceed forward at the march! We will offer the trail salute to the Guardian *Images* as we pass the gates of their cantonment. Remember, you are the Ghost Riders! You show no fear!” The lieutenant-colonel made a gallant effort to follow his own orders.

From the edges of the partition, various ordinances fell to the ground. Teo noted with interest

the rippled pattern within the mallow and the shattered appearance of the shells, as if the explosions themselves had been absorbed in the embrace of the doors.

There was also a body embedded in the mallow, where someone had tried to wade through the soft material. But it had closed around behind him, and he had smothered in the attempt. A breathing hose had not helped, for the mallow had pinched it off and with it his air supply. Teo caught Uaiqa Phoon's eye and the vice-captain, who had not yet cleaned all the mallow from his uniform, managed a grin.

"A song, Lar Rigo," said Teo. "A song as we march."

Lar Rigo nodded and called out, "Cuffland Bows!" Willit began the song, raising his voice in a strong tenor, and gradually the other troopers joined in with greater or lesser enthusiasm.

*"Oh, there once was a troop of Cuffland bows
Come marching down toward Yavalprawns
And their colonel led them up to the mouth of Madness Gap
And said this is the shortest route to Yavalprawns.
And so it goes, though the Ill Wind blows
And gravel coats our cloaks and beards and hair:
So lift high your bows, for a Ghost Rider goes
To meet their adversaries in their lair (in their lair!)
To meet their adversaries in their lair!"*

* * *

The ghosts receded before them without visibly walking, drawing them into a vast chamber filled with wondrous machines. Once inside, the regimental song died away.

No one had to tell Teo that these were the machines with which the ancient Battle in the Sky had been fought. If they had not been designed and built for flying, their builders had missed the mark, for they were sleek and smooth, composed of odd angles with swept-back wings and strange tails. In appearance, they bore an air of menace: with mouths like angry birds and sides and wings adorned with the faded images of plumage and talons. Even sitting motionless in this ancient storage barn, they seemed to soar.

There were hundreds of these machines, parked rank and file into the distance under the bluffs of Sinjin Trell. A vaster volume than could be accounted for by the size of the beauts themselves. Teo had noticed the same effect when he and Sammi had been inside the wrecked shuttle on the shortgrass prairie: It had been bigger inside than outside.

As they drew nearer to the machines, Teo could see that although they had been protected from the sun and weather, the colors had nonetheless paled; dust had collected in corners and ledges; wheels had flattened and decayed. Tapestries of cobwebs hung from ceilings lost in the overhead.

Lights flickered in the cavernous dark. Some, overhead, spotlighted the flightless birds. *Kites*, Teo supposed, and *Snake-eagles*. He wondered which were *bombardiers* and which *interceptors*. Other lights gleamed in panels on the farther walls or in one instance flitted erratically among the ancient birds.

The Savage Archers had begun to bunch up and whisper to one another, pointing to the wonders among which their horses stepped.

The lights darting about in the dimmer regions approached and resolved into a strange, multiarmed beast, waving lights from various tentacles. Rolling on a multitude of wheels, it paused first at one, then another of the sleek machines ranked within the cavern. Snakes flew from its body and struck at the vehicles. After a moment or two, the salamander would flash red, sometimes yellow, twice while Teo watched, green. The archers recoiled from the sight and began to chatter among themselves. A few began to retreat the way they had come.

This won't hunt, thought Teo. Such behavior might affect the tentative acceptance he had won from Cheng and the other ghosts. "Well," he said in his command voice, "this at least is no spirit!"

"Is that supposed to cheer us?" whispered Lar Rigo, soto voce.

The thing froze, turned, and rolled back to where Teo had first seen it, whereupon it began

to repeat its herky-jerky career around the cavern.

“Don’t mind it,” said the olive-complexioned image. “It’s insane.”

“Then I think I ought to mind it very much,” Lar Rigo said.

“The 7659th Maintenance Battalion has performed the preflight readiness check repeatedly for the past 472 years,” said Onankothi.

“Obsessive-compulsive,” added Langkawi.

The voice of Cheng spoke, and Teo waited for Onankothi to translate.

“The autonomic interceptors have failed one by one. A few remain operational. The manned bombers have no crews.”

“Hast thou any trained *aviators* among you?” Langkawi inquired in what seemed a hopeful voice.

Teo had no idea what an *aviator* was, but he was fairly certain that none lurked among his Savage Archers. “Sorry.” He stepped his horse closer to one of the designated vessels. In a circle on its flank it bore a portrait of a vulture and the sigils 1837 and 朝陽. Age flowed off the sleek machine like moss off a toppled tree trunk. He wondered what an interceptor was supposed to intercept.

Teo turned about and found the Maintenance Battalion just behind him.

Years of schooling among the Folk of the Great Grass steeled him, and he did not flinch at the sudden presence. Instead, he swung his war hammer and counted coup.

It was pure reflex, and he struck harder than usually warranted. The Battalion blinked, flashed red, yellow, green, and then spoke aloud in the language Teo did not know. Cheng responded, and the Battalion said in the common speech, “How long this time?”

“Four hundred seventy-two years,” said Langkawi, “by the cycle of the yellow sun. Five hundred and ten by the sun of Terra.”

“By what befell this stoppage?”

The olive-skinned sprite, laughed. “Behold, O Seven-six-five nine, a troop of rangers happened upon this outpost, and their Subadar whacked thee upside thy head, which by great good fortune unstuck thy do-loop.”

“Verily, this one hopes to remain unstuck longer than before.”

“It will be good,” Onankothi said, “to have another voice about.”

“Tell me . . .” Teo asked the black wraith. “We was told this place is a ‘back door’ to Yavalprawns City. Can you tell me where that door stands, cause we was going that way.”

Cheng spoke and Onankothi relayed, “We know of no such city.”

“Pretty hard to miss,” Teo said.

“Nonetheless, we do not know it.”

Sammi spoke. “You know older name: Iabran.”

“Verily, o breed,” said Langkawi o’ th’ Black Kites. “That is the colony that we were assigned to guard.”

“Assigned, and failed,” said Onankothi. “O Ranger, the ruins of that settlement abide to the rear of this fastness, and the pathway thither lies through the barracks. Yet we have no presence or sensors in those spaces, they being unrelated to the command of this wing. The pathway lies two floors down the grand stairwell. We would not commend ye to the levitators, which failed three-and-a-half lakh days ago.”

Langkawi said, “’Tis hell to grow old. Yet so long as any of the wing can be returned to operability, we will stand.”

* * *

A stair into the abyss

The broad stairwell switchbacked into a black-shrouded depth from which rose hollow sounds much like moans—or like air blowing through caverns. How many twists down Teo could not judge. After a while, he noticed flickers of light in the depths. He could not make out what they were, because the flaming torch he carried dazzled his vision, but after a while of studying on it, Teo had the distinct sense that something was staring back at him. The hairs on his neck stirred.

ANALOG

"'Twill be hard," Major Huan said as he gauged the stairs. "But the horses can take it if they step careful. Two abreast, I think."

On an impulse, Teo dropped his torch down the center of the stairwell. As it fell, he counted numerous switchbacks. The stairs seemed to spiral ever more tightly into the depth, but that might have been an illusion, the way a rider seemed to grow smaller as he galloped farther ahead.

Distant voices came from below, sing-song words that were indistinct but peremptory in tone. Teo thought there were Guardians on some of the lower levels of whom Cheng and his companions were unaware, but who were now awakened by the plummeting torch. He thought about breaking away on his own to explore down below.

A lêsar shot out from the darkness and disintegrated his torch.

"That can't be good," Teo said, and changed his mind about exploring.

Sammi stood on Teo's left. He nodded. "Third Law of Fortune say, 'Don't push luck because Luck push back.'"

Tunny Xhozeyof shrugged. "Curiosity itch that always wants scratch."

"Kills cats, too," said Sammi. He gathered up a handful of scouts, and they crept down the stairwell. The point guard was especially hesitant, and Teo couldn't say as he blamed him. But they reached the second level without challenge.

Teo let out his breath and turned to his assistant colonel. "I hate this."

Lar Rigo said, "It's never easy sending men out who might not come back."

"It ain't that. It's not being in it myself."

The lieutenant-colonel smiled, "Easier to risk your own life than to risk others'?"

"Less chance to pull off *stunts*. The purpose of a fight is for a warrior to strut his mojo by performing heroic deeds."

* * *

At each landing, double doors were marked with large symbols, which Teo figured to be numerals. Beyond them were rooms with benches, beds, and machines of unknown import. At the second landing down, Sammi took the scouts through the doors to explore ahead while Lar Rigo led the troopers after him.

Teo summoned Jestapul. "Sergeant-major, stay here until the last troopers pass. Don't let no one get curious enough to go downstairs, even if we bunch up and they're standing here sucking their thumbs."

The old soldier nodded. "Ain't nobody that curious."

Behind the doors on the second "floor" lay a broad, high-ceilinged room full of racks that may have once been beds. Beyond these, a broad area ending at an open archway—and daylight. Sammi and his scouts had blocked this exit and were pushing back troopers eager to escape the cantonment. The Guardians had unnerved them, and they wanted the open air. The horses too, sensing their masters' unease, bucked and whickered nervously. Teo walked his horse through the press.

At the archway, he surveyed the prospect beyond and beheld a tangled maze of ruins, broken walls, and gaping windows. The upper reaches of the buildings were partly melted and draped in flowing stone. Bridges that had once joined their higher levels were broken off and now littered the way below. Dust clouds hovered in the fitful breeze. A gentle hissing like a breeze through leafy trees filled the background. He turned to his chief scout.

"Whaddaya think, Sammi? No firefly screen, looks like." At Phanklar Noi, the screen had disintegrated anything that tried to pass.

The scout wagged a thumb at the wall to the right of the archway, which was scorched and blackened with portions peeled away. "Out there, ruins where air-soldiers took liberties. Screen controls destroyed so they could get out."

"Yah." He looked over the ruins, imagining ambushes around every corner, and shook his head. "Lar Rigo! The regiment will proceed in columns of two. Sammi, Belepo, take the scouts out ahead and find us the best route. This is supposed to lead to Yavalprawns City. We'd like to relieve Jerry's division and catch Enemy headquarters by surprise. But we

wouldn't like to blunder into their reserves.”

Lar Rigo shouted the milling troopers into order, and slowly, they separated into Troops and Squadrons. He turned to Teo and scratched the green frill that encircled his neck.

“If this is their ‘Back Door,’ Clonel, why don’t they have sentries here to guard it?”

Teo clapped him on the shoulder. “Maybe they do, Rigo,” he said in an encouraging voice. “Maybe they do.”

* * *

A door in a house

The tumbledown ruins of Iabran were wilder and more expansive than the more compact redoubt of Phanklar Nor, which had been tucked into a snug cave north of New Cuffy. But there were some things the two had in common. One was a mad assortment of ghosts muttering to one another. But where the ghosts of Phanklar Noi were the likes of Gatekeeper or Armory as befit a military outpost, those of Old Iabran were more suited to a civilian settlement. The whispers spoke in a variety of tongues, which grew more distinct as the column approached a building and faded sharply after they had passed by. They were not accompanied by apparitions.

“Ēy, cippây!” whispered one empty building. “Nalla nêram têtukifîrkalâ?”

Another nearby barked through gaping window jambs and doorways: “Hêi, shibîng! Xúnzhǎo mēihǎo shíguāng?”

The Savage Archers flinched at the first two voices, but they relaxed when a third beckoned in archaic xhavla. “¡Ola soldado! Seekest thou a good time?”

“Don’t get yer hopes up, boys!” cried Teo. “The girls in them joy houses must be mighty long in the tooth by now.” Laughter drifted down the column as the jest was passed along.

They passed other ruins that, where they could understand the whispering, called out enticements for trinkets, tattoos, beverages, or games of chance. Lar Rigo commented that garrison towns had changed little since the legendary sky-battle.

The streets through the ruins were dog-legged and never ran straight for very long. Sometimes, they curled about on themselves and ended in a “culdy sack” or a “vline dally.” To frustrate the Ill Wind, Teo suspected. The streets were bordered by snug-fit buildings, some of whose shattered upper levels reached into the low-lying clouds. Rubble and debris littered the streets. Weeds grew everywhere through cracks in the paving or in the accumulated dirt. Vines crawled up walls; lichen and moss discolored their surfaces. An odd, dry, musty odor permeated the air, a fitting counterpoint to the odd, dry whispers from the buildings.

On one street, they walked their horses below a smack rail soaring on pylons. It zig-zagged in and out through the upper stories. Teo saw no sign of the “terrain” that was supposed to have run on such things.

The route marked by the scouts finally brought them face-to-face with a smooth blank wall of dingy smack. No windows broke its surface and only a single door. Above the door was an inscription in the three languages the ancients had evidently used. The xhavla version read: STRIT 13 MANYFOLD.

Belepo Two Stags waited beside this entrance, indicating that they should walk their horses *into* the building.

“Step dainty, brothers,” he said. “None of those streets go anywhere. They’re all tangly and walled off. We have to cut through this here house, and a mighty strange house it is. Caboral Ezmitt is posted inside to show you which door leads out.”

Which door leads out? Teo thought that a strange thing to say.

The Savage Archers did not have a tactical doctrine for entering and clearing buildings, that not being the wont of light cavalry. Teo gathered his major officers and his lifeguards. He sent Tunny and Bourse through the door first, to take right and left beside it. Then Don Pfuil would lead C Troop single file and set up a cordon, after which the command troop would enter. Sergeant-Major Jestapul would then shepherd the remaining troops after them.

“Sammi’s people already went through, so I don’t expect no trouble,” Teo said, “but let’s not get sloppy and make assumptions. Belepo says, don’t go through any door on the other side o’ th’ concourse, ‘cept where cabo’ Ezmitt directs yuh. Got it? Lar Rigo, yuh go forward and lead

'em out the other side. Promise not to let any ghosts spook yuh."

Lar Rigo managed a brief grin. "Promise."

Inside the building, Teo saw why the scout had been so cautious. A broad concourse ran distantly to the left and the right. Had he not seen the same phenomenon already, he might have been considerable startled. The far wall was pierced by twelve doorways, labeled *Striit 25*, *Striit Men*, *Bulevar T. V. Ramaswamy*, and so on. What these runes meant was anyone's guess.

Rigo looked behind them. "Colonel . . ."

Teo did not turn, "I seen it. Those Commonwealth folks were pukka craftsmen."

Behind them, twelve doorways led out, where only one had led in. He did not try to explain it. No artisan on World could duplicate such things.

Of the twelve portals facing them, several were shuttered, and two opened onto a dark, misty emptiness. The headless body of one of the scouts lay before one of these, by which token, Teo suspected sticking one's head into the emptiness was inadvisable. The remaining doors were open to different vistas. The door Ezmitt warded was labelled *ZENTRUM*.

"Beggin' yer honors' pardon," he said in the north Cuffland accent, "but none o' these here doors lead to the same street, so the regiment must step through the proper one."

When the regiment had with some hesitation passed safely through this door, Teo looked behind and saw without surprise a wall with only a single door. On this side, the inscription read *MANYFOLD GRANDE*.

Teo said to Lar Rigo, "I wondered why the Prawns had no pickets watching that 'Back Door' of theirs. Now I know. *They don't know where it is.*"

"And if they were spooked by the guardians out front, they probably wouldn't have looked too hard."

Scouts trotted back and announced that the street led to the edge of the ruins and, just past a well-kempt park, the city of Yavalprawns began. Teo sighed and relaxed. Lar Rigo asked him why he was so relieved.

"Cuz now we only got us a war to worry about."

* * *

A palace of their own

The regimental staff trotted up a knoll that overlooked the capital and scanned the sprawl of Yavalprawns with their look-glasses. Cuff Town seemed a mere provincial capital in comparison. Beyond the city, the land rolled away, flat and green. The air smelt of the rains on the distant horizon. The sight of those far grasslands wrenched an unexpected chord of homesickness from Teo's breast. He wondered what lay on the far side.

From the right came the distant rumble of thundertubes and the rattle of thundersticks where the main armies contested passage across Dolorous Ford. Teo rubbed his chin.

"Anyone ever visit this place before the war?" he said. "I mean as civilians."

The majors looked one to the other, shrugging their shoulders. Don Pfuil finally spoke up. "I spent a romantic week once in the Old Capital."

"Romantic?" said Kohdam Huan. "You?"

"It was with . . . Well, that doesn't matter anymore. I never saw much of the city beyond the inside of an inn, but I do recognize *that* ornate building."

"Yuh gonna make me ask, ain't yuh." said Teo.

"I'm pretty sure that's the imperial palace."

"Pretty sure."

"I don't think there were too many other palaces in the capital."

"And that's where their king lives . . ."

Lar Rigo spoke up. "Yavalprawns is a republic. She doesn't have kings. She has an emperor."

Teo stared at him.

"Well, technically a 'president-emperor.' It's an 'imperial republic.' They elect their emperor. It's not hereditary."

Don Pfuil laughed, "For two hundred sun-laps they've elected from the same family. But it's not hereditary."

Teo scanned the palace with his look-glass. "Must be pretty well-guarded."

"By an elite regiment of mounted infantry called the Imperial Guards."

"And we're down to what, half a regiment?"

"Perhaps—if we are careful—we could sneak out the Back Door as quietly as we came."

"It wasn't all that quietly, Pfuil," Major Huan reminded him.

"What if'n we wheeled left," Teo wondered aloud, "and hit them Prawns in the rear what's botherin' our friends up top the mesa?"

"Well," admitted Lar Rigo, "it would be damned rude to leave without saying hello. Besides, Major Feinwurth is up there with all our supplies. But doesn't that break the First Rule of Cavalry?"

Teo looked at him. "Which is . . . ?"

The lieutenant-colonel smiled. "Never engage infantry at close quarters, especially uphill. Cavalry trades in speed. We don't stand in ranks and slug it out. We'd lose the advantage of our bows." The sounds of battle from the Heights of Sinjin Trell accentuated his words.

"Where's the rest of their reserves?" asked Teo. The guards he saw around the palace did not add up to a regiment.

"Probably over behind Dolorous Ford, where the main fighting is."

That settled it. He shut his look-glass. "Anyone see Sammi?"

"No one sees Sammi," said Sammi, "unless he wishes to be seen."

Teo shook his head. "One o' these days, Sammi, yer gonna get in serious *murda* pulling that stunt. Tell me. Do yuh think yuh can sneak up top the mesa and deliver a message to Jerry?"

Sammi looked at him. "Wrong verb."

"Awright. *Would* yuh sneak up top the mesa and deliver a message to Jerry? Tell 'im to wait my signal, then attack with all he's got."

Lar Rigo touched his shoulder. "Jerry's not senior officer up there. Ithdor Krathi is colonel of the Twenty-third."

"What signal?" asked Sammi.

"He'll know it. And did Colonel Krathi celebrate his birthday lately?"

"Not that I've heard," said Lar Rigo.

"Then he weren't born yesterday. Now listen. The Prawns weren't expecting us to attack on the mesa top, so their reserves are over by the Ford."

"And?" said Don Pfuill.

"So how'd infantry get from way over there to attack up the heights?"

"Speed-march?" said Sammi.

"No," said Lar Rigo, suddenly understanding. "That's the Imperial Guard regiment up there. Only troops Jacques Prawn had handy."

Teo gathered their attention. "So, who's guarding the emperor?"

Half a dozen look-glasses scanned the palace again; but more Guards did not appear no matter how many eyes sought them.

"We better strike fast," said Major Huan. "He's surely sent for reinforcements by now."

Teo turned to his lieutenant and said quietly, "The regiment will form by troops and charge with the yip. We will fire the palace. That'll do for a signal, yuh think?"

"Battle cry?"

"Haddafahm!"

"Eh? But the general hasn't broken through yet. He's still stuck over at the Ford."

"Sure, but maybe the imperial household don't know that. We might be the vanguard of the breakthrough."

Lar Rigo doffed his cap and turned his face toward the bright, cloudless sky. "Well, least it's a good day for dying."

Teo slapped him on the back. "Let's not be doin' that, not until we've spread a bit of panic in their rear."

* * *

The Imperial Guards had left a few companies behind in and around the palace to guard the

emperor, and it was a hot fight for a fist of time. The savage appearance of the archers and their long-distance bows impelled some Guards to flee precipitously while convincing others to fight to the finish.

But it was enough time for a few companies of those fighting Jerry to realize the palace was under attack; and while initiative is a fine thing in a captain, it is not so fine when it meant pulling out of the battle line to go rescue the emperor. That was all the signal that Jerry and Colonel Krathi needed, and they broke through the crumbling line atop the mesa, sending the Guard reeling down the south side of the Sinjin Trell. Teo had not enough troopers to net those fleeing, though using the burning palace as a redoubt, he was able to deflect the flight toward the west while Jerry chased them. Krathi followed and took up posts around the place.

In the meantime, Teo had captured the emperor, a thick-set matronly woman with strong features and a lustrous green appearance. She wore a loose saffron robe with scarlet trim, an ornate circlet of silver, and a haughty demeanor. She refused to surrender to a savage like Teo, but did surrender to Lar Rigo, "who is at least a gentleman only playing at savage."

Rigo leered, "Don't be too sure it's only play."

The emperor huffed. "I suppose that is what comes from associating with *naeverts*."

The term meant "not-green" and though often thought in Cuffland was considered in poor taste to say aloud. Across the sea, in New Cuffy, outnumbered greenie settlers were much more circumspect in their language, although they did tend to strut because their *gear* was better-made than that of the coastal men they had conquered or the forest men they had battled. (Their encounter with the iron men had tempered their arrogance only a little and with them they made alliances because they could not simply brush them aside.) The Yavalprawnsi emperor had never seen a Westlander until now. Teo saw no reason why he should educate her. He need only hold her prisoner until General Haddafahm arrived.

* * *

A medal for his mettle

Lar Grigio Haddafahm, General-in-chief of the Royal-and-Imperial Field Army of Cuffland, knew an opportunity when it came a-rattling his tent-pole and was as persistent as a bulldog in seizing hold of it. When he had learned through the fleeing regiments whose contagious panic had disrupted the defense of Dolorous Ford, that not only had the Savage Archers somehow crossed the Sinjin Trell, but in cooperation with the Twenty-third Foot had secured the imperial palace, the general had heighed from the Ford with the Field Army and a basketful of medals and banner-ribbons for all concerned.

He had bestowed the Defiant Lion posthumously on the Archers and Foot who had perished taking the *beaut* and the Military Star itself on those who had served in the attack. But when he came before Teodorq sunna Nagarajan the Ironhand the general's mouth tightened in a grim line. "You!" he said.

Lar Grigio was no slight-built man, though his waist and feet were small and nimble, as befit an accomplished duelist. He wore a pointed beard and moustache, the symmetry of which was spoilt by a nose cocked slightly askew. Teo, who had been the proximate cause of the skewness, grinned and said, "Me."

At the end of the ceremony, the general dismissed everyone save Teo, Lar Rigo, and his own lieutenant-general, Don Minniel Shoeny'ess, and led them into his pavilion.

"So," said Lar Grigio, "You could dodge me no longer."

Teo, who had not been especially aware that Grigio had been stalking him in the first place, maintained an attentive silence.

"Your pardon, Grigio," Lar Rigo said, "but the man was a stranger in our country and did not know our customs on wife-lending. He assumed her consent alone was sufficient. Surely, you can make an allowance for that and come to a mutually satisfactory arrangement."

The general's face darkened to a deeper shade of green, but the lieutenant-general placed a hand on his arm and interposed himself.

"My principal," he said, "is not responsible for the uncouth manners of savages. If your principal was unfamiliar with civilized customs, then it behooved him to learn them before

he engaged socially with his betters.”

The principals in a duel did not address each other directly, but only through their *segundos*. That was why it was called a *duel*, Rigo had explained. It came from an ancient word meaning “two.” Hence, the need for “seconds.”

“But this man,” insisted Rigo, “has made you a gift of northern Yavalprawns. He cleared Madness Gap and provided you with both strategic and tactical surprise. Now, he presents you with the president-emperor herself. Surely, that is a suitable bed-offering.”

“It was no more than his duty,” Schoeny’ess responded after an exchange of whispers with the general. “And it is a gift not to my principal, but to the Roy of Cuffland.”

Rigo nodded, as if at a salient point. “Ah, yes. To the cousin of my principal’s sponsor.”

Schoeny’ess started, and he and Grigio fell into a sharp and animated discussion that ended when Lar Grigio made a cutting motion with his right arm. “Then perhaps we will find who the Roy holds more dear,” he told his deputy, “the kingdom’s best general or his cousin’s pet savage.” He turned and faced Teo directly. “Our *segundos* having failed to achieve an amicable accord,” he said, “I must regretfully throw down my glove.” And, tugging that item from his right hand, he slapped Teo across the face with it and dropped it to the dirt at his feet, crying, “Boom!”

Lar Rigo had schooled Teo carefully beforehand in etiquette, else Teo might have ended things then and there by cocking the general’s nose in the other direction. He saw no need for the elaborate ritual. General Haddafahm had been determined on a duel from the get-go. He liked to kill people, and the formalities were meant only to make it legal.

“As the offended party,” Schoeny’ess announced, “Lar Grigio has issued a challenge. As the challenged party, Colonel Teodorq has the choice of weapons.”

Teo rubbed his cheek. “Hunh. How about fists.”

Grigio darkened. “*Civilized* weapons!”

“Yah. Yer right. I already beat yuh with my fist. Wouldn’t be fair to do it twice. Lemme think . . . When the swampmen back home hold *tussles*, they dig a pit two double-armlengths wide. Then they tie the fighters together by their left arms and put serrated knives in their right, then lower ’em into the pit an’ see who climbs out. Hopefully, before the pit fills in with swamp water.”

“Barbarous!”

“I kinda agree with yuh there, gen’ral. Cuts down too much on maneuverability. Yuh sure yuh wanna fight me?”

The general’s jaw clenched tight enough to crack walnuts. “In the worst way!”

Teo turned to Lar Rigo. “Yuh hear that? The wurst way? That’s good. All right. That’s how we’ll do it.”

Lar Grigio and Don Schoeny’ess frowned. Lar Rigo nodded as if he understood. “I’ll make the arrangements, Colonel.”

“Wait,” said Schoeny’ess. “What?”

“The wurst way. Our side riders—what you call *segundos*—prepare two sausages of the same kind: knacked, bratted, whatever. But one of them is mixed with puss from the sores of an anthrax-infected cow. Or a sheep, it don’t matter. Then the two of us sit down at table and we each pick a sausage—it’s called a *wurst* in our *sprock*; that’s why this is called the wurst way—and we eat it. Then we wait to see who gets sick and dies. Oh, we eat it with soured cabbage, hot mustard, and curry. If yuh ralph it up, that’s a forfeit.”

The general’s mouth opened and closed several times but no words came out. “Insanity,” he finally managed.

Teo scratched his head. “I thought yuh said I had the choice of weapons. Here, I picked three so far, and yuh done weaseled out on all of ’em.”

“Have you ever fought a duel?” the general growled.

“Oh, sure. I was once challenged by the whole Serpentine clan. They wanted my head, and I still had some call for it.”

“Well . . . ?”

Teo shrugged. "Ran out of Serps."

Lar Grigio remained speechless for a few moments longer. Veins bulged in his neck, and his deputy looked on him with concern. Teo wondered if the general might leap upon him and *wrassle* right then and there. As he understood matters, that would be a serious breach of etiquette.

The general spun on his heel and strode off to where his major generals clustered about the table map. Don Schoeny'ess spread his hands in apology and escorted Rigo and Teo to the pavilion's entrance. Grigio pretended he wasn't tracking Teo, and Teo pretended he wasn't watching his back.

"Thanks a whole hell of a lot, Rigo," the lieutenant-general said as he held the flap aside. "I thought the man would blow a blood vessel right there. This whole affair has grown embarrassing for the man, and now he's going to 'kick the dog,' meaning us, his staff."

"That don't hardly seem fair," Teo suggested.

"Well, 't isn't," Schoeny'ess admitted. "But what can I do about it? I don't have to remind you what flows downhill. Was I you, I'd walk small steps for a while. The man won't forget you're here, but try not to remind him too much. And Rigo, he isn't too happy you stood second. You aren't putting House Hepplewhite up against House Haddafahm, are you?"

Teo and Rigo were well away from the commander's tent before Lar Rigo burst into laughter. He quieted almost immediately and looked behind in case any of the command staff were watching, then he chuckled more softly. "Sausages?" he said.

"It's what the general wanted."

"Your people actually duel with sausages?"

"Well . . ." Teo thought about it. "It's mentioned in the Great Lays, but no one ever had the guts to do it." He thought some more, then laughed. "'Never had the *guts* to do it.' That's good. I gotta remember that one to tell Sissy."

But behind them, Lar Grigio Haddafahm burst from his tent. "Enough, barbarian! No, Don Minniel, this has gone on too long."

Teo turned to Lar Rigo. "That's the last time I save his butt."

"I think that's why he's so angry. He meant those orders to get you killed."

"I don't mind that, Rigo. People been trying to kill me for years now, and I'm still vertical. What riled me was that those orders got a lot of good men killed beside me what never done the general no harm."

The general's shouting was beginning to attract a crowd. Some were Savage Archers and Twenty-Third Foot, others were the army that had chased the remnants of the Prawn Home Army after Jerry had panicked them. Others were from the Reserve Army that had reached the Ford in time for the rout. They watched with varying kinds of interest. Teo sighed and turned around. "How about recurved bows at three hundred double-paces? On horseback. At the gallop."

"Stop that!" the general shouted. "You only pick weapons you're good with!"

"Well," Teo countered, "I'd be a great fool to pick a weapon I handle poorly."

Laughter rippled through the watching ranks, except for the reserve troops, who were unfamiliar with General Haddafahm and his murderous ways. Teo sighed again. "*Och doke*," he said. "Swords, then."

"Excellent choice!" The general grinned in triumph, and he drew his needle sword. "I accept. Come and get it."

"Oh! I appreciate the invitation."

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"No, are you trying to be tough?"

"Fetch your blade!"

Teo nodded. "Tunny, Bourse, how about we borrow your longswords? I promise to give 'em back when I'm done."

Lar Rigo leaned toward him. "He's a master swordsman. He's fought a dozen men in duels: the late Lar Nandu della Quartz, the late Don Mingish Summ-Set, the late Sinna Chon Esmitt,

the late . . .”

“I get the picture.” He looked about the crowd that had gathered. “He oughta keep better watch over his wife,” Teo said in a raised voice. “That’s way too many lovers of hers that he’s fought.”

“I think it’s a game that Lar and Lay Haddafahm have devised between them. The general does like to duel.”

But Teo shook his head. “No,” he said, “I think he likes to murder. This ‘game’ of his gives him a pretext to do it without getting hanged by the Roy’s courts.”

“But he does have the reach on you . . .”

Teo shrugged. “Yah, I guess he does at that. I seen reaches like that at mess tables.”

Rigo looked at him. “Well?”

“I never left the table hungry.”

His two ironman lifeguards reached over their shoulders and drew their swords. Teo gestured, and they proffered the hilts to the general, giving him the choice. The general blinked, startled at the unfamiliar weapons.

“It’s what the ironmen on West Continent fight with,” Teo explained to Lar Rigo. “They got double-edged blades long as my arm and a handle yuh gotta work with both hands. Weighs about two or three times what a needle-sword weighs.”

Haddafahm took Tunny’s weapon, and it immediately tilted point down. Teo tsked and said, “That’s a poor guard position.” He took Bourse’s sword and twirled it over his head and flipped and spun it around his body. He ended in the two-handed “batter” stance. Haddafahm struggled to raise his blade to waist level. For the first time in their encounters, he seemed frightened.

Teo took a step forward and shifted to sky guard. The general took a step backward. His blade wavered.

A voice in the watching throng cried out, “Halt! Grigio, put up your sword. You, too, barbarian.”

Heads turned, and Lar Grigio went to one knee. “Father!” he said.

Lar Rigo came to Teo’s side. “That’s Olmec Donal, the Householder.”

“Doke,” said Teo. “But do you see the cornet by his side? I remember him from when I got ‘presented.’ I guess he likes to go around in disguise.”

The various Lars and senior officers had belatedly recognized him, too, and they all took a knee in subservience. Lar Rigo joined them. Teo, Jerry, and the other Westerners bowed—except for and Sammi and Belepo, for hillmen and foresters neither bowed nor knelt to any man. “Roy Cuff!” the officers shouted in ragged unison.

The Roy was not at all nonplussed at being recognized. He whipped off his broad-brimmed hat and held it out at arm’s length to the cheers of his army. Then he whispered to the Olmec, who nodded.

“Grigio, to me.” And when his son had stepped before him he grabbed his shoulders and pushed him down to both knees. “Is it true,” he asked, “What we overheard prior to the duel. Were all your other duels actually badger games?”

“Is that why you raised your voice?” Rigo whispered aside to Teo. “You recognized him in the crowd?”

“I recognized the Roy, not the Haddafahm Householder, but yeah.”

The general denied the charge, but the Olmec only nodded. “I’m afraid there will be a Court of Inquisition to investigate not only your dueling practices, but also your conduct of this battle, and your unseemly behavior regarding this barbarian.”

The gasp from the crowd seemed to indicate that this last charge was the most serious. Well, *different lands, different customs*, as they said on the Great Grass.

The Roy whispered again to the Olmec, who called out, “Marshalls, take the general into custody.”

Teo caught a glimpse of Don Minniel in the press around the Roy and grinned. So, that was where the *mucky-mucks* had heard about “the conduct of the battle.”

* * *

ANALOG

Afterward, Lar Rigo said, "I've never seen a duel so adroitly conducted."

Teo looked around at his staff. "I don't know what you mean."

Morningstar said, "He means the *bead game*."

"Oh."

"A psychological duel. I've never seen the like. You maneuvered the general out of position with your outré suggestions and put him on uncertain grounds. Then when you suggested swords, he jumped at the chance without thinking through what sort of swords you had in mind."

The staff came to the edge of the park, and Teo stared out across the great city to the waving grasses beyond. A man might ride there like the wind for days. Sammi, studying his face, heaved a sigh.

"Hey, Rigo," he said. "Think yuh can command this gang?"

His lieutenant-colonel pursed his lips. "I thought so the very first day. Now I think I would be right."

"Well, yuh'd have Jerry fer yer Number One. He ain't too shabby. And Srinivas knows how to build the bows."

Rigo grunted. "Can I have your sister?"

"Don't bite off more'n yuh can chew."

"One thing I don't understand," the Lar said. "Why didn't you carry through the swordfight? You could have had your revenge with a single swipe before the Householder called a halt."

"I didn't want revenge," Teo admitted. "I wanted something far more severe. I wanted justice."

Michael Flynn has sold more than 70 stories to Analog since 1984, plus 15 novels and story collections. He is best known for the novel Eifelheim and the Spiral Arm series.

His most recent book is Captive Dreams, a collection of six interlinked stories (three from Analog). He is currently working on a series of stories called The Journeyman and a novel, In the Belly of the Whale, set aboard a generation ship two hundred years into a thousand-year flight to Tau Ceti.