

Argonautica

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1.  
Pelias meeteth the One-Sandaled Man

Jase Miller first saw the iron monster in its improvised drydock off the Yazoo. The huge creature had her nose into the land and showed her armored ass to the river. Her twin stacks and rust-red casemate loomed above the flat Old River country like a visitation from another world. Laboring darkies swarmed over the thing like ants. Even over the sound of the General Bee's engine, Jase could hear the ring of hammers on railroad iron.

"There she lies," he thought, "and I am going to have her or get hung."

"Not as big as I thought," said Ensign Harry Klee, who had seen Louisiana before she burned.

"Big enough," said Jase, and wondered again how he would steal her. By indirections find directions out, he thought.

He signaled the engine room for ahead slow, then tapped the bell twice to send a leadman to the bow for soundings. General Bee dropped off its bow wave, slowed in the murky water. Shoreward, a cottonmouth moccasin bared its fangs from the

safety of an oak limb.

Strange country, Jase thought. He was a salt-water sailor, and unused to the ways of rivers. The meandering Yazoo country was simultaneously open and constricted—absolutely flat, though with all its sight lines hemmed in by dense hardwood forests. Cypress, willows, cottonwoods, all thirsty trees that clung to the banks of the river. Everything that stood was strung with vines. There were alligators here, and snakes; herons and cormorants flocked in thousands. And it was hot. Hot as a boiler room. Jase yearned for a sea breeze.

"By the mark three!" sang the leadsman. "Half less three! By the mark twain!" Jase maneuvered the tug toward the bank, signaled astern slow, and brought the Bee gently to ground on Yazoo mud. The levee began to fill with curious bystanders.

Ensign Klee's huge body almost blocked the pilothouse window. "Any of them look like much a senator to you, Jase?" he said.

Jase peered around Klee. "May be the fellow in the top hat."

Harry Klee squinted and spat. "He looks more like an undertaker."

"Guess I'll go ashore and find out."

Jase rolled down his shirt sleeves and put on his grey uniform jacket—visiting a former senator required a degree of formality—then he adjusted his straw boater and made his way past the thirty-pound Parrott rifle on the foredeck. Once there, he discovered that the mechanism for lowering the gangway had jammed.

"Sorry, sir," said Castor, one of the twins, in his Cockney accent. "I'll 'ave it fixed in a tic."

Jase looked at the group of people standing on the levee and felt his temper rise. He decided he was not about to stand and be gawked at while he waited for the gangway to be repaired, so he dropped off the bow and waded to the land, wet above the knee. The Yazoo mud took one of his boots, which did not improve his temper. He splashed ashore and mounted the four-foot-high levee in one stride.

"Senator Pendergas?" he asked the fellow in the top hat.

The man shook his head. "That's the general there," he said, "coming this way."

The senator—now a general—was a broad, round-headed man in shirt sleeves, striped uniform pants held across his big belly by red suspenders. His shirt front was stained with tobacco. When Jase saluted him, Pendergas held out one big hand and waited for Jase to shake it. Jase did as the man seemed to want.

"Lt. Jase Miller, C.S.N., commanding the General Bee," Jase said.

"Glad to meet you," Pendergas said, for all the world as if Jase was a constituent.

"Let me have men about me that are fat," Jase thought, "Sleek-headed men and such as sleep o' nights." And felt inwardly pleased.

"You got any engineers?" the Senator asked. "I'm having problems with my engines."

"I've got Navy engineers," Jase said. Because Pendergas was Army, and so was his boat apparently. And on account of the first point, Jase aimed to change the second.

Pendergas looked at him with little eyes half-hidden by lids of fat. "We can work something out, I reckon."

"I am ordered to cooperate with you, sir."

Pendergas spat tobacco onto the grass. "Well, that's good. Because you and me, that's all the South has to defend Vicksburg."

Which was, Jase reflected, sadly true. A few months ago Flag Officer Davis had taken Memphis with his Yankee river squadron. Farragut had captured New Orleans with his salt-water flotilla, then steamed up the Mississippi, right past Vicksburg's batteries, to join Davis north of the city. With the two Yankee fleets united, it was clear that Vicksburg was next on their agenda, and the South didn't have much to stop them.

Pendergas looked down at Jase's stocking foot. "Ain't the Navy issuing full sets of boots these days?"

"The Navy issued the full set," Jase said, "but nobody told me the Yazoo River was planning on collecting a toll."

Pendergas curled a lip at this sorry example of wit. "Let's hope the Yankees don't get the other," he said. "And your boat with it."

There was a rushing sound as the Bee blew steam. Pendergas' little eyes almost disappeared into his fleshy face as he looked at the General Bee.

"What kind of boat has the Navy given me, Jase?"

Chill mirth crept round Jase's brain. So Pendergas thought the Navy had given him a boat, did he? They would see whose boat would be given to whom.

"Armed tugboat, sir, escaped from New Orleans before it fell," he said. "We carry a thirty-pound Parrott bow chaser, a twenty-pound Parrott aft, and a twenty-four-pound smoothbore on each broadside."

Pendergas' lip curled again. "And no more armor than a country whorehouse," he said.

"Oh, a little more than that," Jase said. He had built waist-high log structures around the cannon to protect the gunners, and stacked bales of cotton around the pilot house, the boiler, and wherever else he thought it might do any good, but there wasn't much else that could be done. The Bee had been built as a tugboat, taken into the Navy because the Navy had no other vessels, and then named after a man who had been dead since First Manassas. None of these omens seemed particularly auspicious.

"Well," Pendergas said, "come and look at Arcola, and I'll show you the boat the Army's going to use to clean Farragut off the river." He turned toward the rust-red monster he was building in his cotton field, and raised his voice.

"Argus! Argus McBride!"

Limping on his one stocking foot, Jase followed the senator toward the drydock. McBride turned out to be an old man, with a shock of white hair and a handshake dry as sand.

"Formerly of the New Orleans, Galveston, and Great Northern Railroad," Pendergas said proudly. "He's rebuilding Arcola for me."

Argus looked at Jase skeptically. "You wouldn't know anything about triple-expansion marine engines, would you?"

"I'm your man," said Jase.

The senator clapped Jase on the shoulder. "Good boy! I knew we could use you!"

"If you like, I will send for my chief," Jase said, "and we'll look at the engines together."

While they waited for Chief Tyrus to come from General Bee, Pendergas and Argus proudly showed them over the armored ram they were building on the Yazoo.

Arcola had started life as the Mingo, one of the Ellet rams that had sunk the entire Confederate River Defense Fleet in about ten minutes during the Battle of Memphis a few months ago. A few days after the battle, Mingo had blown its boiler while on patrol, drifted down the Mississippi, and come aground on a sand bar, where it was captured by a corporal's guard that rowed over from shore. "My corporal's guard!" Pendergas bellowed in amusement, and jabbed Jase in the ribs with an elbow.

President Jefferson Davis, who had served Mississippi in the Senate alongside Pendergas, had obliged his colleague at the war's start with a brigadier's commission. But—possibly because Senate experience had given the President a good notion of Pendergas' capabilities—Pendergas had never actually been given the opportunity to command a combat unit. Until his corporal's guard rowed out to the sandbar to demand Mingo's surrender, Pendergas' sole war experience had been to raise regiments and supplies in safe rear areas, which he shipped off north to the fighting army.

Pendergas knew an opportunity when he saw it. He hauled Mingo off the sand and hid her up the Yazoo, on one of his plantations. His slaves dug day and night to build a drydock here in his cotton field while he assembled the men and equipment necessary to turn his captured Yankee boat into a monster that would devour the republic that gave it birth.

Argus showed Jase the foot-thick wooden bulkheads that ran the length of the boat, to strengthen it for ramming, and the bows packed with timber to increase the power of the blow. The two triple-expansion engines, driving screw propellers, were braced for the shock of ramming and were able to drive the Mingo at fifteen knots.

The Yankee Mingo, built purely as a ram, carried no armor or guns, but Argus had

changed that. He had covered the ram with a two-foot-thick casemate of oak, angled like a pitched roof so that shot would bounce off, and then plated the oak with two layers of railroad iron, the rails ingeniously rolled and slotted, riveted and spiked and racked together to present a smooth rust-red surface impenetrable to enemy shot. A pilothouse had been built atop the casemate forward, steel bars stacked like the logs of a frontier cabin and welded into a roughly pyramidal shape, with an open top.

Bellona's bridegroom lapp'd in proof, Jase thought.

While building his ram the senator had also been scavenging guns. A massive ten-inch Dahlgren smoothbore was to be mounted forward, pivoting on tracks so that it could fire from forward, port, or starboard gunports. A seven-inch Brooke rifle was to be similarly mounted in the stern. Each broadside consisted of three bottle-shaped thirty-two-pound smoothbore cannon, making six altogether. Rather than being placed opposite each other on each broadside, the guns were staggered down the length of the narrow ram, to allow each big gun room for recoil.

Jase wondered if either Argus or Pendergas realized how much the iron and guns would degrade the ram's performance. They wouldn't be getting fifteen knots out of this boat ever again. They'd be lucky to see half that.

And they didn't seem to know anything about ballast, either. All that iron topside was going to make the ram roll like a drunken whore unless they stowed more weight below the waterline.

Still, it would be a good boat, more than a match for anything the Yankees had in the water. Jase's mouth watered at the thought of commanding her.

"We can't seem to get the carriages right," Argus said. "That's why the guns ain't in her. None of us have ever made gun carriages before."

"My men can help you with that," Jase said.

"I'm gonna knock Farragut's flagship to splinters," Pendergas said, "see if I don't."

Jase kept silent on this point.

He had plans of his own.

2.

Jason, Herakles, and Tiphys of Siphae journey to the Temple

Jase and his officers, Harry Klee and Chief Tyrus, were invited to the big house for supper. Jase always enjoyed the sight of Klee's huge body stuffed into a dress uniform, the cannonball-shaped head glowering from beneath a cocked hat while his thick neck bulged out from around the collar and neckcloth.

The Senator's plantation house was a quarter-mile inland through cotton fields. Long Shanks—which Jase imagined was Longchamps creatively spelled by its owner—was a big place of raw red brick and cypress wood, too new to have acquired the white plaster and stately pillared portico that would eventually turn it into a miniature Greek temple somehow misplaced in the bogs of Mississippi. Folks hereabouts even hired artists from Europe to paint false grain on their cypress wood to make it look like a less common brand of timber. Jase thought it was pretty odd what rich people spent their money on, but he watched the rich carefully when he could. He aimed to be rich himself, and he wanted to learn their ways.

Mrs. Pendergas was as stout as her husband and chewed at least as much tobacco, spitting with casual accuracy into a silver ladies' spittoon designed so as not to get tobacco juice on her skirts. Jase bowed over her hand when he was introduced—on one fat finger there was a diamond the size of a robin's egg—and when he straightened he saw a fat crab louse sitting on Mrs. Pendergas' head. The louse eyed him with a look of the same suspicion that the senator's lady was giving him at just that moment.

Jase promised himself he would find reason not to accept any offer to lodge at Long Shanks. At least he knew his own boat was clean of vermin.

Interesting, Jase thought, these Mississippi gentry. Out east, in the Carolina

tidewater where Jase had been raised, the planters made a display of their manners and elegance and breeding, but Mississippi had been raw frontier just a generation ago, nothing but swamp and cypress, and the folks who lived here were still people of the frontier. Very little on the Yazoo had been papered over—neither the plantation houses nor the people had gained a veneer of elegance, and life was still lived in the raw. Ambition was for masters, submission for slaves, and sheer violence the means to wealth.

They had come out West to get rich, these people. Jase figured it was something he and the planters had in common.

Accompanying them was one of Pendergas' aides, a young, soft-spoken artillery lieutenant that the Senator introduced, with a twinkle in his eye, as "Euphemism." There was obviously a story behind this, one that Euphemism thought a good deal less funny than Pendergas, but the young lieutenant was so quiet and retiring that Jase thought it better not to ask.

The Pendergas' kept a good cook, though. Navy vittles had sharpened Jase's appetite for the real thing, and he tucked into the pickled oysters, goose, beefsteak, and fresh greens with a will, and washed it down with the senator's French champagne. The dinner conversation focused on the war, and on the senator's opinions of the various commanders, none of which were favorable. Pillow was a coward, according to the Senator, Van Dorn a fool, Beauregard a vain, posturing frog-eater, and Johnston—any Johnston—an idiot. Pendergas bore a grudging respect for Robert Lee, who had just driven McClellan from his post before Richmond and saved the capital, but he implied that Lee had just been lucky.

Pendergas dwelt at some length on a master plan of campaign that he had submitted to the President, which involved the senator's raising a new army around Jackson, then striking north to the Ohio while the other forces in the West acted as his auxiliaries. Mr. Davis had not, as yet, offered a response to his onetime colleague, so Pendergas was planning on using his new ironclad ram to attract attention and glory to himself and to make his plan irresistible to those in authority. Jase nodded and expressed his admiration of this plan, and silently concluded that the senator felt acutely his lack of a meaningful assignment.

"And about yourself, Captain Miller?" Mrs. Pendergas asked. "Have you seen any fighting?"

"Mr. Miller," Pendergas said heavily, "is a lieutenant, my dear."

"Oh, he's a captain, too," said Tyrus. "His rank is lieutenant, but he's captain of the Bee, and that's what we call him."

"It is a courtesy title, then," Pendergas said.

Jase nodded to the senator. "Just as you may be a brigadier general, but you will also be captain of the Arcola."

Pendergas nodded, pleased with this idea. He wiped gravy off his beard with a napkin the size of a tablecloth.

"But to answer your question, ma'am," Jase said, nodding to Mrs. Pendergas, "yes, I saw action in the privateer Mobile under Captain Markham. We took six prizes last year, if you remember, and sank the Catskill gunboat off Pensacola." Privateers were something of an anachronism in the modern world, Jase knew, but they didn't have to take orders from dim-witted politicians, and they got to make a profit on their captures. Jase had, in theory, made a tidy sum when the Mobile's six prizes were sold, but the profit was all on paper, and Jase still hadn't seen a cent of the money. That had soured him on privateering.

And then, in a gallant act of generosity, Captain Markham had given his privateer to the Confederacy as a warship, and the government had obliged him by giving him captain's rank in the Navy. Jase Miller found himself without a job, and there didn't seem to be any privateers fitting out, so in an ill-considered outburst of patriotism he had joined the Navy as well, just a few months before Ellet's rams put most of the Confederate Navy at the bottom of the Mississippi. He should have looked for work as a blockade runner, he knew now. That's where the money was.

"Where are you getting crew?" Jase asked, as he accepted one of the senator's cigars and strolled to the drawing room.

"Called for volunteers among artillery batteries," Pendergas said. "Got sixty gunners that way. Got the beginnings of an engine room crew from the railroads and some unemployed steamboat men." He lit a lucifer match and paused with his cigar half-raised to his lips. "We'll fill up the crew with field hands. Servants."

The senator puffed his cigar alight while Jase exchanged glances with Harry Klee. "You're using slaves to fill up your crew?" Harry asked.

"Servants," Pendergas nodded, using the euphemism common among planters. "The niggers can haul ropes and shovel coal as well as anyone." He saw the dubious look on Harry's face and tried to reassure him. "It'll be white men who steer the boat and point the guns, don't worry."

An old trick, Jase knew, to make money. Some planters had tried it in the Old Navy—they put their slaves on board as crew, and while the slaves worked, the owners pocketed the slaves' pay for themselves. The practice wasn't common, because most Navy captains refused outright to enroll slaves, but some captains with Southern sympathies had permitted the practice.

But even the most fire-eating Southern captain, no matter how colossal his greed, had ever for an instant considered putting sixty or eighty slaves on his warship. The idea was sheer lunacy.

Harry Klee's thick neck swelled inside his collar. "But, General Pendergas," he said, "slaves—servants—they won't fight for you. Not like free men."

The senator gave Klee a complacent look. "They'll do what I tell 'em. They always do." His diamond stickpin glittered in the lantern light. "They'll all tell you, Boss Pendergas is a fair man. The whip and the branding iron only for those who deserve it, apple jack on Sundays, and I keep my drivers away from their women. Everybody works hard at Long Shanks, but nobody works harder than me." He nodded. "So they'll fight for me, I reckon. They know what's good for me is good for them."

"But sir—" Harry was about to continue his protest, but Jase caught his eye and gave a slight shake of the head.

The last thing he wanted was to keep Pendergas clear of disaster.

Jase looked at the senator. "Well, how you make up your crew is your business," he said. "But what your gun crews'll need is training, and my boys from the Bee'll be happy to provide it."

"Thankee," Pendergas said.

"In fact, once your men get to know the ropes a little, we might have some competition between your men and mine."

A red reflection glowed briefly in the senator's eyes as he drew at his cigar.

"Perhaps a little wager on the outcome?" he suggested.

Jase smiled. "I think the Navy would be happy to bet on a sure thing," he said.

"A sure thing?" Pendergas seemed amused. "You figure your little boat's able to give my boys a challenge?"

"I'm counting on it," Jase said, and took a long pull on his cigar.

### 3. Jason plans to recruit the Argonauts

"I want you to mix with Arcola's crew," Jase told Harry and Tyrus as they strolled back to the levee. "Get to know them. Get to be their friends. I'll make sure you have access to the Bee's spirit locker—they're going to be thirsty men after working on that monster all day." He smiled. "Have less than thou showest, Speak less than thou knowest, Lend less than thou owest."

"Ain't got money to lend nowheres, anyhow," Klee said. "Those white crew, they ain't gonna be happy to work with blacks."

"And it's dangerous," Tyrus said. "Asking a slave to fight for his master is like asking a steer to fight for the honor of the slaughterhouse. The quicker the Arcola surrenders, the sooner the blacks get their freedom."

"I want you to point this out to the senator's crew," Jase said. "And every time you catch any of the officers or crew making a mistake, I want you to point that

out, too. I want you to let them know that they ain't getting proper instruction from proper sailors." He smiled. "Once Pendergas' crew realizes that the senator plans on taking 'em straight out on their lonesomes to fight Farragut's whole fleet, with niggers making up half the crew and no real officers among 'em, I figure they'll be looking for a way out." He looked out at the General Bee, lying like a shadow against the levee. "And a way out," he said, "is just what we'll give 'em."

4.

Jason's history is related

Jase had grown up on the Charleston waterfront, the scrawny red-haired runt in a litter of roughneck brothers. As a boy he wandered over the wharfs, imagining Spanish galleons choked with gold as his eyes roamed over the ships. Charleston's elegant gentry didn't give a damn whether he was educated or not, but his parents did—his God-fearing mother made sure he had his letters, and his father, a saloon keeper, pounded pieces of the Bible and Shakespeare into him with a stick. But the sea was what drew him, and when he was twelve he took his first voyage, as a captain's servant, past brick Fort Sumter to Havana. He alternated working on ships with working in his father's saloon until his maternal uncle was finally rewarded for a lifetime of toadying the Democrats with a postmaster's job in Alexandria, Virginia. This was close enough to Washington for him to get within smelling distance of some real patronage: soon all Jase's relations were working for the post office. And Jase himself, somewhat to his surprise, found himself with an appointment to the Naval Academy.

Annapolis was easier than he'd expected. He already knew practical seamanship and navigation: spherical trigonometry was as natural to him as breathing. The discipline and hazing were mild, and far less arbitrary, than what he got at home from his parents and brothers.

Relations between the South Carolina wharf rat and other young naval gentlemen were more problematical. They had money, connections, and social elegance: Jase had a world of experience that, at Annapolis, didn't count for a damn. He hated the Southerners because they were rich, lazy, and stupid. He hated the Yankees because they were rich, ambitious, and Yankees. He kept his chin tucked and his fists clenched. He got a reputation as a vicious fighter, a wolverine with whom, in the end, it was easiest not to tangle.

When he finally got his commission he was glad to be at sea again. All he needed was a good war and he'd make himself rich off prize money. In the absence of prize money, he'd settle for a ship of his own. Instead there were long cruises to show the flag in the Mediterranean and mind-numbing months off Guinea on anti-slavery patrol. The only good tour was under Markham in the Constellation. Markham wasn't bad, for a rich planter.

He hoarded his meager lieutenant's pay and dreamed of war and command. Not for the sake of glory—though he had no objection to a scrap with the Limey or the Frog—but because it would be an opportunity to get rich. Just let me loose on an enemy, he thought, and I'll strangle him with one hand and empty his pockets with the other.

When the Union crumbled, Jase took his time deciding which way to jump. He had no reason to love the Confederacy. The people running the rebellion were his worst nightmare, but on the other hand he hated the Yankees six ways from Sunday. He didn't want to fight his own family: he knew his brothers would join the CSA. Captain Markham finally helped him make up his mind when he offered the first lieutenant's berth on his privateer. Privateers were in business to make money, and money was what Jase wanted to make.

After the privateering cruise he joined the Navy on a ridiculous surge of optimism, thinking he could maybe hitch himself to Markham's star. But Markham wasn't given a command right away, and the Navy Department put Jase to work building a ropewalk in Mobile.

But Captain Markham came through for him. People in Richmond asked him to undertake a certain mission on the Mississippi. Markham said he wasn't the right man for the job, but he knew somebody who was.

Markham wouldn't do anything underhanded or dishonorable, and he was a bad liar. These, Jase figured, were his character flaws.

Jase took the Western & Atlantic east for a meeting with Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin. Benjamin had a bandit's touch with finance and did not share Captain Markham's character flaws. Jase Miller took to him right away.

Jase had some conditions. He wanted to hand-pick his own crew from anyone in the South, in or out of the service. He wanted his back covered in Richmond, particularly with the Secretaries of War and of the Navy.

And he wanted not to be poor when the war was over. In this, he figured, he was just like the leaders of the Rebellion.

Benjamin saw the sense of these requests. He acceded entirely.

Harry Klee was at loose ends after the Louisiana had been scuttled, and Jase took him on as executive officer. The Jackson twins were found on a Charleston blockade runner. Chief Tyrus was brought out of the shipyards in Charleston, where he'd been converting vessels to blockade runners, and the Gunner, Faren Smith, the finest cannoneer and rifleman Jase had ever known, was found amid the wreckage of the River Defense Fleet. Other people were found her and there. None were exactly immune to the lure of profit.

There was money up the Mississippi, Jase Miller told them. There were two Federal fleets in the way, Farragut's salt-water flotilla and Davis's river fleet. So all Jase and his men had to do make their fortunes was steal the Army's ironclad ram, then defeat the Yankees.

5.

The Argo is builded by Jason and Argus

Under Jase's direction, the senator's workmen put together massive gun truck carriages of cypress wood strapped with iron. Carpenters assembled a simulated gun deck on the levee, protected with revetments and cotton bales, where the guns could be pointed out over the Yazoo and crews could be trained while workmen still labored on the ironclad. The battery could also be used to protect Arcola in case the Yankees decided to venture up the Yazoo. Crewmen from the General Bee came ashore to instruct the ironclad's crew in gunnery.

Since there were no real seamen in Arcola's crew, nobody wondered why the little Bee, a tiny vessel in a service strapped for volunteers, was fifty percent over complement. Jase had, like Fortinbras, shark'd up a list of lawless resolute, and the list was a long one.

The ironclad's crews proved no better than expected. The militia artillerymen that Pendergas had scavenged from his training units knew how to do their jobs well enough, given that they'd trained on little six-pound brass howitzers instead of hulking iron naval guns, but the militiamen hated the blacks like poison. They demonstrated on every possible occasion that they'd rather curse and kick their black fellow crewmen than fight the Yankees. The slaves knew better than to disclose the hatred they doubtless felt for the whites, but they showed no enthusiasm for their task, and little bits of sabotage kept occurring. Friction primers would go missing, the special ammunition for the Brooke rifle would be placed by the wrong gun, handspikes and priming irons would not be ready to hand when they were needed. On one occasion, the guns' wooden tompons were seen floating down the Yazoo. These incidents drove the white gunners into near-frenzy.

Senator Pendergas pronounced himself pleased with his gunners' progress. Jase smiled and bided his time.

Jase formed some of the Bee's men into a baseball team, and Navy played Army almost every afternoon, following drill. With Faren Smith's pitching, Castor Jackson stealing bases, and Castor's twin Put-Up-Your-Dukes and Harry Klee regularly belting the ball into the bayou, the Navy won on a regular basis. Army



discontent increased. Jase let it simmer.

Pendergas seemed unaware of the tensions within his command. He busied himself with his grand plans for winning the war once the President gave him the troops, and with plotting the destruction of Farragut's fleet, which he figured would be the work of an afternoon. On occasion, though, he relaxed to the extent of attending a baseball game.

"Your center fielder," he nodded on one such occasion, "I've been thinking he looks familiar."

Jase took a draw on one of the senator's cigars. "His name is Pedaiah Jackson," he said.

Pendergas gave him a squint-eyed look. "The prizefighter? The one they call Put-Up-Your-Dukes?"

"That's the one."

"I saw him beat Tommy Corcoran down in Orleans in '58. He was a champ, wasn't he?"

"Heavyweight champion of Great Britain and Ireland," Jase said, "till the law found out about the wives he had stashed all over the kingdom, and he had to take a long sea voyage." On the USS Constellation, as it happened, where Jase was serving as third lieutenant.

Pendergas spat tobacco into the grass and ground it in with his shoe.

"Interesting crew you've got, Miller."

Jase nodded at the field. "That's Jackson's twin brother Castor at shortstop. My quartermaster."

The senator scratched his beard thoughtfully. "There's a prizefighter up in Yazoo City called Tom Amboise. People call him 'King.' A blacksmith. Killed a man in the ring up in Memphis with his bare fists."

"I heard of him," Jase said.

"You reckon Put-Up-Your-Dukes would fight him? Barehanded, of course? I'd put up a good cash prize. We could stage the fight up in Yazoo City, and I could commission a special train from Jackson for all the sportin' gents."

Jase concealed his inward smile. "Talk to Jackson about it. But I don't want him fighting as long as we're working on the Arcola. Launch the ram and get the men trained, and then I figure I can release Dukes from duty for a few days."

The senator spat. "Gives me more time for putting up placards and spreading the word." And placing bets, Jase figured.

"Well, then," Jase said. "If Jackson is willing."

Pendergas peered at him. "Is Jackson in training?"

"I've never seen him come close to losing."

Pendergas smiled as he placed mental bets against the local man-killer. Things were coming together pretty well.

6.

With sacrifices to the Gods, Argo is launched

Placards for the prize fight started going up on the same day that Arcola was launched. The earthen embankment that separated the makeshift drydock from the Yazoo was torn away, and foaming river water spilled into the gap. As slaves worked madly with shovels and barrows, the water climbed the ram's wooden hull to the belt of iron at the waterline. The cradle on which Arcola rested gave a series of groans. People cheered. Guns fired a salute. Flags waved. A militia band—boys and elderly men—played "Bonnie Blue Flag." Pendergas, grandly dressed in a soft pearl-grey uniform, waved his forage cap at the crowd.

A gun fired. The Army battle flag, the red square with the blue saltire and white stars, rose on the ram's flagstaff.

Jase, aboard General Bee, did not like that flag there, and reckoned he would have to change it. He ordered ahead slow. The tugboat's bronze screw propeller thrashed brown water. Warps tautened, creaked.

The ram groaned but refused to move from its cradle. The railroad iron was weighing it down. Jase increased Bee's power until there was nothing but white

froth under its stern counter. Arcola did not move.

Harry Klee beat upon the frame of the pilothouse door with one huge fist. "Those Army dung-throwers! They've stranded Arcola in her own dry dock!"

Jase jangled bells to signal engine stop. "We'll get her afloat."

"Hope she's not stuck till the river rises!"

Mule teams were mobilized, harnessed to warps, and lined up on the levees. The ironclad was lightened by the weight of its anchor and chain, its cookstove, a pair of anvils, carpenter's stores, and the contents of the paint locker. Again Jase signaled Bee's engine room ahead slow. Mule drivers cracked whips. Again the flags waved. Again the people cheered. Again Pendergas waved his cap. Again the strains of "Bonnie Blue Flag" were heard.

Again the ironclad failed to move. Pendergas threw his forage cap onto the levee and kicked it into the Yazoo. Jase lit a cigar while Harry Klee cursed and fumed.

"Calm down, Harry," he said. "This is just dandy." Then he went ashore to tell Pendergas he had a plan.

The crowds had gone home by the time Arcola was floated. The ironclad's boilers were filled with water. Jase warped a coal barge into the drydock until its bows touched Arcola's flat stern. Just enough coal was shifted into the ram's bunkers to get up steam, then the barge was warped away again. It was the middle of the night before the steam pressure was sufficient to crank the engines, but that wasn't enough for Jase. He had Chief Tyrus tie down the safety valves and ordered more coal thrown into the fireboxes.

The mules were harnessed once more. Harry Klee took position in Bee's wheelhouse. Jase stood in the armored pilot's station atop the front of the ironclad's casemate, Castor Jackson and three others stood at the wheel just below him, and Chief Tyrus attended the engines. The other crew were hustled ashore, and were probably glad to be there. Jase wished he could blow a steam whistle to let everyone know when to start, but Arcola lacked that piece of equipment. Maybe a whistle was beneath the dignity of an armored terror such as the ram.

Arcola's pilot house lacked a roof, so Jase just chinned himself up, got one foot onto the casemate, and stood. The day's heat still rose from the railroad iron. He had Castor hand him up a battle lantern, and he waved it at Klee. Bee, which had a whistle, promptly gave out with a series of blasts, and over the silent river Jase heard the sound of General Bee's engines begin to thump. Whips cracked. Wood groaned as it took the strain.

Jase looked down into the ram and called to Castor. "Signal astern slow." Castor expertly played the ropes that rang bells in the engine room, and was answered by huge, solid, tooth-rattling crashes as Arcola's engines engaged, then a surge as the twin eight-foot-diameter propellers began to bite water. White water streamed alongside Arcola's flank. Jase felt the ram shudder, heard submerged wood groan.

"Half astern," he ordered. Bells jangled in the engine room. Tongues of flame licked from the twin stacks. The hawsers that connected General Bee to Arcola were so taut that water shot from the coils as they took the strain. The ram's air intakes, huge metal bells shaped like ear trumpets, began to howl with the force of the gale sucked into the boilers. Wood moaned like a giant in torment. The water in the drydock surged back from the propellers, turned to froth. A shudder ran the length of the ram, and Jase felt the trembling in his bones.

Jase saw Pendergas on the edge of the drydock, pacing up and down, shouting at him. He had a feeling that the senator wanted Jase to shut everything down and wait for the Yazoo to rise.

Jase looked left and right, watching the water surge along the ironclad. Gauged his moment.

"Astern full." Spray from the propellers flew twenty feet high, a wave inundating Pendergas in his new uniform. Pendergas kept shouting. A series of bangs like cannon shots sounded through the air. Arcola jerked on the ways and Jase almost tumbled down the inclined iron casemate. There was a surge, the bow rose as if to a wave, and Arcola leaped like a racehorse from the drydock, scattering behind it the hardwood wedges that had held it in its cradle.

"Engines stop! Helm hard a-port! Hard down!"

Jase had calculated that Arcola's propellers would pull so much water into the drydock that its water level would rise several feet above the level of the Yazoo. The rising water, more than the power of the propellers, floated the ram free.

Castor and his mates flung themselves on the wheel's spokes, trying to get the big rudder over before Arcola speared itself, stern-first, onto the opposite bank of the Yazoo. Harry Klee had to maneuver nimbly in midstream to avoid being rammed as Arcola shot past General Bee; he had his own rudder hard over and was steaming upstream at full ahead. Arcola had only begun its turn before the hawsers connecting it to General Bee cracked taut, and the ram snapped stern-to-current with a jerk that almost sent Jase tumbling. Arcola rolled madly for a moment—Jase remembered that she was unballasted, topheavy, and watched in horror as creamy water licked the gunports—but the boat righted itself, and Jase breathed easy.

Steam flew high and white as Chief Tyrus valved the boilers. The rushing steam made so much noise that for a few moments Jase didn't hear the screams and shrieks rising from the Yazoo. He looked in puzzlement at the water, then saw heads breaking surface in foam.

Mules. No provision had been made for untying the mule trains that had helped to run Arcola out of its dock. The ram, which probably weighed a thousand tons with the armor on her, had dragged the animals out into the river, helpless as birds in a net. To judge from the cursing that was emanating from the vicinity of the struggling animals, some of the mule handlers had been dragged into the water as well.

Jase gazed in horror at the thrashing men and animals, tangled together in their harness. It was the sailor's worst nightmare: in the water, drowning because you were tangled in your own equipment. Arcola was killing them. He shouted to Castor, ran down the casemate to the foredeck, and tried hauling on the lines with his bare hands, but it was useless. Even with Castor's help, he wasn't strong enough. The river had the men and animals, and there was nothing to be done.

Two men drowned, and twenty-four mules, before Arcola was laid alongside the levee. Because the men were free whites, Pendergas would pay compensation for the mules only.

Jase thought of the old pagan days, when the launch of a ship would mean the sacrifice of men and animals, and he wondered if the dark old gods of the Yazoo had just conferred a blessing on the ironclad and its mission.

7.

The Argonauts holdeth games and crowneth the Champions

The day after Arcola's launch, Army and Navy met for their gunnery competition. Arcola fired first, the smoothbores pounding away at targets set on rafts in the Yazoo while the Brooke rifle fired at targets on the far bank. Both Jase and Pendergas pretended not to notice when one of the loaders dropped a thirty-two-pound solid onto the bare foot of one of the blacks, or when a fistfight developed among the crew of the ten-inch Dahlgren.

The guns fell silent. Powder smoke slowly dissipated in the still Mississippi air while Arcola's gunners filed out of the battery. General Bee chugged onto the Yazoo to replace the targets. Jase looked at his watch.

"Four and a half minutes," he said to Pendergas. "Very creditable." Pendergas spat with pleasure.

Harry Klee led the Bee's gunners into the battery, and Jase almost felt sorry for Pendergas. Every member of Bee's crew was a picked man, though there was no way that Pendergas could know that.

The trained Navy gunners loaded so fast they fired two shots to the Army's one. The Dahlgren demolished its target at the first fire, then Klee grabbed a handspike, put it to his massive shoulders, and shoved the huge gun carriage

sideways, training it on one of the thirty-two-pounder targets.

Faren Smith's Brooke rifle fired two ranging shots at its distant target across the Yazoo, then blew it to smithereens with the third. By the time it swung inboard to another target, that target was gone, and there was nothing left to shoot at.

Jase clicked his watch shut and called for a cease-fire. "Two minutes fourteen seconds," he said amiably. "No sense wasting powder shooting at floating wreckage."

Pendergas gave him a thoughtful look. "That was ... impressive, lieutenant." "My gunners have had more practice. Yours will improve."

The senator said nothing, only spat a meditative quid of tobacco onto the grass. Pendergas handed Jase his winnings—two hundred silver dollars. "You'll win your money back in the prize fight, and then some," Jase consoled him.

Pendergas then had his bugler call his men to receive their pay. The pay was in Confederate scrip, stuff so badly printed that the ink stuck to the fingers and the bills turned to compost in the soldiers' pockets. Sutlers and merchants would only take scrip at a discount. Jase wondered if the wages that Pendergas was collecting on behalf of his slaves were paid in scrip, or in specie. Jase reckoned the latter.

This was better and better. Jase called for General Bee's pay chest, which Secretary Benjamin had provided, and handed out his own crew's wages—all in silver.

"Be sure to tell your friends in the Army," he admonished his men, "that the Navy pays in silver, because we all get prize money for our captures. Too bad they're not in the Navy, eh?"

Wine maketh merry, he thought, but money answereth all things.

He observed thoughtful expressions on the faces of a great many Army men that day.

8.

Pelias plotteth against Jason

Arcola was ballasted with leftover railroad iron and fifty tons of pig iron brought in barges from Yazoo City. Her guns were hoisted into her, and she began her trials, steaming up and down the Yazoo while her crew accustomed themselves to sweating inside a baking iron box while working alongside enormous, fast, and highly dangerous machinery. Jase was pleased by the speed he could get out of the ram despite all the armor topside. Ten knots, he judged, if he had the current with him.

One night, when Arcola had been warped up to the coal barge to fill its bunkers, and Jase had retired to his stateroom on Bee to take care of some paperwork, Harry Klee loomed up in the doorway.

"I've just had a drink with the Senator," he said.

"Bully," Jase said, his mind on watch and quarter bills.

"That artillery competition opened his eyes, it seems. Pendergas offered me a position as second-in-command of Arcola, if I'd bring twenty of our gunners with me. Said there was no use in us being on an ol' tugboat when we could be making heroes of ourselves on an ironclad."

Delight sang in Jase's mind. "I've been underestimating him!" he said. "Here I'm trying to steal his men, and he tries to steal mine!" He looked up at Klee.

"What did he offer you?"

"Fifty silver dollars. Ten for anyone I brought with me."

Jase laughed. "Ask for more money," he said.

Klee nodded. "I'll do that."

Jase tipped back his stool and looked at the huge man in the doorway. "How are we faring with stealing his boys?"

"Pretty well, I reckon. If you can get Pendergas away from 'em for the length of time it would take to get steam up, I figure most of 'em will follow you. Maybe even the officers."

"All's well, then." Jase stroked his short red stubble. "Now all we need is for Put-Up-Your-Dukes to give the folks a good show."

9.

Polydeukes the Boxer fighteth King Amycus

"Lucky the fight's today," Harry Klee said. "The Senator was getting close to my price."

Jase gave a tug to the ring ropes, made sure they were lashed properly to the uprights. "What is your price?" he asked.

"I'll let you know," Klee said, "when it's time for you to pay it."

Jase had just come to Yazoo City on the General Bee, bringing Senator and Mrs. Pendergas along as passengers, along with some of their friends. Though it was still morning, Jase's guests had put away a cask and a half of whiskey during the course of their little river trip.

Which was fine with Jase Miller. The drunker the better.

The twins had been in Yazoo City for several days, getting the lay of the land, with Faren Smith in charge of keeping them out of trouble. Now they and Jase were checking the ring, making certain that there weren't hidden dangers, a rope that would give way, an upright insecurely mounted, or hidden weapons that "King" Amboise could palm once the fight was under way, and use to smash his opponent's ribs, or gouge him in the clinches.

"Have you seen this Amboise?" Jase asked.

"No aggravation there, guv'nor," Put-Up-Your-Dukes judged. "I guess I got a hundred tricks he ain't seen."

"Don't finish it too quick," Jase said. "I want this to last all afternoon."

Since prizefights were illegal, the fight couldn't take place in Yazoo City. Shortly after noon a whistle blew, and the first of the special trains chugged into sight, packed with the sporting crowd brought in from Jackson. Jase looked at the rich planters with their diamond stickpins and silver-headed canes, and he reckoned that he'd never seen so many men out of uniform since the war began. And, since there were silks and jewels everywhere on display, it was difficult to tell the fancy ladies from the respectable women by the scale of their finery alone except that the ladies refused so much as to look at the strutting town girls.

The planters' women, Jase figured, were practiced at not seeing what their menfolk got up to, their amorous night raids in the slave quarters especially. Harry Klee appeared with a silver bowl of his special milk punch. Jase offered it to the Senator and his lady.

The main fight commenced about an hour later, after some preliminary bouts that featured hayseeds walloping each other till they grew so tired they could barely lift their arms. The crowd was restless by the time the celebrated man-killer was introduced. Amboise barely acknowledged the crowd as he climbed into the ring. He was somewhere else entirely. Somewhere where he could kill people with his bare hands.

Put-Up-Your-Dukes made a more relaxed entrance, grinning, waving in answer to the cheers of the crowd and of General Bee's men. The announcer, shouting through a brass speaking trumpet, introduced various dignitaries in the audience—judge this, colonel that, congressman the other, nothing like the South for titles and phony dignity—and Pendergas rose in his dove-grey uniform to take a bow and wave his cup of milk punch at the crowd.

Then the fight got under way. The man-killer started with a leap, an attempt to get the Englishman into a headlock so that Amboise could smash him repeatedly in the face without danger to himself. Put-Up-Your-Dukes, wise to the trick, slipped away and hammered Amboise in the ribs. The bare fists made meaty thwacks as they struck flesh. Amboise charged. Put-Up-Your-Dukes evaded, slipped the wild punches, counterattacked precisely.

And so it went for the first ten rounds or so, the blacksmith pursuing, the Englishman sideslipping and taking advantage of openings. After that Amboise

lost his head of steam, and Dukes counterattacked, jabs and solid rights and hooks to the ribs, punches that chipped away at the blacksmith's wind and strength.

After about the twentieth round Put-Up-Your-Dukes slowed down, as if he, too, had run out of steam. The two fighters stalked around each other, firing occasional punches. Their forearms were blueblack from blocking strikes. Whenever Amboise attacked, Dukes would clinch, leaning into Amboise with all his weight, making the blacksmith support him. There was puzzlement on Amboise' face as he tried to work out what to do. His corner kept shouting at him to attack, attack, keep hitting, but Amboise knew perfectly well that it wasn't working. Jase understood Amboise' problem better than the blacksmith did. He had never before met a man who wasn't scared of him. Amboise's success as a boxer was based on strength and his man-killer reputation, and Dukes' refusal to be frightened cut one of his legs out from under him right from the start. Amboise spent the interval after the thirty-seventh round vomiting. And the thirty-ninth. But afterwards he stepped back into the ring, fists high. You couldn't say he lacked courage.

The sight of Amboise heaving didn't seem to diminish the Senator's thirst. When the bowl of milk punch ran low, Jase had it carried away so that it could be refilled. Harry Klee made it himself, with rum, whisky, cinnamon, nutmeg.

"This is the first time you've seen Put-Up-Your-Dukes, isn't it?"

"Yep," Klee nodded.

Jase took from his pocket a brown bottle labeled Tincture of Opium and emptied its contents into the punch bowl. He watched as Klee stirred the mixture. "Do you think you could beat our boy? You must outweigh him by fifty pounds." Harry Klee stroked his black beard. "I could beat him, maybe," he concluded, "but only by killing him."

"Let's hope Amboise doesn't think the same thing," he said.

The audience was growing restless when Jase returned and handed the Senator a cup of the new batch. "Compliments of Ensign Klee, sir," he said.

The Senator looked impatient. "Can't you get them to give us a show?" he said.

"They've been dancing a damn quadrille for the last hour. The onliest entertainment we've seen has been Amboise upchucking his guts."

"I'll see what I can do, General."

He conveyed the Senator's request to Castor, and Put-Up-Your-Dukes shifted to the attack, flailing away with wild flurries. The cheering crowd probably didn't notice that few of the punches landed, or that those that did thudded into the blacksmith's ribs, keeping him short of wind and strength.

During the sixty-first round Amboise shot a wild left into the Briton's onslaught, and Dukes staggered. The crowd roared. Amboise followed up, steam-driver punches sending Put-Up-Your-Dukes into the ropes. For a moment Jase's heart stopped—he had too much money on this fight, damn it!--but then Dukes managed to slip under one of the blacksmith's punches and escaped into the ring, where he spent the rest of the round retreating while the crowd hollered for his blood.

"He broke my jaw, sir," Dukes said as he rested between rounds. His voice was a bit thick, but otherwise unaffected by his injury.

"Finish him off, then," Jase said.

"That should take another ten rounds or so," Castor judged.

It was a long process, since in a bareknuckle fight Dukes couldn't go straight for the knockout without risk of breaking his hands, he had to keep cutting away at the man's strength, taking him to pieces bit by bit.

And it took longer than ten rounds to wear away the murderous light in the blacksmith's eyes. The fight had gone into its eighty-fourth round when the exhausted Amboise dropped his guard enough to let Put-Up-Your-Dukes drive a punch straight into his throat. Amboise gagged and bent over, clutching his windpipe. Dukes volleyed a half-dozen unanswered punches to his head, then hammered him in the temple with one solid fist. There was a crack like a wooden mallet banging home a fid. Amboise dropped like a sack of beets. He convulsed, ugly little twitches running over his body. His supporters stormed the ring and carried him away before the referee finished counting him out.

Whether the cause was the punch to the throat, the fist to the temple, or the quality of the medical care—the ring doctor had passed out from drink about the fortieth round—the word soon passed through the crowd that Amboise was dead. Which didn't stop the band from playing "Dixie," or Jase and the Senator from collecting their winnings.

The Senator's pupils had shrunk to pinpricks when he returned to the grandstand with his winnings to find his wife was sound asleep, slumped in her finery. From her throat issued delicate, ladylike snores.

"Maybe you should get a hotel room tonight," Jase suggested. "We can return to Long Shanks in the morning."

The Senator considered. The opiate hadn't affected him at all, other than to increase his air of jollification. "Bound to be some parties in Yazoo City tonight." He jingled the gold and silver in his pocket. "And it's not me who will be paying."

"I'm going to get Put-Up-Your-Dukes out of sight," Jase said, "before somebody thinks to arrest him for killing that boy."

"They won't serve a warrant on a Navy ship," Pendergas said.

Jase nodded. "Then I know where to hide him."

He needn't have drugged the punch after all, he thought. The possibility of a murder warrant was enough excuse to get everyone aboard the Bee and head down the Yazoo.

Amboise had become another sacrifice to Jase's success.

10.

Jason taketh the Argo to sea

It was two in the morning when General Bee pulled up to Long Shanks Landing. Jase was surprised to see the levee alight with torches and lanterns, and the ironclad abuzz with activity.

"We got a wire, sir. Yankees coming up the river," said the man Pendergas had left in charge, the artillery officer known as Euphemism. "Two Eads ironclads, Clasher and General Stone, and a double-ended gunboat."

Sudden fire blazed through Jase's veins. "Have you got steam up?" he demanded. "Steam's down, sir."

"Well get it up, you fool!" If the Yankee squadron caught Arcola tied to the bank and unable to move, Jase and his crew might as well be in Paris for all the good they'd do.

The army lieutenant's eyes widened, and he turned to give the order, then hesitated. "Where's General Pendergas, sir?" he asked.

"In Yazoo City! Now get that steam up!" He turned to Harry Klee. "You'll take command of the Bee. Get that torpedo ready."

Klee grinned. "Lovely, Captain. Couldn't have worked out better."

Most of General Bee's crew poured off the tugboat to help ready Arcola for combat. Jase had a pair of coal barges warped alongside Arcola on the river side so that the Yank boats couldn't ram her while she was helpless against the bank.

Harry Klee took the Bee down river on a reconnaissance.

Jase brought order to the Arcola, had the gunners standing by their pieces, the guns loaded and run out the ports while the stokers worked like fury to raise steam. When one of Pendergas' officers volunteered to ride to the telegraph office and send the Senator a wire, Jase cursed him, called him a coward, and ordered him back to his post.

The last thing he wanted was for Pendergas to show up on a chartered boat just in time to make himself a hero.

At five in the morning Chief Tyrus reported that Arcola had a full head of steam. The National squadron hadn't turned up. Bee returned at dawn without having scented any Yanks. Jase sent the crew to breakfast by watches and had a chat with Harry Klee.

"How's Put-Up-Your-Dukes?" he asked.

"Not talking much," Klee said, "but I reckon he's all right." He spat. "You

think those Yankee boats even exist?"

Jase stroked his unshaven jaw as he gave the matter his consideration. "That wire was pretty specific, down to the names of the Eads boats," he said. "We've got to assume that the Yanks have a squadron up the Yazoo somewhere. What with all the boasting our papers have been doing about this ram, it may be that Farragut or Flag Officer Davis decided to see what all the boasting is all about."

"Lucky they didn't send the whole fleet." Klee cocked an eye at the starboard watch, eating breakfast in the Senator's cotton field while the port watch stood by the guns. "You planning on reading 'em your commission?" he asked.

Jase slapped an insect. "They'll like the news a sight better if we sink some Yankee ironclads first," he said.

"You reckon they'll follow you?"

"I don't plan on giving 'em any choice, Harry."

After breakfast he had both crews mustered on the levee. Jase and Harry Klee climbed the sloping red side of the ram, turned to face the men he wanted to lead down the Yazoo. The whites stood in ranks, most of them in uniform. The slaves slumped behind, silent and resentful.

"I'm not a politician," he told them. "I'm a Navy man, and I don't give speeches."

"Rude am I in my speech," he thought to himself with amusement, "And little bless'd with the soft phrase of peace." Father, your Shakespeare is more useful than you knew.

"There are two Yankee ironclads on the Yazoo!" Jase said. "They've heard we're up here, and they're looking for us. If they find us now, with Arcola tied to the bank, we'll be trapped like rats in a hole." He gestured down the river, a clenched fist. "If we go to find them, the fight will be even!" He raised his voice. "That's all the South has ever asked. A fair chance! An even fight! Am I right, boys?"

There was a cheer. Jase observed Tyrus and Faren Smith among the Bee's men, keeping the cheer going longer than might otherwise have been the case.

Jase grinned and threw out his chest. Give 'em a little Harry Fifth, he thought.

"I don't want anyone on board Arcola who isn't ready to get himself a bellyful of Yankees!" he said. "I don't want anyone with me just because he's ordered to be there. And that includes servants!"

"You in the back!" he said, craning over the ranked white faces on the levee.

"The Confederacy thanks you for your contribution, but you will not be required for the coming battle. You are dismissed!"

The blacks moved away, casting glances of hate or contempt over their shoulders, while the white crewmen cheered. They didn't need any prompting this time. Some of them even threw dirt clods after the retreating slaves.

Jase felt a moment of quiet triumph. If he had to build morale by uniting white against black, or black against white, or for that matter by getting them all to whip a cringing cur dog, then that's what he'd do.

"And as for the rest of you—" He took off his straw hat and waved it at the hatchway. "Any man of you who wants a scrap with the Yank, take your stations!"

The crewmen cheered again as they poured onto the ironclad. Harry Klee had the watch and quarter bills ready—the new watch and quarter bills, the ones that distributed two-thirds of General Bee's complement over the ram, and put them in charge of all Arcola's departments.

"Raise the flag, sir?" Harry Klee asked.

"Ay," Jase said. "And let's make it the naval ensign, shall we?"

Klee got an ensign from the Bee, the rectangular flag with its white and red stripes, the blue canton with the circle of stars, and sent it up Arcola's flagstaff. Jase saluted the ensign as it rose, and felt a thrill rocket up his spine. His flag. His boat. His command.

It would take more than Pendergas to take it away from him. And more than a Yankee flotilla, too.

He was about to enter the boat when he saw Lieutenant Euphemism hovering uncertainly by the hatch. He approached, happy to see the lieutenant salute him.

"Yes, lieutenant?" Jase said. "Do you have a question?"



"To tell you the truth, lieutenant-captain-lieutenant-I have been superceded in command of the starboard battery by one of your men."

"You are not superceded," Jase said. "You hold the same post you always did. But I did put someone more experienced over you."

"I'm not certain you have the authority to do such a thing." Euphemism's eyes rose to the flagstaff. "I do not believe I would feel comfortable serving aboard a Navy boat. Perhaps I will ride to the station and wire General Pendergas."

"You'll miss the fight."

"I'm not sure it's my fight, sir, properly speaking."

Jase gave the young man a thoughtful nod. "As you choose. I want only volunteers for this mission."

The lieutenant touched his cap brim. "Much obliged, sir."

"But you should know, lieutenant, that if you wire the Senator, there may be unfortunate consequences."

The lieutenant smiled. "For you, sir?"

Jase laughed, to the lieutenant's surprise. "Lord, no," he said. "What I meant is that if you miss this fight, you should ask for a transfer out of this department. Because you'll never be able to walk aboard Arcola again and hold your head up."

The lieutenant stared, then swallowed, hard. Jase stepped back from the hatchway, gestured for the man to enter. "Come along, sir," he said. "You can wire the Senator from Vicksburg as well as anywhere."

Euphemism pondered for a moment, then smiled, touched his cap again, and entered the ram.

Let the Senator stay away for the next fifteen minutes, Jase thought, and the ram is mine.

11.

The Argonauts faceth the peril of the Clashing Rocks

Black smoke poured from Arcola's twin stacks as the ram thrust down the Yazoo. The foredeck before the casemate was almost awash with brown water. Jase sat on the edge of the roofless pilot house, his seaman's soul thrilling to the glory of it all.

"Who is she that looketh forth as the morning sun," he thought, "fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?"

Arcola. His Arcola.

Oh, Arcola was a sweet boat! Fast despite her size and weight, trim, born for the water. Engines tuned to a fare-thee-well, and if she was a little hesitant to answer the big rudder, well, that was just because all the iron gave her momentum. It was a flaw for which a commander sensitive to her ways could compensate, and Jase had learned her well in her trials.

He was so taken with Arcola that he had to forcefully remind himself, now and again, that this was all about money.

Sitting next to Jase was the Gunner, Faren Smith, who held an English-made Armstrong target rifle casually across his knees—even as Nimrod the mighty hunter before the Lord, Jase thought.

Jase glanced over his shoulder and saw General Bee following two cables' lengths behind. Bee towed a pair of coal barges which would be cut adrift on the appearance of any Nationals. Above Bee's foredeck towered a pair of wooden sheers that supported a forty-foot boom with a homemade tin canister on the end, Harry Klee's spar torpedo. Behind the foredeck gun stood Put-Up-Your-Dukes, a handkerchief slung beneath his broken jaw and tied over his head. It would be the big prizefighter's job to place the canister under an enemy hull, then touch off the fifty pounds of black powder in the tin bucket.

The thing that most worried Jase was that he and Klee would be unable to communicate with one another once the fight started. Each would have to remember his part in the plan. But there were several plans depending on different contingencies, and it was more than possible to confuse one with the other, and

of course, there came a time in any fight when the plan went straight to hell....

"Smoke downriver, boss," Faren Smith said. Jase turned abruptly, scanned the river ahead, saw nothing.

"To the right, above the trees."

Jase corrected his gaze, saw the black smudge billowing above a tangle of cypress. Coal smoke, all right. A lot of smoke, which meant more than one boat. Jase felt his heart shift to a higher rate of speed, like an engine with the throttles opened. He turned again, waved at the tugboat following behind, pointed to the smoke rising over the cypress. He saw Harry Klee wave back from the pilothouse, then saw a plume of steam rise as Klee blew the whistle twice, the sound unheard over the throb of Arcola's engines.

Jase dropped through the pilot house to the main deck, where Castor stood by the wheel. The inside of the ironclad was hot as a blacksmith's forge, and the clank and hiss of the engines hammered on the ears. "Captain on deck!" someone yelled. The crew shuffled into a state of attention. They'd been at quarters since leaving Long Shanks, the boat cleared for action, guns loaded but not run out the ports.

"Yankees around the bend!" Jase shouted. "Run out the broadside guns!"

Guarding against abrasions with their leather waist protectors, the crewmen threw their weight onto the gun tackles, their bodies leaning almost to the deck as they hauled the heavy iron thirty-two-pounders to the ports. Jase walked swiftly aft, to the hatchway, then dived down the companion to the engine room. Gleaming piston rods slammed back and forth in the red light of the furnace. The monster cranks of the shafts flung themselves up, then down into their wells, a terrible lunging movement that could crush a man as easily as a boot could squash a beetle. Stokers stood stripped to the waist and leaned on their shovels, sweat making pale tracks in their coats of coal dust.

"Yankees!" Jase shouted to Chief Tyrus. "Stand by to ram!"

Tyrus nodded. Jase ran back up the companion, traveled the length of the gun deck. Forward of the wheel he saw daylight gleaming on the big Dahlgren pivot gun. The iron shutters that closed its three hatches were open on account of the heat. He paused next to Castor, ordered, "Close those shutters forrard." he said. No sense in letting a lucky Yankee shot fly in and drive the length of the boat.

Then he jumped up into the pilothouse again. Faren Smith still sat on the edge of the hatch, legs dangling, rifle across his knees. "I want you to aim the first shot from the Dahlgren," Jase told him. "After that, you can come up here and use that Whitworth."

"Ay, sir." Smith swung down, made his way to the gun deck.

Jase looked over his shoulder, saw the Bee following, its men at quarters, the spar torpedo poised high in the air.

He hoped the torpedo wasn't a dud. They were tricky things.

He looked forward, gauged the approaching boats by their smoke. "Steer a point to port," he told Castor. Take the turn wide, he thought. Let's not risk running aground on that point, not now.

The point neared. Jase felt sweat trickling down the back of his neck.

"Full speed!" he shouted down to Castor. "Hard a-starboard!"

Castor already had his hand on the bell line to the engine room. He signaled madly, then threw himself onto the wheel along with his three quartermaster's mates. There was a moment's hesitation as the rudder bit, and then the ram heeled into the turn, white water creaming along its side.

The point fell astern, with its tangle of cypress and flock of roosting cormorants, and a new vista opened up. Jase felt a rocket of pure terror fly up his spine as, a bare three-quarters of a mile away, he saw the Federal squadron. He had known the Eads ironclads were big, but these were the size of islands, islands forged of iron and studded over with batteries of artillery. The Northern engineer James Eads had started with the flat-bottomed hulls of big Mississippi steamers, then plated them over with a slab-sided iron casemate sloped at forty-five degrees. A conical pilot house perched atop the casemate forward, and behind the twin stacks reared a tall pair of humps, the armored

housing for the twin paddle wheels.

But what made the Eads boats dangerous was their firepower. Where the Arcola had a single gun firing forward, Clasher and General Stone had four. Where Arcola had three guns on the broadside, the Yankee boats had five. And where Arcola had a single gun firing astern, the Eads ironclads carried two.

Arcola's advantages were its speed, its ram, and the greater thickness of Argus McBride's ingenious armor. As Jase stared through the steel pilot house bars at the Yankee flotilla, they seemed scant advantage enough.

If it goes badly, he consoled himself, he could run away. With its twin screws, Arcola was faster than these big paddle boats.

And at least the Yankees were moving up the Yazoo one at a time, not as Jase had feared in line abreast, presenting Jase with an iron wall. The boat in the lead, judging by the gilt-trimmed letters that scrolled out on a graceful wrought-iron arch between the stacks, was the Clasher. The Stone followed. If the double-ended gunboat was present, it was behind the Stone, and Jase could not see her.

"Wheel amidships," he called down. "Stand by the bow gun."

Arcola lurched and shuddered as Chief Tyrus fed more steam to the engines. Jase could see Castor fighting the wheel as the power came unevenly to the screws.

"Port your helm. Meet her. Hold her so."

Jase aimed Arcola right for Clasher's bows, as if intending a head-on collision. The impact would probably be suicidal for both boats, but if he could panic Clasher's helmsman into turning, then he would be able to ram the Yank broadside and sink her.

Jase ducked beneath the hatch coaming, shouted along the gun deck.

"Stand by your guns!" he shouted. "You're going to have all the time you need to aim, so make each shot count."

There was a sudden bang, and Jase straightened just as a solid iron shot shrieked right overhead, a sound that made him duck again. Clasher had fired one of its bow guns. Jase's heart hammered. This was all happening very fast.

Another gun went off, and for a moment Jase was staring right at an advancing iron ball that seemed aimed right between his eyes. Terror sang along Jase's nerves. But the shot dropped at the last instant, and then Jase felt the impact, heard iron clang and timbers groan. Sparks flew, and then Jase saw the forty-two-pound solid shot shooting straight up into the sky as it bounded off Arcola's slanting casemate.

Another bang, then a series of splashes to port as a clean miss skipped along the surface of the Yazoo. And then another impact, another screech of iron, as Arcola's armor absorbed the last of round of Clasher's forward battery.

"Run out the forward gun! Fire at will!"

The forward iron shutter was thrown open with a clang, then trunnions rumbled on the deck as the ten-inch Dahlgren was hauled out the port. Jase stared at the oncoming bow wave as Clasher's massive prow shouldered aside the brown river water. The Yankee was not turning. That damned Eads boat had to be at least fifty feet wide.

Lord, Jase thought, they were coming together fast. Let him not mistime this. Shoot, shoot, shoot now, he mentally urged Faren Smith.

Too late. He ducked below the coaming to shout at Castor.

"Port your helm! Signal the engine room for half ahead! Ready the port broadside!"

Just then the bow gun went off, its roar hammering Jase's ears in the confined space of the casemate. There was an almost immediate clang as Clasher's armor received the ten-inch ball. Jase straightened and looked forward just as the rudder began to bite, the planking tilting under his feet, the boat slowing as the big rudder acted as a brake. As the gunsmoke cleared he saw a dimple on Clasher's casemate iron where the Dahlgren had struck. There was no other effect.

That huge prow seemed only yards away. Jase's mouth went dry. If he had mistimed, it would be the Clasher that rammed Arcola, not the other way around.

"Helm to starboard!" Jase shouted. Castor flung the wheel the other way,

throwing his weight on the spokes. The blunt Yankee prow creamed closer. Arcola shuddered as the rudder bit and slewed to the left.

"Brace for collision!" Jase yelled. He'd mistimed, damn it.

There was an impact, then a sound of rending timbers as Arcola's port bow struck the port bow of Clasher. Jase clung to the bars of the pilot house as the collision tried to take him off his feet. Timbers shrieked as Arcola scraped along Clasher's port side, the huge Eads boat shouldering the ram aside as if it were a piece of driftwood. A laugh forced its way past Jase's throat. He hadn't managed to kill his boat on the Yankee's prow after all.

"Port battery!" he shrieked with relief. "Fire as you bear!"

And then Faren Smith hopped up beside him, the Armstrong rifle in his hands.

"Shoot the helmsman, sir?" he offered.

"If you like," Jase said, but his words were drowned by the storming of the broadside guns, Clasher and Arcola firing at such close range that the muzzles almost touched. Flame and smoke shot up between the iron casemates, and the clang of iron sounded like anvils ringing beneath the hammers of giants.

Splinters flew through the air as Arcola's longboat was demolished. Crewmen of both vessels cheered. Smith aimed and fired his rifle in the din, and Jase didn't even hear him.

"Missed, sir," he reported, and began to reload.

Jase peered through gunsmoke. "Starboard a point. Meet her. Run the Dahlgren out the port side."

That would put Arcola on a slightly diverging course. He wanted to get as close to the starboard bank as possible so that he would have room to turn the ram around.

The second Eads boat, General Stone, was hidden behind Clasher and had very possibly not even known what was going on until the first shot was fired. Stone followed Clasher at two cables' distance. A canvas awning was spread over the flat roof of Stone's casemate, and bulwarks of sandbags and timber had been constructed beneath the awning. Jase saw people running along the top of the casemate, arms glittering, and realized that Stone carried a company of infantry on its roof, probably with the intention of using them to burn a few plantations or gins while they passed through the interior of Mississippi.

Two cables behind the Stone came the double-ender gunboat. Pointed at each end, with rudders fore and aft and a pair of paddle wheels right amidships, the gunboat could go as fast astern as forward. Though it was ideal for reconnaissance missions up creeks and bayous, in a battle between ironclads it was outclassed.

He heard the clang of iron shutters and the rumble of trunnions as the reloaded port battery began to roll out the ports.

"At the second boat," he called, "fire as you bear."

The Dahlgren's mighty boom concussed the water with its fury. Its iron shutter slammed shut as the huge smoothbore recoiled into the casemate. From Stone came a clang, and Jase saw infantryman dive for cover as the ten-inch ball struck the Yankee's slanted armor and bounded over their heads in a trail of sparks.

"Look at the Bee, sir!" Faren Smith called in delight. "Look at her take on that big Yankee!"

Jase turned to see the General Bee, flame shooting from her stacks, firing its guns as she ran along the side of the Clasher. The Eads ironclad hadn't reloaded its broadside yet and weren't able to reply. Jase saw the spar torpedo dip, saw Put-Up-Your-Dukes and another crewman wrestling with the ungainly butt-end of the spar. And then the torpedo splashed white as it hit the Yazoo, and the force of the water immediately wrenched it from the prizefighter's hands as it slewed under the Clasher's hull.

"My God," Jase said, knowing what was about to happen. He saw the boxer's arm jerk the lanyard, and then the river rose beneath the Yankee boat as the fifty pounds of gunpowder went off beneath its flat bottom.

Water splashed out the gunports, he saw, blasted up right through Clasher's bottom. The sound echoed off the trees. The explosion heeled Bee far over to starboard, and for a moment Jase's heart stopped as the tugboat was poised on the edge of a capsized. But then Bee righted itself, and the Clasher's gunports

filled with struggling figures as nearly two hundred crewmen tried to abandon ship at the same instant. Boilers began to thunder as river water found the fires. Steam gushed from every port. The two tall stacks toppled into the river. There was nothing to keep the Clasher afloat. It was made of iron, and it sank fast. In a few brief seconds, all that was left on the surface was foam and struggling figures.

Then Arcola and General Stone began to exchange broadsides, and the river filled with the sound of iron hammering iron. The infantry on Stone's casemate lowered their muskets and began to fire by platoon volleys, and Jase winced as musket balls whined off the pilot house. Faren Smith waited for the shooting to die down, then popped above the pilot house, leveled his rifle, and fired.

"Got an officer, sir," he said conversationally. "Only infantry, though."

The double-ender's bow gun fired, and the shot screamed overhead. There was a crash as it landed in trees. Jase glanced at the river bank to starboard, the cypress standing in the brown water. Gauged his motion. Felt sweat trickle down his nose. He tried to remember that the boat hesitated when the helm was put down hard, that she didn't answer the wheel directly.

"Hard a-port!" he called. "Engines ahead full. Run the Dahlgren out forrard. Starboard battery, stand by to fire at the gunboat."

Arcola heeled as the rudder bit water. General Bee maneuvered sharply to avoid collision as the ram crossed its bows. The starboard battery lashed out at the double-ender, but Jase's eyes were on the Stone.

"Rudder amidships. Steady as she goes."

Jase jerked around at the sound of a bang aft, afraid he'd been hit, but then he saw the plume of gunsmoke and realized that the Brooke rifle, trained aft, had fired as it bore on the double-ender. Bee, having crossed Arcola's wake, was aimed for the double-ender as well. Its bow gun barked out, and Jase saw splinters fly from the Yankee boat.

Jase returned his attention to the Stone. The Yankee's stern guns rolled out the ports as the Confederate ram fell into her wake, and both fired at almost the same instant. One hissing shot punched a hole in Arcola's starboard funnel. The other missed. Arcola's ten-inch Dahlgren fired in reply, and as the shot struck home Jase was pleased to hear the crack of broken iron plate.

The Yankee's rear armor wasn't as thick as that in front. If he could keep on the Stone's vulnerable tail, the huge Dahlgren was going to break down the enemy's defenses.

Cannon boomed as General Bee engaged the double-ender. Jase ignored it: Harry Klee was on his own.

Arcola's big bronze screws bit the water. Her speed grew. General Stone loomed closer, a gun-studded wall of iron.

"Brace for ramming!" Jase called.

Arcola smashed into Stone's stern with a sound like thunder, the ram's iron-plated beak punching through timber. Jase didn't think he could sink General Stone this way, but hoped he could disable the Yankee's rudder. If Stone lost its rudder, it might slew broadside-to-current and Jase could ram it broadside.

Iron shutters parted with a clang, and Stone's aft battery began to run out.

"Engines half ahead," Jase called. The boats drew apart as Stone's guns fired.

Jase felt Arcola shudder, heard oaken timbers crack. Arcola's bow gun blasted out again. Again there was that satisfying smash as the ten-inch solid struck home.

Faren Smith's Whitworth cracked. "Another officer," he reported, but then musket balls began to whine around the pilot house as the infantry atop the enemy leveled their weapons and began to fire. Jase hunched low, peering through the lowest slit at the looming enemy. He was acutely aware that he and Smith were the only targets a whole company of infantry could find to shoot at.

"Engines ahead full!"

Jase rammed again, jolting the Stone with another smashing blow from behind. A swarm of musket balls pelted the pilot house. Jase wondered if he should order the Dahlgren loaded with grapeshot and blow those footsoldiers off their perch,

but decided his best chance for ending the fight was to keep hammering at Stone's vulnerable stern.

This went on for at least fifteen minutes. General Stone plodded upriver, with Arcola pursuing, ramming her stern whenever the opportunity presented itself. Stone was going to have to do something: she was running in the wrong direction, deeper into enemy-held Mississippi, and the Confederate ram lay between the Yank and its base. But if Stone tried to turn around, Arcola would ram her broadside and put her on the bottom of the Yazoo.

"Sir! Sir!" Jase looked in surprise to see a powder-streaked Army lieutenant, the man called Euphemism. "That last shot knocked away the flagstaff!" Euphemism shouted. "Our flag's lying on the casemate where I can't reach it through the gunport!"

Jase winced as a musket ball whined through one of the pilot house slits, ricocheted off iron, then buried itself in the oaken coaming. "Very good, lieutenant," he said, unable to think of a remark more suitable to the occasion.

"Sir!" Euphemism sounded desperate. "It's not good at all! We're not flying a flag! The Yankees could think we're trying to surrender!"

Jase looked at Smith. Smith shrugged. "Let 'em," Jase said.

"No!" Euphemism shouted. "We've got to keep the flag flying!"

Jase watched in surprise as Euphemism chinned himself up to the open hatch atop, then sprang onto the casemate and ran aft. He picked up the remains of the flagstaff and stood straddling the casemate's spine, waving the flag like fury and shouting defiance at the Yanks.

"And the Navy flag, too," Jase said.

"Well," Faren Smith said, as surprised as Jase, "at least it gives the infantry someone else to shoot at."

And indeed the infantry seemed happy to devote their attention to Euphemism. He stood amid the bullets' hail as he shouted and waved his flag and his fist. The Yanks' efforts, however, did not seem blessed by any great accuracy. Though they shot off his cap, and at one point knocked him down, he just got back to his feet and yelled at them to try harder.

Finally the Dahlgren smoothbore did its work: the big gun boomed, and the thunderous concussion was followed by a crack, then a rapid series of clangs. The ten-inch solid shot had penetrated Stone's rear armor, traveled the length of the boat, then began bounding inside like a mad thing, upending guns, taking off arms and heads like the devil's own executioner. Once the boat's iron armor had been penetrated, the same armor that protected the ship from attack would not let the shot out: it bounced around inside, like a seed shaken in a gourd, until it got tired.

"Three cheers!" Jase shouted. "We've raked her!"

The third cheer rang out just as Stone began a lumbering turn. The raking shot had convinced the skipper he had to try something before the Dahlgren gutted his boat.

"Starboard your helm!" Jase called. "Ring for full ahead."

Arcola's ram caught the Stone dead amidships. There was the crash of timbers, the scream of tortured oak. "Engines half astern," Jase called. He suspected he hadn't gained quite enough momentum to do mortal damage. He backed Arcola for a cable's length while the Stone's paddle wheels thrashed white water in an effort to get the big boat around, and then Jase ordered full ahead and speared General Stone on the iron-sheathed ram.

There was a colossal wrench, a rending of timbers, a crash of machinery. Jase felt Arcola pitch forward, heard the gurgle of water as it crept up the casement. "Astern full!" he shouted. General Stone was filling with water and would drag Arcola to the bottom unless Jase could get the ram out of the enemy boat.

The ram's engines shuddered to a stop, then reversed with a hiss of steam. Jase felt his boat tilt downward. He could hear the gurgle and suck of water. He had to get the boat reversed before her screws pitched up out of the water. Stone's broadside guns roared, hammering Rebel iron. The big bronze screws turned the water white under Arcola's stern. Then, with a moan of broken timber, the ram pulled free. Water gushed into the enemy boat, and her crew began to pour out

her hatches.

"Port your helm! All stop!"

Silence fell on the torpid river, and then Jase heard the distant sound of two shots. General Bee's action with the double-ender was proceeding, out of sight, downstream.

And then Arcola's crew began to cheer. Jase leaned wearily against the side of the pilot house and grinned at Faren Smith.

"Well," he thought, "the boat is mine now, whatever anyone else might think."

12.  
King Lycus welcometh the Argonauts to the city

Accompanied by General Bee, Arcola pulled up to the levee below the fortress city of Vicksburg, protected by the hundred heavy guns on the city's red clay bluffs. Arcola sported a new flagstaff, jury-rigged by Euphemism, on which flaunted the bullet-torn Navy flag. Bee had reclaimed its coal barges, on which slouched about a hundred soggy Yankees picked up off the river. The rest of the Federals had got ashore and were wandering in the swamps of the Yazoo, where they would eventually be rounded up, no doubt, by the militia.

Harry Klee had won his running fight with the Yankee double-ender by putting an explosive shell into one of its paddleboxes. With one paddle wrecked, the gunboat had veered straight into the bank, where her crew had set her afire. The double-ender blew up when the fires reached its magazine, and its crew had joined the scattered refugees on the shore.

Bee was somewhat the worse for wear. Its stack was riddled and leaking, and its superstructure had been hit by enemy shot that had punched clean through the wood-sided tug, though without harming either its crew or its machinery. The Yanks' accuracy had put Klee in a temper, which he relieved by cursing at the prisoners as they were marched to the city under guard.

Jase sent Put-Up-Your-Dukes to the telegraph office to send a wire to Richmond announcing the victory, then mustered the two crews on the levee, lit a cigar, and called for Arcola's pay chest. But first, he took from his chest two letters he had been saving, each from Secretary of the Navy Stephen Mallory.

The first letter commissioned Arcola as a vessel in the Confederate Navy. The second placed Jase in command of her, and assigned him and Arcola to special duty on the Mississippi, as described in sealed orders to be opened later at the captain's discretion. Jase read the letters aloud to the assembled crewmen, then smiled and drew on his cigar as Faren Smith and Castor led the cheers.

"There," he thought, "let Pendergas try to get me out of the boat now."

He saw the Army crewmen exchanging uncertain glances, and saw the uncertainty increase as he ordered the muster rolls produced and the pay chest opened.

"In the Navy," he said, "we are entitled to head money for the crew of the Yankee boats we sank this morning. I have every expectation that Congress may award prize money as well. I intend to pay all Navy men their share, in advance, in silver. Unfortunately I can't do this for you Army boys..." He smiled.

"Unless, of course, you choose to enlist in the Navy and remain with Arcola. Ensign Klee—" Pointing with his cigar at Klee. "—will be happy to put you on our muster rolls. Now—" He cleared his throat and tried to look serious. "Some of you may wonder whether you can serve simultaneously in the Army and Navy. My own guess is that people like us need not worry about it, that these are matters for people in Richmond to fuss over. What I do know is that if you put your name on the dotted line yonder, you can receive your head money in silver. Anyone for the Navy—" He took off his straw boater and flourished it in Klee's direction.

"Form up before Mr. Klee!"

A cheer rose as the Army men broke ranks. Jase watched them and savored his cigar. He became aware that Euphemism was limping toward him.

"You're not wounded, I hope?" Jase said.

"A few scratches," Euphemism said, and patted at some tears in his uniform jacket. "The Yankees shot off the heel off my boot."

"That's a brave thing you did, sir," Jase said. "I won't venture to speak to its wisdom."

"Wise or not, it was necessary," Euphemism said briefly, and Jase wondered if it was necessary to the Cause, to the laws of war, or to Euphemism, a proof of his own courage under fire. The Army man held out his hand. "I wonder if I might see your orders, sir?"

Jase handed over the two letters from Secretary Mallory. Euphemism read them with a polite frown. "These appear to be perfectly genuine," he said. "But I observe that these are dated nearly a month ago."

"That is correct."

Euphemism looked up at Jase from beneath the brim of his cap. He stroked his mustache thoughtfully. "This usurpation of yours appears to have been planned in high places, sir."

Jase found himself in an expansive mood. "Let us say, Lieutenant, that you, I, and Richmond alike meditated on the capacities of General Pendergas, and came to identical conclusions. And furthermore, there is a mission to which Richmond has assigned us, and for I and my men have been hand picked."

"And your orders?"

"Sealed," Jase said. "I cannot open them at present. But the mission is vital to the Confederacy, and will be profitable for all concerned."

Euphemism frowned. "I would not have it said that I joined the Cause for mercenary motives, Captain Miller."

"I'm sure not. But naval custom permits reasonable profit in reward for hazard."

"But I am not in the Navy, sir."

Jase inclined his head toward the line that had formed before Harry Klee. "We can rectify that, Mr. Euphemism. We would enlist you as an ensign—that is the naval equivalent of your present Army rank—with your commission dating from this morning, before the fight on the Yazoo. Your position on Arcola will remain unchanged."

"I'm flattered, Captain." Euphemism tilted his head, affected to consider the offer. "I'm afraid not, sir," he said. "I fear I can serve a single master only."

"As you wish," Jase said. "But I hope you will remain on Arcola." The crew, Jase suspected, would admire Euphemism for his bravery, if nothing else.

"I will remain unless orders take me elsewhere."

"I'm happy to hear it." Jase offered Euphemism his hand, and Euphemism took it.

"By the way," he asked, "why do people call you Euphemism?"

The Army man stiffened. "My real name is Ronald Fux, sir. F-U-X, like the composer."

Jase tried very hard not to smile. He failed. "Very well, Lieutenant," he said.

"Welcome aboard."

"Your servant, sir." Touching his cap brim. "What happens next?"

Jase glanced uneasily up the river. "The crew will be permitted to celebrate tonight. But in the morning, I want everyone at stations. Once Farragut finds out I've sunk his boats, he's going to come looking for us. He's not one to let this sort of insult stand."

"Perhaps he will not find out."

Jase laughed. "He'll find out from our newspapers! I'm sure enterprising Vicksburg newsboys sell the local rags to the Yankees every day."

Euphemism's mustache gave a twitch. "I hadn't considered that."

"I think we'll be in a scrap before the week is out. Probably in two or three days."

There was a blare of brass on the bluff above their heads, and then the thump of a drum. "'Bonnie Blue Flag?'" Jase wondered aloud, "or 'Dixie?'"

Euphemism tilted his head, listened for a moment. "'Hail to the Chief,'" he said.

"I think you may be right."

The band came marching down the bluff to the river, followed by most of the town's civilian population. News had reached the population of Arcola's victory on the Yazoo.

Which meant, Jase thought as he doffed his boater to wave it at the crowd, that



Farragut would find out tomorrow.

13.

Jason seeketh the blind prophet Phineus, and finds him beset by Harpies

Tomorrow brought Pendergas, the Senator and his wife bellowing into town on a special early morning train. Jase traveled up the bluff to meet them at the headquarters of General Van Dorn, who commanded the department. Van Dorn was thin, shorter even than Jase, and pugnacious; he was an able general who had never won a battle, and Jase reckoned that Van Dorn wasn't about to win this one, either. Pendergas demanded his ironclad. Jase refused to give it to him, and showed his authorization from Secretary Mallory. Tobacco juice sprayed from Pendergas' lips as he shouted that Arcola did not belong to the Secretary of the Navy. Jase replied that, on the contrary, it did. Pendergas demanded that Van Dorn put Jase under arrest. Jase suggested that if he were to be placed under arrest, it should be the Department of the Navy, not the War Department, that should do it; and further offered the opinion that in light of the losing battles of Belmont, Forts Henry and Donaldson, New Orleans, Island No. Ten, Shiloh, Memphis, and Corinth—he tactfully avoided mention of Van Dorn's own defeat at Pea Ridge—he, Lt. Jase Miller, was the only successful Confederate commander west of Virginia, and that to place him under arrest would irretrievably damage the morale of the civilian population.

"Besides," Jase said, "my crew is personally loyal to me, and will fight for no one else."

"You bribed them!" Mrs. Pendergas roared.

"I paid them their wages," Jase said, "which is more than the Senator ever did."

"Snake in the grass!" she screamed, and went for his eyes. For the next few moments Jase dodged about General Van Dorn's office like the Bee beset by an Eads ironclad, until Van Dorn and the Senator between them got ahold of Madame Pendergas and wrestled her into a chair.

Van Dorn looked as if a twenty-pound Parrott rifle had just gone off next to his ear. "Gentlemen," he said, "this is out of my sphere. All I can do is wire Richmond."

"Your servant, sir," Jase said, saluted smartly, and made his way out.

In the street he asked directions, then walked east of the courthouse to a smart town house in the Empire style, with Corinthian capitals atop the pillars of its marbled portico and a truly astonishing array of flowers in the garden, all blossoming beneath a bronze statue of a nude Venus poised atop a fountain. The house, according to the bronze plate at the front gate, was called Lemnos.

A thickset, middle-aged woman opened the door to Jase's knock. She wore black mourning silks, and the frown on her face, so deep it looked as if it had been scarred into her with a knife, did not so much as twitch as Jase introduced himself and asked to speak to Phineas Proffitt Thackeray, former governor of the Territory of Missouri, onetime US emissary to the Sublime Porte and the Court of St. James, and member of the Cabinet under Jackson and Van Buren.

The woman's eyes gave a disdainful flicker. "The governor doesn't see anyone."

"I carry a letter from the Secretary of the Treasury," Jase said.

The woman gave a sniff, then stood away from the door. "You can come in, then, I suppose."

The house, Jase noted, was one of those in which the doorframes had been carefully painted to look like expensive imported wood instead of the cypress it probably was. The woman in black led Jase through the house and out the back door, where there was another extravagant garden, fountains and trellises, vines, flowers, and tinkling water. Governor Thackeray sat in the sun in a wrought-iron chair. He was a rail-thin elderly man with a long white beard and thick shoulder-length hair combed back off his forehead. His suit was of a slightly old-fashioned cut. Despite the thick summer heat he wore a blanket around his shoulders.

A woman sat next to him, reading aloud from a book. She wore a wide straw hat

and carried a parasol against the sun. She was younger than the other woman, blonde and pretty, with a full, pouting lower lip. She wore white against the other's black.

The governor's head snapped up at the sound of Jase's boots on the garden's brick walk. "Who is this, daughter?" he asked.

The woman in black answered. "It's a Lt. Miller of the Treasury," she said.

"Of the Navy Department, ma'am" Jase said.

The woman glared at him. "He said Treasury, father."

"Miller of the Arcola?" the younger woman asked. "Why, you're a hero!"

The older woman's deep frown turned deeper still. The governor rose from his chair, offered his hand. With the blanket around his shoulders he looked dignified as a Roman senator in his toga.

"Honored to meet you, sir," the governor said.

"The honor is mine."

"Permit me to introduce my daughters. This—" Nodding toward the younger. "Is Harpina. And you have already met—" Turning to the woman in mourning. "Mrs. Hellstrom."

"Honored," Jase said. Harpina bobbed him a curtsy, but Jase barely noticed it. Something about the governor had drawn his attention. When he had turned to his older daughter, he had not quite faced her—his stern gaze had gone off at a slight angle. And when Jase looked at his eyes, he saw the blue-white film over the pupils. Cataracts.

Governor Thackeray, he realized with a kind of chill, was blind.

"Sit down, sir," the governor said. He sat, rearranged his blanket. "Lyncea—" To the older daughter. "Bring Lt. Miller a chair."

"I have a letter from the Secretary of the Treasury," Jase said as Lyncea went for a servant.

"Give it to Harpina," the governor said. "My daughters are useless, stupid women, the both of them, but at least their eyes are sound."

Jase reluctantly handed the letter to Harpina, not knowing if she was exactly the person in whom to confide the Treasury's secrets. Harpina marked her place in the book with a feather, and broke the seal on the envelope. "This is to introduce Lt. Miller," she said, "who has the confidence of the Government in the matter of the shipment from Nashville..."

14.

The tale of the Golden Fleece is related

Earlier that year, on the 16th day of February, twelve thousand Confederate soldiers surrendered to General U.S. Grant at Fort Donelson, opening all of central and western Tennessee to Union occupation. Panic descended on Nashville as its tiny Confederate garrison tried to evacuate vast amounts of military stores in the face of terrified mobs. Amid the biscuit, saddles, salt pork, arms, and rifling machines sent at the last minute out of the city were thirty-five million dollars in gold and silver shipped by special train to Memphis.

The money joined another thirty million dollars in the city's vaults, the entire amount now defended by the River Defense Fleet of the Confederate Army, the River Defense Fleet that the North's Flag Officer Davis had sunk with so little trouble in June. At the last possible hour, Jase was told, Governor Thackeray, acting on his own initiative, managed to get the 65 million dollars onto a boat heading downriver to Vicksburg. But the boat had broken down south of Helena, and the gold and silver had been taken ashore and buried in a location known only to the governor. But since then the river north of Vicksburg had been patrolled by the Union, and it had been impossible to retrieve the money. But now the balance of power had changed. Arcola ruled the river. And Governor Thackeray was supposed to lead Jase to the South's buried fortune.

But Governor Thackeray was blind. How he could find a buried treasure in the tangled wilderness of the Mississippi flood plain—or even to have buried it in

the first place—was more than Jase could imagine.

Harpina finished reading the letter—fortunately it was couched in euphemism—and then she giggled. "Sounds like a conspiracy," she said.

"Hush!" her sister snapped. "Don't talk about what you don't understand."

Harpina tossed her head. "I can say what I like," she said. "It's clear from the letter that daddy is supposed to take Lt. Miller to something the Treasury wants, but I don't know how he can lead Lt. Miller anywhere, blind as he is..."

"It is not necessary to go on about our father's affliction," said Lyncea. "This letter has to do with the Sacred Cause of our nation, and your speculations are unseemly and foolish. You'll be rattling your featherbrained notions all over town, and probably getting everything wrong..."

"Fiddlesticks," said Harpina. "And fiddlesticks to your Cause, too."

Lyncea reddened. "How dare you speak disrespectfully of the Cause! The Cause for which my husband and his brothers gave their lives!"

"My intended is in a Yankee prison, but I don't go moping about, or let it interfere with my life."

"Obviously," Lyncea said.

"Leave us," the governor said forcefully, "the both of you. Go and get dinner ready—our guest will be staying."

The two ladies left, glaring at each other.

"My second family," the governor said. "My first, the children I made when I was young, either died or disgraced me. So I married again, and this—" He shook his shaggy head. "This is the result. The silliest, stupidest creatures ever born. My son—" His face hardened, and acid entered his voice. "The war has taken my son. And my third daughter is a perfect savage, the most wayward and self-willed reptile ever to reject civilization—she will not live even in as settled a place as Vicksburg. What a brood God has given me! What a vile travesty of a family to beset a man in his old age!"

Jase could think of no response. An old blind man, he considered, had every reason to be bitter.

But the governor seemed to have forgotten his audience. "A travesty of a family," he said, "in a travesty of a country. I argued against this war—I addressed the legislature, sir!—but they scorned me. They do not know the North as I do. They did not realize how well those men would fight, or know that the North has its own genius. All they heard was their own vainglorious words, their own foolish defiance. And the war has shown that I was right. With the exception of Manassas and the Seven Days, there has been only one defeat after another." He gave a savage laugh. "Those fools in Memphis made no effort to secure the gold in the bank vaults! The gold! They believed the River Defense Fleet was invincible, that Memphis would never fall! They thought my warnings absurd. They left it to me!—to me, the man who despises them all. Fortunately I was a director of three Memphis banks, and could act. Well, if the gold is safe now, and if Mississippi can survive another year without suffering devastation and occupation, it is on account of me, the man our wise leaders despised as a compromiser and a Unionist! And you, sir—"

The man's blind eyes snapped to Jase, staring right at him, and Jase felt himself take a breath.

"So," the governor said, "I hear your Arcola is invincible, just like the River Defense Fleet."

"I hope never to test the assumption, sir," Jase said.

The governor gave a skeletal grin. "That is not an answer typical of your class."

"I am not a typical officer. That is why I've received this assignment."

"And your plans for recovering the specie?"

"Farragut will come after my boat," Jase said. "He isn't the sort of man to permit his ships to be sunk without striking back. If we survive his assault, then I will try to get Arcola up the river, to the place you direct."

"You will take me along."

Jase hesitated "Sir?"

"I want to be free of those two bitches of mine. If I don't get out of this place, they'll either finish me off with an apoplexy, or I'll kill them with my

bare hands."

"Sir," Jase said, and fumbled with his thoughts. "Forgive me—but I wonder—your daughter Miss Harpina seemed to imply that you will be incapable of leading us to the treasure."

The governor gave a thin-lipped smile. "I can't. But I can lead you to the person who can, and for that you will have to take me to my plantation Delrío."

"And where is Delrío, sir?"

"Forty miles up the river."

With two Federal fleets in between, Jase thought. Now that was cause for thought.

Dinner followed. Lyncea and Harpina bickered the entire time. Governor Thackeray seemed so disgusted by the performance that he ate little more than two bites of the meal that Lyncea insisted on cutting for him. Before the meal was quite finished, Jase had enough: he looked at his watch, announced that he was late for a meeting, and excused himself. Harpina walked him to the door. She reached for the knob, then her boot seemed to catch on the carpet and she pitched backwards, into Jase's arms.

She looked up at him and giggled. "Are you sure you have to leave?" she asked. "Wouldn't you rather have a nice fuck?"

Jase considered the warm girl in his arms. "Aren't you to be married?" he asked. "My fiancé was captured at Fort Donelson. He wouldn't mind if I go on enjoying myself. And don't worry about my Daddy—he'll growl and spit, but I think he really enjoys hearing about these things."

Jase set Harpina on her feet. "I really must go."

She thrust out her lower lip. Jase kissed her hand before he left, and was glad to be gone.

15.

Jason seeketh guidance from the pilot Dascylus

Pendergas came to Arcola's berth the next day to make a speech from the levee, and win back the hearts of his crew: the Army men ignored him, and the Navy men jeered. Van Dorn sat in his headquarters and did nothing. And that night, Farragut came down the Mississippi with his whole fleet, all the huge black sea-going frigates with their towering masts, their wooden hulls, and their long, flashing broadsides.

Farragut wanted no part of Arcola, that was clear. He kept to the right bank, away from the ram and Vicksburg's river batteries. His ships were silhouetted by bonfires the rebels had prepared on the far bank, and Arcola and Vicksburg's hundred guns fired away for over an hour while the Federals fired back. Only an occasional shot rang on Arcola's armor: it was likely that in the dark, with all targets obscured by gunsmoke, the Federals had no clear idea where Arcola was berthed, and apparently they weren't about to venture close enough to find out. Dawn light revealed no wreckage, no toppled masts or gutted hulls, and this suggested that the Federals had paraded past Vicksburg without loss to themselves. The Confederates had suffered nothing except for six men wounded by a gun bursting in one of the river batteries.

Vicksburg, apparently, was saved. Farragut was taking his wooden ships back to salt water. The band marched forth for another impromptu parade, and the people of the town swarmed into the batteries and down to the waterfront to rain on their heroes both garlands and whiskey.

In the midst of the celebrations came a telegram from Richmond announcing Jase's promotion to commander, which Jase hoped Van Dorn would take as an indication of the government's attitude toward his usurpation of the Arcola.

The next day Van Dorn invited him to headquarters. "Arcola's very presence has driven half the Yanks off the river," he said, "and you've sunk a significant fraction of the second half. With Arcola on the river, all the Northern garrisons are cut off from their support. With your cooperation, Captain Miller, I propose an immediate descent of the river, with my forces and yours, to

recapture Baton Rouge and New Orleans."

"General," Jase said, "I'm afraid that my orders take me up the river, not down. Once I complete my mission, however, you may consider Arcola at your disposal."

"Up the river?" Van Dorn narrowed his eyes. "May I know the nature of this mission, Captain Miller?"

"I regret to say, General, that my orders do not permit me to give you that information."

The general's brows narrowed. He stroked his pointed imperial. "But surely nothing could possibly take precedence over the recovery of Louisiana? The campaign would be over in a matter of weeks, and then you could proceed upriver on your mission—and with my army accompanying."

"I can't disappoint Richmond, sir."

"Whatever it is they've ordered you to do, I'm sure Richmond would be far more pleased with New Orleans returned to the Confederacy."

"Sir, I regret that I can't oblige you."

Van Dorn's dark face flushed darker still. "You are refusing? And if I should put my request in the form of an order?"

"I should be unable to oblige."

"Damn it, man!"

Van Dorn argued, then stormed, then raged. Jase held firm. "If you force me, I will put General Pendergas in command of the ram!" Van Dorn said.

Jase shook his head. "With Pendergas in command of Arcola, you'll be lucky to hang on to Mississippi, let alone take Louisiana."

"I'll find someone else! Vicksburg is full of river men!"

"None who have the confidence both of the people and of Richmond," Jase said.

Van Dorn glared. "You presume a damned great deal for a junior officer!" he said.

Jase saluted. "Your servant, sir."

Bell, book, and candle shall not drive me back, he thought, When gold and silver beckons me to come on.

He returned to Arcola to find that Harry Klee had located a Mississippi River pilot to take them upstream. He was a plump, comfortable-looking man named Dashiell, who had spent eight years piloting boats along the great river before the war before retiring at the opening of hostilities. He knew the way to Delrío Landing perfectly well.

"At night?" Jase asked.

"Certainly."

"Do you know a place where we might hide Arcola in the daytime?"

Dashiell considered. "There is a towhead called Ajax Bar just above Fitler Bend. I figure it ain't more'n two miles from Delrío Landing. The river's at a high stage, so I reckon we can get your boat into the channel behind the towhead. The towhead's covered with willows and cottonwood, so I don't guess anyone will see you from the river." He shrugged. "It's been over a year since I've had any reason to investigate Ajax Bar, so the soundings may have changed or silted up entirely. But Ajax is your best bet. If not, I can tuck you behind Stack Island or Pittman Island."

"Can you show me on a map?"

"If you have a map, certainly." Dashiell put one plump finger to his forehead.

"Though, if I may say so, sir, the only useful map is here. And that is what you are purchasing with what, if your mate is to be believed, is certainly a highly generous consideration. Certainly a sum to make it worth my leaving retirement."

Jase smiled and offered Dashiell one of Senator Pendergas' cigars. "Well, Mr. Dashiell," he said, "if your map is as correct as you think it is, the government's money is well spent. And if it's not—" He grinned. "I reckon I'll just have to shoot you."

Dashiell's lips parted in a smile, and then he caught sight of the look in Jase's green eyes, and the smile froze on his lips.

"Harry," Jase said to Klee, "I need you ashore. We must pay a visit to Governor Thackeray."

16.

The Argo entereth the hostile sea

Arcola and General Bee steamed out of Vicksburg late that afternoon, cruising at easy speed on the wide silver water. The crew stood at quarters, guns loaded and run out. Harry Klee had constructed another spar torpedo, and it stood poised on its boom above the Bee's foredeck. Bee towed its two coal barges—any coal supply available upriver would be one they would have to fight for. Though none of Flag Officer Davis's Yankee ironclads had been seen in these waters since Farragut had taken his deep-water flotilla downriver, that did not mean they weren't lurking somewhere about, or waiting for Arcola to leave the sheltering batteries of Vicksburg and to expose itself to destruction.

General Bee took the lead, ranging a mile or two ahead as a scout. If Bee ran into trouble, she'd give Arcola warning, then run back and fall in behind her armor.

Governor Thackeray lay in a hammock swung between two of the broadside guns. Jase and Klee had taken him away from his protesting daughters that afternoon. When the old man's feet had faltered on the road leading down from Vicksburg's bluff, Harry Klee picked him up and carried him easily as he would have carried a child.

Night fell, and the two vessels skimmed along the starlit channel. They were in a kind of no-man's land—there was no Federal garrison south of Helena, but neither was there any Confederate force in the area other than some local units of militia. The North had commanded the river till now, ironclads and gunboats moving freely on the water, and the only reason they had not planted troops on the soil of Mississippi or Arkansas was that they had not thought the soil worth the taking.

No vessel, belonging to either nation, was seen on the river. Dawn found Arcola hovering in deep soundings off the southern point of Ajax Bar, a long narrow sandy island, crowded with vegetation and hard by the Mississippi bank of the river. Dashiell took Bee behind the bar to make soundings, and then, when the depth of the water proved sufficient, the tug returned to tow Arcola into the narrow channel.

The ironclad dropped anchor and swung in the brisk current that scoured the chute behind the island. There was nothing but wilderness to be seen: no homes, no fields, no boats, nothing made by man, just cottonwoods and willows that trailed their branches in the brown water.

Jase had warps carried out to Ajax Bar and to the Mississippi shore to keep the ram in the deepest part of the chute. Canvas awnings were spread to keep the crew from cooking in their iron box. Harry Klee, left aboard Arcola in command, was warned to post lookouts on the island, to keep a weather eye for Yankees, and to pay close attention to the stage of the river. Jase didn't want Arcola stranded here should the Mississippi fall.

Klee brought one of the coal barges alongside and began the process of refilling Arcola's bunkers. A trained crew could shift eight tons of coal per hour, using shovels alone: Jase would be happy with half that. Jase shaved, changed his shirt, and transferred to General Bee. Klee carried Governor Thackeray over to join him. The tug carried them upriver, past Ben Lomond and Stack Island, to Delrío Landing, where Jase stepped ashore with Faren Smith and Put-Up-Your-Dukes, whose swollen, blackened jaw was still bound in a handkerchief. Together they helped the governor ashore. Faren Smith walked arm-in-arm with the blind man, and carried his Whitworth rifle in the crook of the other arm.

Delrío's levee was at least a mile from the landing, through thick country. The river had once flowed through this area, but in the recent past the river crabbed over toward Arkansas, stranding the plantation far inland. Once Jase climbed the levee he saw, from what had once been the edge of the river, a live-oak alley leading to a many-chimneyed plantation house. Jase walked through the alley, past the strange, contorted live-oaks, their limbs warped into fantastic, deformed shapes as if by some sinister magic.

The black footman who answered the governor's knock wore livery and sweated beneath a white periwig. "Sir!" he said in surprise. "Take me to the garden," said the old man, "and tell my daughter I am here."

17.

Jason meeteth the Princess Medea

"I like a garden," Thackeray said, as he took his seat, amid a profusion of blossoms, in a cane chair. "I put a large garden planted in all my homes after my sight began to fail." He threw his head back and stared unblinkingly, defiantly, at the morning sun. "The scent of the flowers brings back pleasant memories." He looked down, scowled. "And helps to obliterate unpleasant ones." "They shall sit every man under his vine," Jase said, "and under his fig tree." A woman appeared, hurrying toward them from beneath a vine-covered arch. The governor glanced sharply in her direction at the sound of her boots on the brick walkways.

"This is my youngest daughter," the old man said. "'Melia." Jase lifted his boater off his head. The young woman curtsied.

She was a small, brown-skinned girl. She wore a ragged straw bonnet with a frayed ribbon, a worn brown cotton sack dress belted around her waist with a rope, and an old pair of heavy leather gloves crusted with the black soil of the Mississippi Delta. She carried a garden spade in one hand, and perched on her nose were round smoked spectacles that concealed her eyes. Jase wondered if eye problems ran in the family.

"Pardon my appearance," 'Melia said to Jase. "I was working in my garden." The governor looked stern. "We have servants for that sort of thing, 'Melia," he said.

"I like working in the garden, father," she said. "The servants never get it the way I like it."

The governor leaned back, inhaled the scent of the blossoms. "It is a splendid garden, that's true. More fragrant than our other houses. And the sound of the wind through the blossoms is remarkably soothing." He nodded. "You have the gift, 'Melia, to be sure."

He turned to Jase with one of those piercing, unnerving looks that seemed so impossible in a blind man. "This is Captain Miller, daughter," he said. "He is the man the Navy has sent to take you upriver."

'Melia curtsied again as Jase looked at her in surprise. "You, Miss?" he said. "You know where the—" His tongue stumbled.

She looked at him through her eerie smoked spectacles. "Where the gold is hidden? Yes. I was my father's eyes on that journey, and hid the gold myself."

"I have to give 'Melia the credit," the governor said "The Yankees would have got it all if it hadn't been for her efforts." His lip curled. "Not that it might not be better if they had. If the Confederate government gets its hand on this money, they will use it only to prolong this ruinous folly of a war."

"Better it should be spent on our follies than the Yanks'," Jase said.

Amusement tilted the corners of 'Melia's mouth. "Have you any particular follies in mind, Captain Miller?"

He bowed. "I am open to suggestions, miss."

The old man's blind eyes favored them each with a savage glare. "You have no time for follies, either of you. I imagine the captain will want to steam upriver tonight, and you should make yourself ready for the journey."

'Melia gave Jase an inquiring look. "Yes," he said. "Tonight, if that is possible. The less time spent waiting on the river, the less time in which we can be detected by a Yankee patrol."

"Make yourself ready, then," the governor said. "Tell the servants to prepare dinner." He gave a sniff. "And change your clothes, girl! I'm sure you look as if you just walked out of a swamp."

18.

Blind Phineus doth prophesy

"Absurdity!" Governor Thackeray said over dinner. "Madness! To put all your money on slavery!" The governor snorted. "Utter foolishness—a nation of slaves in the modern world."

Jase and 'Melia looked at each other. The custom at dinner, it seemed, was that guests listened while the governor declaimed. 'Melia gave Jase a wry, apologetic smile and looked down at her plate.

She did not wear her smoked spectacles indoors. Her eyes were brown, with pupils wide as saucers. She had changed into an elegant silk princess gown, with puffed sleeves that showed off her tiny hands. Small and quick and elegantly dressed, she hardly seemed the uncivilized creature of the woods that her father had described.

Like good sailors, Faren Smith and Put-Up-Your-Dukes were paying attention mainly to their dinners. But the boxer, Jase noted, chewed carefully, and only on one side of his mouth.

"I should have anticipated it," the governor continued. "Slavery is the way to wealth for the mediocre man. A genius will make a success of himself no matter what his situation, but for a man of modest talents there is no more certain way to wealth than through exploiting the labor of his fellow men. The mediocre need slavery to prosper, and because they need it, they will fight for it. And," sighing heavily, "the mediocre, by definition, outnumber the rest of us."

A periwigged servant offered asparagus from a Sevres platter. Jase waved him away, and turned to the governor.

"You talk as if you weren't a planter yourself."

"I started as a planter, sir," the old man said. "I took eighty niggers over the passes from Virginia, marched them down the Natchez Trace, and carved out my first plantation when the Louisiana Purchase was young. And I've built other plantations since, up and down the river. But I knew the future wasn't in it—once I'd made my fortune I sold all but one of my first plantations and put my money into shipping, banking, and manufacturing. I currently own seven plantations, but four of those are outfits to which I made loans and on which I subsequently had to foreclose. The war will destroy all seven, I expect, and the houses in Vicksburg and Natchez. Good riddance." He gave a dreamy smile. "I will miss the gardens, though."

Faren Miller signed to one of the servants to bring him more sliced duck. 'Melia turned to Jase. "Do you have slaves yourself?"

"No," Jase said, "but I'm no abolitionist. I've met any number of men who deserve to be enslaved."

She nodded. "So have I."

He wondered if he could shock Miss 'Melia, if it were possible to shock anyone in this family.

"I did not mean Africans only," Jase said.

She looked at him sidelong through her narrow eyes. "Neither did I," she said.

The governor laughed at this, and his amusement rang down the table.

19.

Medea's history is related

Governor Thackeray offered Jase and his men guest rooms in which to rest for the evening's voyage, but Jase said he'd rather rest in one of the garden's viney arbors, a sentiment of which the governor seemed to approve. Jase found a couch in a garden pavilion covered with white gingerbread, fancy as a river steamer, and took a few hours' sleep. The sound of boot-heels on the walkway woke him, and he looked up to see Miss 'Melia moving along the walk with a basket in her hand. She had taken off her silks, and wore instead a split riding skirt, a businesslike white blouse, a bow tie, and her smoked spectacles. She entered beneath the same arching trellis through which he'd first seen her, and vanished



from sight.

Jase buttoned his jacket and followed after.

He found her in a herb garden, bending beneath the statue of a bearded Greek who carried a phial in each hand, as if offering them. Polished brass snakes wrapped each of his arms. 'Melia looked up at the sound of Jase's approach, but did not rise.

"Did I wake you, Captain Miller?" she said. "If so, I apologize."

Jase tipped his boater. "I wasn't asleep," he said. "May I help you?"

"That won't be necessary. I am taking some stone-root to make a poultice for your Mr. Jackson. I don't think his jaw is healing properly, and your surgeon's mate is only giving him willow bark." She stood, placed roots into her basket.

"I have given him poppy to ease the pain, then I will tie two of his teeth together to align his jaw properly. After which the stone-root will help reduce his swelling."

"Your father didn't mention you were accomplished in such things," Jase said. He looked about the garden, recognized peppermint, sage, comfrey, bayberry, thyme...

She tilted her head, smiled. "I'm very accomplished, I fear. I can call this modest plant stone-root, or horse-root, or souche du cheval, or collinsonia canadensis, if you like." She stiffened, and her look turned defiant. "At one time I studied to be a physician. Since medical schools will not accept women, I studied under Dr. MacHaon in Natchez before his death. When the war began I offered my services to the Confederate medical service, but they declined to employ me."

"How shortsighted of them," Jase said.

"I couldn't help but be an improvement over the butchers the government did employ," she said tartly. "I have seen the lists of casualties. The healthy die of camp fever, and the wounded of sepsis. A little knowledge applied with intelligence, and so many could be saved ... but it's all being bungled, as the entire war is being bungled."

Jase detected in 'Melia's words an echo of her father's bitterness.

There was a moment of silence, and then her defiance eased. "Well," she said.

"At least I keep my father healthy, and all our people." She pointed at a bushy flowering plant with bell-shaped flowers. "This is belladonna. A lovely flower, isn't it? I used it to dilate my father's pupils when he began to go blind—it enabled him to see around the cataract, until it grew."

"I thought it was poison," Jase said. "Deadly nightshade."

"All poisons have their uses. I have a great many poisons in my garden—here is foxglove, here is poppy. Datura you will know, perhaps as Jamestown or Jimson weed. I have taken all of them myself, and recorded the symptoms to add to the medical literature."

He looked at her in surprise. "Wasn't that dangerous?"

"Of course it was." Impatiently. "But it's common among medical people to experiment on themselves, and it's one of the ways those of us—" Her mouth twisted. "—who cannot practice, may nonetheless be of use. At any rate, I survived. The experience in each case was not entirely unpleasant. Poisons may liberate the spirit, even as they suppress or stimulate the body."

She looked up at the statue of the Greek. "This is Asclepius, the Father of Medicine. He offers the vials of Gorgon's blood that were given him by Athene. One heals, the other kills. But which is which? Medicine has its paradoxes, you see."

"If I were your father," Jase said, "I wouldn't have let you do it."

"My father does not compromise," 'Melia said. "He cannot—it is not in his blood—and his blood runs in my veins. I do nothing by halves. If I study medicine, I don't half-study it, I don't say, this of the vials of Asclepius is for me, and the other I reject. One must know death in order to know life."

"Death comes soon enough, it seems to me."

"I would rather be dead in truth, than dead in spirit." She reached into her pocket, withdrew some seeds. "Blue morning glory," she said. "Would you like some? I take it when reality grows too oppressive."

Jase looked down at the seeds he had been told were deadly poison, would either

kill him or turn him raving mad, then looked up into 'Melia's round dark spectacles. "No thank you, miss," he said. "I guess I need a clear head to get us up the Mississippi."

"So you do." She put two of the seeds in her mouth, dropped the remainder in her pocket, and put her arm through his. "Now walk with me to your crewman, and we'll see what I can do for his poor jaw."

20.

Medea joineth fortunes with Jason

"You need not stop here on your return," Governor Thackeray said. "I will be comfortable enough with my garden and my retainers."

"What if the Yankees come?" 'Melia asked. "They'll burn Delrío down and steal the servants."

"They can burn it, for all I care, and me in it," the governor said, cheerfully enough. "We can all go to Hell together."

'Melia left her father, came aboard General Bee in her split riding skirt, and was made a guest of the wardroom. Put-Up-Your-Dukes—whose jaw already seemed to have reduced its swelling—carried her small valise and a leather medical bag filled with her instruments and potions. The tug returned to the waiting Arcola, Jase and 'Melia transferred to the ram, and Arcola raised its anchor, backed slowly from behind Ajax Bar, and started its journey northward just as the sun turned the horizon scarlet.

Miss 'Melia was given the same hammock her father had occupied, and in the light of the battle lanterns she swung demurely in its embrace, her tiny booted feet clear of the deck. When Jase ventured from the pilot house to the gun deck he found her enjoying the polite attentions of the officers, particularly Lt. Euphemism. She was in a laughing mood, pupils broad as gunports as she nibbled the morning glory seeds in her pocket.

At dawn, Dashiell slipped Arcola behind a towhead near a place called Myrtle Grove. The stacks of the two boats towered over the flat country, and the crew were sent up to wreath them in greenery in hopes that, at a sufficient distance, the stacks might pass for trees.

Jase had awnings spread to keep the summer sun off the iron casemate, gave the crew breakfast, then had them transfer coal from the barge to Arcola's bunkers. After several hours' rest, Jase ordered dinner prepared, then mustered the crew of both boats on Arcola's gun deck. He stood on a box so everyone could see him. Being a short man amid all these hulking bruisers had its disadvantages.

"You know that we have all been chosen for a special mission," Jase said. "And what I am now happy to tell you is that the special mission involves gold! Gold and silver!"

The crewmen murmured as their eyes glittered in the light of the sun shining through the gunports. Jase reckoned he had succeeded in attracting their attention.

"After the Yanks took Memphis," he went on, "sixty-five million dollars' worth of Confederate gold and silver, all in coin, was buried upriver from here. And it was this young lady—" Pointing with his hat at 'Melia. "—who, with her father, buried the money and can lead us to the hiding place. We are assigned to recover it! We are going to return to Vicksburg ballasted not with pig iron, but with silver dollars and gold eagles!"

The casemate buzzed with the sound of the crew talking among themselves. Jase signaled Castor to blow his pipe and order the men to silence. Jase gave them a feral smile as they grew quiet.

"I have negotiated for us a generous share as prize money, and arranged that the money shall be shared out as soon as we complete our mission in Vicksburg. So keep a sharp lookout, and we'll all be rich men."

More sensation. Jase had the crew dismissed, then escorted Miss 'Melia to dinner in General Bee's wardroom.

"You have got your men in a state of excitement," 'Melia said later, as she

strolled beneath the awnings with Jase on the tug's afterdeck. "They didn't know why they were going upriver till now?"

Jase put a hand on the breech of the tug's twenty-pound Parrott rifle. "They knew there was money in it," he said. "They trusted me for the rest."

"If it were up to me," 'Melia said, looking at him through her smoked spectacles, "I would have reported the money sunk, and kept the location a secret till the end of the war. It was my father who insisted on making a report to the government. He doesn't care about any of us—he takes pleasure in the thought of everything being destroyed by the war, his family as well as the rest. He passes on the money as if it's a curse."

Jase looked down at her. "You're very frank."

She laughed. "Mendacity is too exhausting unless there's a point to it. I know what I want, and I don't see why I should conceal it."

Jase stepped close to her. "What is it you want, then, Miss 'Melia?"

She leaned one elbow on the Parrott rifle. A smile tweaked at the corners of her mouth. "Remembrance is a treacherous thing," she smiled. "And one piece of the Mississippi looks very much like another. It would be a pity if my memory were inadequate to the situation—I'd have to stay upriver, perhaps till after the war. And then the money would be lost, at least to the Confederacy."

Jase nodded. This wasn't entirely unexpected. "I believe," he said, "that Secretary Benjamin understands that in wartime, things can go astray. Sacks of coins are awkward things, hard to move from one place to the next. They can get lost. I reckon that as long as the bulk of the money gets to Vicksburg, the government will be grateful enough."

She put her arm in his. "I am used to accepting masculine guidance in money matters," she said. "Perhaps I should follow your example, then, and take a share equal to yours."

"I will see that it happens."

She looked up at him. "And you, Captain Miller? What is it you want—with the money?"

"There's no point in buying agricultural land," Jase said. "The price'll drop after the war, no matter who wins. I figure to buy property in port towns—there will be shipping under us or under the Yanks. Maybe buy a boat yard in Charleston or Mobile after the blockade drives the prices down. Build blockade runners—blockade runners are the way to make money in this war. But you want to just buy shares in many ships, you don't want to own the things outright. That way you don't lose too much money when the ship is captured. Because they will all be captured, sooner or later."

"I can see you have thought this out."

"I try to keep ahead of people," Jase said. "Keep the bulge on 'em, and they'll do what you want."

"So this whole business is just a means to an end?" she asked. "Arcola, the battle, this crew, my father, my self? Just a way to make yourself rich?"

Jase said nothing, just looked at her.

"Captain," 'Melia said, "you are beginning to interest me."

21.

Herakles abandoneth the expedition

Night began to fall, and Arcola maneuvered from behind its hiding place and began its journey upriver. General Bee forged ahead as a scout. At three bells of the morning watch, a cool northern wind began to drift across the river, and Jase saw feathers of fog rising from the warm surface of the water. He cursed under his breath, and hoped that Harry Klee would drop back and rejoin them. The mist rose, thickened, grew dense. The stars vanished as the fog closed overhead. Jase ordered ahead slow, and the ironclad crept ahead, barely making progress against the current. Leadsman were sent forward to sound the water's depth. Dashiell, sitting next to Jase on the pilothouse roof with his legs dangling into the casemate, seemed to navigate purely by memory, enhanced by glimpses of

the shore revealed by gaps in the fog.

Damn, Jase thought. Where is General Bee?

"Scrubgrass Crossing," Dashiell said. "Port your helm. Ring the engine room for more turns."

Castor, eyes wide in the iron-sheathed darkness of the casemate, obeyed in silence. He and everyone else aboard could only hope that the pilot wasn't as blind as they.

"Silence there!" Jase said, over the chant of the leadsmen. "Listen!"

There was a thrashing noise ahead, heard only barely through the sounds of Arcola under way, the thud of the engines and swirl of water over the prow.

"Side-wheeler," Dashiell whispered.

A Yankee. Bee had a screw, not paddle wheels. Jase heard a bell ring, heard the call of a leadsmen whose accent marked his birthplace as north of the Ohio.

"Half less three! By the mark three!"

"Wheel amidships," Dashiell called to Castor in a voice barely above a whisper.

Then he leaned next to Jase. "We're making the crossing at the same time. God preserve us from a collision."

"Stand by, the bow gun," Jase ordered, and hoped that it wasn't one of the huge Eads ironclads out there, something big enough to bash in even Arcola's reinforced bows.

The thrashing paddle wheels grew louder. Jase's hands clenched on the edges of the pilothouse. His mouth was dry.

"There!" Dashiell's hand was on his arm. "There, to port!" Briefly the fog parted, and Jase saw the Yankee's silhouette just as she passed: a lean, narrow boat, with twin stacks and a pilot house stacked high with sandbags.

One of the Yankees' fast wooden river rams, part of the same squadron to which Arcola had once belonged.

The ram disappeared into the mist astern. Jase held his breath, listening for sounds of an alarm.

Nothing, nothing but the thrashing of the paddles and the receding chant of the leadsmen. Arcola hadn't been seen.

"Port your helm." Dashiell whispered the order.

"They're looking for us," Jase said. "They know we're on the river."

And he wondered if the Yanks knew what Arcola was looking for.

22.

Medea guideth Jason to the Golden Fleece

Dawn found Arcola still blind in the fog. Wet soaked through Jase's jacket, dripped from his hair and the brim of his hat. He ignored his misery, his nerves strung taut for the sound of a Yankee squadron.

"That's Laconia to port," Dashiell said. "I've taken you as far as I can, without clearer instruction."

"Pass the word for Miss Thackeray," Jase ordered.

"Do you know the chute behind Island 68?" 'Melina asked when she arrived. "We need to get into it."

Dashiell shook his head. "Can't do that in the fog," he said.

"You'll probably have to enter above the island," 'Melina said. "There are rapids at the foot of the chute."

Dashiell looked unhappy. He turned up his collar against the dripping fog. "I'd rather do the Laconia crossing in daylight. It's a tricky one."

"Then we wait," said Jase. "Maybe the Bee will rejoin us."

The fog began to burn away an hour after dawn. Jase tensed, half-expecting to see four or five Eads ironclads lined up ahead of him, guns run out and aimed down his throat.

The river was empty. Dashiell called for half speed ahead, and began maneuvering into the crossing. Miss 'Melina, still in the pilothouse, put on her smoked spectacles.

"Where is Bee?" Jase wondered.

"If she'd run into Yankees, we would have heard," Dashiell said.

"Most likely," Jase said. Though sometimes sound did strange things, and gunfire was not heard by people who should have been within easy listening distance.

It was likely, though, that Bee simply anchored in the fog, failed to see Arcola steam past, and was now pounding up the river after them.

Jase fingered his chin and considered the loss of the coal barge that Bee was towing. If Bee didn't appear with the coal, Arcola might not have enough fuel to return to Vicksburg. Once the ironclad was hidden, he would have to let the boilers cool in order to conserve fuel.

'Melia proved right about the dangers of the lower chute behind Island 68. The remains of a steamboat lay on the rocks, its stacks thrown into the current, white water foaming over the broken decks.

"Felicity," 'Melia said. "We came in her from Memphis. She blew her boiler and couldn't maneuver clear."

Dashiell managed to get Arcola into the upstream end of the chute stern-first, with the aid of leadsmen and some careful maneuvering. Trees hung close on either side of the anchorage, and brushed the stacks as the ironclad moved past. Once the anchor was dropped, Dashiell urged that warps be carried out to the trees on either bank to secure the ironclad in the event that the anchor dragged. Jase turned to 'Melia.

"How close are we to, ah, our goal?" Then he laughed at himself for his circumspection. There was no longer any reason to refrain from talking about the treasure.

"Not far," 'Melia said, "but I defy you to find the place without my guidance."

"Sir?" Castor asked, looking up from the wheel. "How are we to get ashore? General Bee has all the boats."

Jase barked a laugh. Three days on the river, in constant peril of their lives, and now this absurdity.

"There is a little skiff at Helius, our plantation," 'Melia said. "Just north of here, through the trees. Unless of course the river took it, or the Yankees."

"Can you see the river from Helius?" Jase asked.

"Yes."

"We'll set up a lookout for General Bee." The tug would never find them here, not in this narrow passage lined with tall cottonwoods.

"I can swim," 'Melia said, "if it's necessary."

"It won't be," Jase said. "And I don't think we'll need your boat, either." He sent for strong swimmers to carry warps and lines ashore, then rigged a bosun's chair to take people to Arkansas. He, 'Melia, Faren Smith, Smith's Whitworth rifle, and four crewmen came to the land dry-shod. Jase wore his service pistol holstered at the small of his back.

Jase turned to Miss 'Melia, gave her a nod. "Will you take us to your hiding place, miss?" he asked.

The tilted her head, looked at him. "You will abide by our agreement, Captain?"

"Of course," he said, then added under his breath, so only she could hear, "It ain't my money."

She gave a merry laugh. "Better bring picks and shovels, then," she said, and after they were brought she turned to lead them inland. The country was so thick that they could move only on animal tracks. 'Melia guided them along one path after another, her little feet moving along the narrow trails with utter certainty. Eventually they came to a steep slope covered with vine-draped oak and sassafras.

"It's an old Indian mound," 'Melia said. "Built by the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, or so they say."

'Melia led them along the side of the mound till their path was blocked by a lightning-blackened pumpkin oak that sprawled across their path. The huge tangled ball of roots loomed over their heads.

'Melia turned around and grinned. "Here we are," she said.

Jase looked at the dense country and saw nothing. He peered over 'Melia's shoulder to see if the tree was hollow and the money might have been hidden there, but the tree seemed solid enough.

"There, captain!" Pointing at the slope above the ball of tree-roots. "We put

turves over the hiding-place."

The toppling tree had pulled a huge ball of dirt into the air, leaving a kind of earthen cave where the roots had been, a ready-made hiding place. Jase had his crewmen begin their work with spades. In the fertile soil, the turves had already taken root, and were hard to dislodge. Beneath them was a layer of black soil, and then Jase heard the ring of metal as a spade struck something. Jase felt excitement sing through his veins. The soil was cleared away by hand, revealing a canvas bag that Jase drew from its hiding place. He figured it had to weigh thirty pounds. Jase could smell rot in the canvas, but the stenciled legend First State Bank of Nashville could still be read. He tore away the rope that knotted the bag shut, reached in, pulled out a fistful of twenty-dollar double-eagles.

Gold. The head of Liberty gazed at him from the face of one coin.

There was a moment of silence, and then Faren Smith gave a whoop. The crewmen laughed and looked at the gold with shining eyes.

Jase turned to 'Melia, who was leaning on the old pumpkin oak and watching them through smoked lenses, a smile of delicate amusement on her lips.

"Is it all in canvas bags?" he asked.

"Unless the bags have rotted away," she said. "Some of the bags weren't very sound even when we buried them."

Jase let the coins spill between his fingers, hearing the them chime as they hit the coins in the bag, and then he tied the bag shut again. He turned to one of the crew. "Bring me Chief Tyrus and the quartermaster." And when Tyrus and Castor arrived, Jase put Castor in charge of digging out the money.

"No one is to dig unless you're watching," he said. "You are to take charge personally of everything that comes out of the ground. No one else is to handle it but Chief Tyrus, who will convey it to the boat."

"Ay, sir," Castor said.

"If a bag breaks, you are to stop digging until every spilled coin can be accounted for. I'll send you some sacks from Arcola to carry any loose money."

"Sir."

Jase turned to Chief Tyrus. "You are to convey the money to the ram," he said.

"Either carry it yourself, or have others carry it under your direct supervision. The money is to be in Castor's sight at all times, or in your own."

"Ay ay, sir."

"When you get the money to Arcola," Jase said, "send it aboard via the bosun's chair." He smiled. "I'll put Euphemism in charge of stowing it. He seems an honest sort." His smile turned wolfish. "And the others will watch him, of course."

"Very good, sir," said Tyrus.

Jase looked up at Faren Smith, who cradled his Whitworth rifle in his arms. "Mr. Smith," he said, "anyone who fails to follow my instructions is clearly attempting to cheat his fellow crewmen and the Government. Your job is to shoot anyone who disobeys my orders."

Smith smiled. "With pleasure, sir," he said.

Jase handed the Chief the bag of coins. "Chief Tyrus," he said, "carry on."

"Sir." Tyrus saluted, turned, and began walking down the trail to the ram.

Jase and 'Melia followed at a more leisurely pace. "Can you trust these men?" she asked.

"I have to trust them sooner or later," Jase said. "If I trust them now, it's less likely that later I'll wake up later with a slit throat."

Jase crossed to the ram to rig a pair of slings that would carry the money to the ram, and also to brief Euphemism concerning how to ballast a ship with gold and silver. An armed guard was posted on Arcola's bilges, with a petty officer and Euphemism to guard the guards.

A pair of crewmen armed with carbines accompanied Jase and 'Melia to Helius, where he planned to set up a lookout for General Bee. Helius proved to be a modest frame plantation house set amid overgrown cotton fields.

"Our overseer joined the army and got killed at Pea Ridge," 'Melia said as Jase helped her over the rail fence that surrounded the property. "Mrs. Overby, his

wife, tried to run the place till the Yankees came, said the field hands were contraband of war, and carried them off. Mrs. Overby went to Helena, where she had kin, but her last letter said there were a few servants remaining. Folks too old to leave—or too feeble, I suppose, to help the Yankees with their designs." Miss 'Melia proved correct. There were five elderly blacks living on the property, three women and two men tending the little vegetable garden they'd planted for their own sustenance. 'Melia set them to cleaning the main house while Jase took his men across overgrown lawns to the landing, and posted them on a point nearby with a good view of the river. They carried carbines and flags to signal to General Bee if the tug appeared.

When Jase returned, he found the covers taken off the furniture in the front parlor, and 'Melia sitting on the sofa drinking water from a tin cup. "The Yankees took the silver and the china," she said, "but they couldn't take our spring water. Would you like some?"

"Thank you," Jase said. He took the cup from her fingers and sipped. There was whisky in the water. She patted the sofa cushion next to her.

"Please sit down, captain."

"Thank you."

He removed his pistol belt and sat. She had taken off the smoked spectacles, and Jase noticed that her pupils were something like normal size. Perhaps she didn't need her morning glory seeds today, not with the stimulus of gold running through her veins.

"I would offer you dinner," she said, "but there's nothing. The Yankees ate the livestock and ran through our stores—all Helius can offer are some dried peas, salt pork, corn dodgers, and a quart of Bourbon I retrieved from my father's desk. You'd probably rather have your Navy ration."

"Your father has better whisky," Jase said.

"He never believed in rationing his own pleasures."

"I look forward," said Jase, "to following his example. I've been poor all my life, and I plan to spend the rest of my life enjoying the contrast."

'Melia looked at him. "I know people who could spend that money in a year."

Jase shook his head. "They must be people without any imagination."

She smiled. "I didn't think you were the sort to spend it foolishly. I wish my fiancé had that sort of drive."

He looked at her in surprise. "You're engaged to be married?"

One small hand floated to touch the globe of an elegant glass oil lamp, drifted idly over the inscribed glass figure of a horseman. "A planter's son. Good manners, a fine horseman, a splendid dancer. Rich, of course. Tall, broad-shouldered, handsome. But one day it occurred to me that this was all he was, that if you took away his manners and his horses and his mansion house there would be nothing left. He had no character or ideas that didn't come with his situation. He wasn't a bad man, or even a weak man—he was just, just—nothing. Tailored clothing stuffed with straw." Amusement tweaked her lips.

"So I broke off the engagement—it was a great scandal, another reason for me to avoid the society of Natchez and Vicksburg—and later my beau became engaged to my sister Harpina. He joined the army last year, and was captured at Fort Donelson."

And now Harpina was offering herself to strange officers while her intended waited behind prison walls. "The poor man," Jase smiled.

She leaned back on the sofa, took the whisky-spiked water from his hand. "You're not like him at all," she said. "Take away your commission, your Arcola, your share of the treasure—and you would still be yourself. Jase Miller. As, if every one of my father's plantations burned tomorrow, I would still be 'Melia." She stared boldly into Jase's eyes. "'Melia, who knows what she wants."

Jase took her in his arms and drew her closer. "What do you want, Miss 'Melia?" he asked.

"I want for certain," she said, "and for ever." He pressed his mouth to hers before she could say more.

23.

The appearance of the Colchian fleet

Jase, some hours later, decided to return to Arcola and make certain the specie transfer was going as scheduled. He was in the parlor, buttoning his jacket, when he looked out the window and saw his lookout running to the house. He ran to the hall and opened the door. "Sir!" one shouted. "Yankees! Yankee gunboats!" "Run to the boat!" Jase said. "Tell Chief Tyrus!"

Jase ran to the landing and saw, parading before his eyes, most of the Federal strength on the river. There were four Eads ironclads, black and beetle-shaped on the water, and a pair of lean Ellet rams. A commodore's pendant flew from one of the ironclads, so that meant Flag Officer Davis was attending to this matter himself. Led by the rams, the Federal squadron came down the river in a long line, then neatly anchored bow and stern close to the Mississippi shore.

Jase watched the squadron through binoculars and wondered what Davis had in mind. The Yanks were looking for Arcola, he reckoned, but if they knew where she was hiding, why were they anchored peacefully across the river? The Yankee crews were deploying awnings and walking casually on the casemates. Rowboats carried visitors from one boat to the next.

Davis had just decided to spend the night here, apparently. Maybe they were waiting for word from downriver, from that ram they'd sent ahead.

Jase returned to the house. 'Melia sat in a tall cane chair—one of her father's—on the front porch, her feet kicking casually a few inches above the floorboards. "I don't think they're coming," he said, "but I'd better get to Arcola, just in case."

"Should I go with you?"

"You'll be more comfortable here. I'll send for you if we have to get steam up." She looked up at him, a lazy smile on her lips. "I hope you come visit tonight, Captain Miller."

"In the morning sow thy seed," Jase thought, "and in the evening withhold not thy hand." He tipped his straw hat. "Miss 'Melia," he said, and returned to his ironclad.

Chief Tyrus had manned the ten-inch Dahlgren forward, but kept the transfer of the currency going. Every time the sling carried a load of gold to the ironclad, it returned full of the ram's pig-iron ballast, which was promptly flung into the water, where it now formed a modest island.

"Shall we get steam up, sir?" Tyrus asked.

Jase looked up at the tall stacks and thought of the clouds of black coal smoke that would mark their position. "I don't think so," Jase said. "They're anchored on the far side of the river. No point in provoking a fight unless we have to."

"Are they blockading us?"

"I don't guess they know we're here. I expect they'll move off tomorrow. If they steam back upriver, we'll have avoided them. If they go down, then we'll have a scrap, but I don't figure we'll be any worse off than we are now." He looked at Tyrus. "How's our money?"

"The more we dig, the more we find," Tyrus said. "There doesn't seem to be any end to that cave."

Jase grinned. "What a damn shame," he said.

Tyrus seemed aggrieved. "There's tons of the stuff. I wish they'd left the silver in the vaults."

Jase put his hand on Tyrus' shoulder. "We'll give the government the scrawny white money," he said. "And fill our personal pockets with gold."

He went aboard Arcola to visit the money in the bilges. Euphemism stood over the growing pile, a notebook in his hand. "I've been keeping an inventory, sir," he said. "We have replaced twenty tons of the ballast."

Coal could be transferred by shovel at eight tons per hour, Jase thought. This was going to take longer.

"Very good, lieutenant," Jase said, looking down at the bags. Twenty tons, he thought, and more to come. He felt a tingle in the hand that had plucked gold double-eagles from their bag. He could still taste 'Melia on his lips.

If he listened carefully, he could hear a rich future singing in his blood.



24.

The sacrifice of Apsyrtus

Jase posted another pair of lookouts on the point near Helius to keep watch in the night, and brought 'Melia her supper on a tin tray. He found her still sitting on the porch, her feet swinging in the twilight, a cup of whisky-and-water still in her hand.

"Very good of you," she said, "to consider my hunger."

After midnight a thundering knock at the front door woke Jase and 'Melia from sleep. He rolled away from 'Melia and reached for his clothing, and was pulling his shirt over his head when he heard the running footsteps of a servant on the stair.

"Miss!" the old woman called. "Officers to see you! Yankee officers!"

Jase's heart gave a lurch, and his hand froze on his boot-tops. His sidearm was downstairs, in the parlor. He'd forgotten it there.

"Tell them I'll be down in a minute!" 'Melia called. Then, whispering in his ear, "Dress quickly. I'll show you the back stair."

"I don't have my pistol."

"They're not here for you, I'm sure."

Jase drew on his clothing, but carried his boots in his hand so that the Federals wouldn't hear him on the stair. 'Melia made sure the curtains were drawn, then struck a match and lit a candle. She put on a plain gray house dress, then combed her hair as Jase, hands suddenly clumsy, buttoned the dress up the back.

"I wonder if the house is surrounded," Jase said.

"Hide at the bottom of the back stair. Don't run unless you must."

She turned, gave him a fierce kiss, lips driving into his. "Don't worry," she said. "I will deal with them."

'Melia took his hand with cool fingers, led him to the back stair and down. She showed him the back door, then walked with the candle toward the front hall, leaving Jase alone in the warm velvet darkness, his boots in his hand. His heart throbbed loud as Arcola's triple-expansion engines.

He heard a murmur of voices from the front hall, then the opening of doors as 'Melia took the others to the parlor. Her voice rang clearly down the back hall to Jase's hiding place. "I wish you had confined your visits to a civilized hour ... major." There was particular venom invested in the last word. When the man spoke in answer, Jase thought he knew why. The major's voice was as Southern as his own.

"My duties forbade an earlier visit," he said. "And I would not have come at all, but I saw a light through the trees. I knew this place had been abandoned, and I became curious."

"I showed no light," 'Melia said, truthfully enough. "It must have been the servants."

"We are looking for a rebel ram," the major said. "It has been reported in these waters."

'Melia's laugh was a little shrill. "A ram? No. I came here by submarine boat." There was a moment of silence, and then the major spoke again. Though his tones were soft, they froze Jase's blood.

"Tell me," the major said. "Where is the money?"

'Melia's answer was scornful. "I have some coins in my pockets. You Yankees may take them, as you've taken everything else."

"We know who took the money from Memphis before it fell," the major went on. "We know that you were with him. But there's been no sign of it since. Or the boat that carried it away."

There were a few shocked seconds before 'Melia composed an answer. "You can hardly blame the boat for staying out of your clutches. And the money, of course, was taken South."

"You forget," the major said, "that we read your papers. If tens of millions had

been spirited out of Memphis just as the city fell and given to the Confederate government, don't you think the papers would have boasted of it? Especially as there was so little else for your press to boast about? Don't you think there would have been headlines ten inches high?"

Jase felt sweat trickle down his face. 'Melia gave a laugh. "Perhaps Father has it, then. Maybe he's got a pile of gold on one of his plantations."

The major's answer was quite serious. "What we haven't been able to work out, you see," he said, "is why the enemy ram came north. There are no Rebel military operations in progress for it to support. It can't attack any of our bases by itself, and it would be suicidal for the ram to attack our whole squadron without support. So why is it here?"

"I'm afraid our government does not consult me before it dispatches its ships," 'Melia said.

"The ram had to have come up the river for a reason," the major insisted. "And when I saw the light at Helius tonight, it occurred to me that the only possible reason was the money. Sixty or seventy million dollars that seem to have gone missing between Memphis and Vicksburg."

'Melia laughed again. "Search the house and grounds," she said. "See if you find a ram in the garden."

Jase froze at the invitation.

"Where is the money?" the major asked.

"Let me fix you some tea," 'Melia said, "and we can continue this ... fascinating conversation."

"I don't want your tea, 'Melia," the major said. "I've come for the money, and I mean to have it."

There was a moment's silence, and then Jase heard, clear as a striking bell, the double click of a revolver being cocked. Jase froze in horror.

The shot was loud as a cannon. Then more shots, a regular fusillade. Jase dropped his boots and ran down the hall to the parlor. When he came in he saw, through air blue with gunsmoke, 'Melia holding Jase's pistol in her hand, with a young man wearing a major's oak leaves lying stretched in his blood before her. Another man in the uniform of a lieutenant was leaning against the wall, red spurting from his torn neckcloth as he clawed at the flap of his holster with blood-slicked fingers. 'Melia's revolver clicked on an empty chamber.

Jase clubbed the standing man in the face with his fist. The man slid down the wall, and Jase pulled the wounded man's revolver from his holster as he lay there, a look of terror on his face as he watched his artery fountain his heart's blood onto the parlor carpet.

"Get your boots." 'Melia's voice was strangely calm. "Let us go."

Jase's head whirled. 'Melia took him by the arm and drew him into the back hall. She returned to the parlor, picked up the oil lamp from its table, the lamp with the horseman inscribed on its delicate glass reservoir, and flung it onto the carpet between the two Yankees. Glass shattered. Flaming oil rolled over the carpet in a wave.

She took him to the back stair. He pulled on his boots with nerveless fingers. And then 'Melia opened the back door and gestured into the night.

"The boat's crew," Jase managed. "They would have come with a boat's crew. They may have heard the shots."

"All the more reason to leave quickly. They won't search for us at night."

They fled across the overgrown fields by starlight. By the time they reached the fence line, a bright glow radiated behind them, the fire catching hold of the old frame building. "My God," Jase gasped. "My God, they will start searching for the treasure. They know it's here!"

Fire glittered in 'Melia's eyes as she gazed at the burning house. "They don't know the gold is anywhere nearby," she said. "Or Arcola either. What you heard was the—the major's private theory. He'd just worked it all out, and he rowed across the river to boast about it to my face."

"I don't know," Jase said.

"I do. He wouldn't have told his superiors, not until he'd proved to himself that he was right. I imagine he came to Helius expecting to find me there, or maybe my father."

Jase stared at her. "You knew him?" he said.

"Of course." Her glittering eyes looked into his. "He was my brother."

25.

Phalerus the Archer maketh a discovery

Arcola's crew stood to their guns at dawn, and waited for the Yankees who did not come. Burning Helius was a pillar of smoke on the northwest horizon. Jase sent out Faren Smith and a party of armed sailors as scouts, and they reported Yankees crawling all over the plantation, but none ventured into the thick wilderness that surrounded the cotton fields.

"See?" 'Melia said, when Jase told her. "A pair of officers went ashore on some kind of private adventure, and it went wrong. Maybe they were assassinated by partisans, maybe they set fire to the place and were caught in the blaze because they were drunk. The servants know nothing of any importance. No one is thinking of gold." She leaned close, and a shiver went up his spine as he felt her tongue taste his throat. "No one but us. For certain and for ever."

Faren Smith also found Jase's two lookouts, who maintained that they'd been watching the Yankee squadron all night, but had missed the little rowboat on its approach because they weren't looking for something so small. Jase, certain they'd fallen asleep on watch, had them gagged and tied to a pair of trees, and let them sit there till nightfall.

The Federal squadron moved off around midday, heading south. So Arcola would have to meet them on the river if she was to make Vicksburg.

The loading of the money went on. All fifty tons of pig iron ballast had been replaced by bags of cash, and all the railroad iron ballast, too. Jase emptied provision casks and re-stowed them filled with Indian-head silver dollars and golden eagles.

By unspoken agreement, everyone had forgotten about Jase's elaborate plans for safeguarding the treasure. Let the crewmen fill their pockets: there was plenty more. Toward mid-afternoon they ran out of places to stow the money and began to stack bags of cash between the guns.

"We're low on our marks," Chief Tyrus said. "I hope we aren't so deep in the water that we can't get out of this chute."

"Perhaps we should rename her the Floating Mint," suggested Euphemism.

"Shut the hell up, lieutenant!" Jase snarled. His officers looked at each other. Jase stalked away, walked for a moment beneath the cottonwoods until he could calm his singing nerves. He heard footsteps behind him, saw Faren Smith approaching, the Whitworth still carried in the crook of his arm.

"Can you spare a moment, captain?" he asked. "There's something I think you should see."

The Gunner led Jase along the path toward Helius, but stopped before he reached the point where the hardwood forest opened up into cotton fields. "I found this when I was scouting the Yankees this morning, sir," he said, and took Jase off the track, through the trees. "Look here," he said.

The bodies were not far off the path, the bones lying limp in their clothing. Jase counted five skulls, though there may have been others underneath. Though scavengers had picked the bones clean of flesh, the clothing was not badly weathered, and the bones were still bright in the mottled sunlight.

Jase's mouth was dry. "The crew of Felicity," he said.

Smith nodded. "Reckon so," he said.

A memory floated into Jase's mind, 'Melia addressing her brother. Let me fix you some tea. Her brother the Yankee major had known better than to accept the offer. She had brought refreshing drinks of that wholesome Helius spring water to the crew of Felicity as they finished concealing her treasure, but when they'd died she hadn't been able to drag them very far off the trail. Then she'd cast their steamboat adrift in the chute, and let the rocks take it.

Jase looked at the Gunner. "I wouldn't tell any of the other crewmen about this," he said.

"I won't," Smith said. "But I don't plan to let that young lady doctor me none." Jase looked down at the pile of bodies. Fresh green growth sprang between their bones.

"Me, either," he said.

26.

### The Argonauts confronteth the Dragon's Teeth

In late afternoon Arcola began raising steam, and black smoke poured from her stacks and drifted over the treeline. There was plenty of money left in the cave, millions probably, but no place left to put it—no place unless the ironclad was to completely lose her identity as a warship, unable to fire the guns because there was too much cash in the way. Before casting off Jase ordered the cave sealed up again, and closed in with turves of grass. Someone would come for the money sooner or later. Jase reckoned 'Melia would get to it before the Confederate government did, but concluded the matter was no business of his. With leadsmen chanting from the nearly submerged bows, Dashiell and Jase maneuvered Arcola out of the chute behind Island No. 68 during the last half-hour of daylight. The boat lay deep in the water, with the Mississippi creaming high on the casemate, and responded sluggishly to the helm. The boilers would need more coal, Jase thought, to keep her moving in this state, though at least the river current was in their favor, and would add three or four knots to their speed.

Drive like Jehu, Jase thought. He rang the engine room for full ahead, determined to make as many miles downriver as time would permit. Leaving Dashiell and Faren Smith in the pilot house, with orders to keep their eyes skinned for the Yankee flotilla, Jase dropped to the gun deck. Bags of money were stacked in every corner. Crewmen sat and reclined on them and seemed dazed less by weariness than by dreams of wealth and luxury. Miss 'Melia's hammock swung over a small mountain of wealth. Lt. Euphemism, Jase saw, was attending her.

He returned Euphemism's salute and tipped his hat to 'Melia. "Are you comfortable, miss?"

"Oh yes. Lt. ... Euphemism," smiling, "has been most attentive."

"Thank you, miss," Euphemism said. He turned to Jase. "Sir?" Euphemism said.

"Your people from the Bee have been enlightening me as regards the custom of prize money. They tell me that the captain's share is three-twentieths, and that the lieutenants split two-twentieths between them. That the warrant and petty officers split another five-twentieths, and the ordinary crewmen split half the total."

Jase smiled. "You'll find that the ordinary shellback can calculate his share of prize money faster than he can drink his whisky ration."

'Melia's eyes shone. "Your share is three-twentieths, and mine is equal to yours, but three-twentieths of what? Most of the money," sighing, "is pledged to the government."

"True," Jase said, "but I reckon Jeff Davis won't have too many objections if the government's share comes to ninety percent," Jase said.

Calculations flickered behind 'Melia's eyes. "If we recovered fifty million out of the total, say, that would give us five million as the crew's share. And three-twentieths of that would be seven hundred and fifty thousand, all in gold!" Her white teeth flashed as she laughed. "You're nearly a millionaire, captain! And so am I."

"And the ordinary sailors would have close to twenty thousand apiece," Jase said. "But remember that we'll going to have to get past an entire Yankee squadron before we can count the money."

Plus, Jase thought, he'd probably have to rent a railroad car to get his share away. His share alone, in gold, would weigh over a ton and a half. He'd worked it out with paper and pencil before he'd ever left Vicksburg.

There was a little frown on Euphemism's face. "But surely, sir, even if the crew

is entitled to a share, it would have to be awarded by a prize court."

"Prize courts are mighty slow, lieutenant," Jase said. "Those of us from the old Mobile are still waiting for the prize courts to deliver the money owed us for the six prizes we took last year. And even if the prize court ruled in a timely way, they wouldn't pay in real money, just in notes. So," he smiled, "we'll just take our share ahead of time, and save the court's time."

Euphemism's frown deepened. "I don't know if I can approve of this trifling with the Government's money," he said.

"Strictly speaking," Jase said, "the money isn't the Government's, it belongs to depositors in Tennessee banks. Though it looks as if Richmond will get ninety percent of it."

Euphemism seemed oblivious to the glares the nearby crewmen were giving him. "If it's private money," he continued, "that's even less reason to give large sums to the soldiers and sailors whose job is to defend the money, not help themselves to shares. And even if the prize court rules in your favor, I don't see," turning apologetically to 'Melia, "I don't see how a civilian is entitled to a share as large as that of the captain."

"Be not righteous over much," Jase said, "as the Preacher sayeth."

'Melia put a hand on his arm. "Be generous," she said. "I could have kept it all, you know."

Euphemism had the decency to look embarrassed.

"All was arranged ahead of time," Jase said, "with Secretary Mallory and the Secretary of the Treasury."

"I have read the Constitution, sir," Euphemism said. "No member of the cabinet has the authority to confiscate or give away private monies, nor to award prize money without participation of the courts. It's plain illegal, sir."

"Seceding from the United States was illegal, too, or so I hear," Jase said.

"Sir," Euphemism said stiffly, "I must beg you not to confuse our sacred Cause with a plundering expedition."

Jase had never quite as clearly seen how closely Euphemism resembled the those rich young idiots he'd known at Annapolis. "Oh," he snarled. "Sorry. I'm sure Jeff Davis never planned to make money as a result of secession. Heaven forbid."

Euphemism pressed his lips together whitely. Then he rose to attention and clicked his heels. "Captain Miller," he said, "I am obliged to inform you that if you continue with this illegal act, I will formally protest with General Van Dorn, with the governor and attorney general of Mississippi, and with the government in Richmond. I will also inform the newspapers of your actions. My family is not without influence, sir. I beg you to keep this in mind."

Jase looked at him. "Do as you please, lieutenant," he said.

Euphemism saluted, turned, marched aft. Jase let out a long breath. "Damned idiot," he said.

'Melia looked after the lieutenant with worried eyes. "Let me talk to him," she said. "I'll try to bring him to reason."

He looked into the dark eyes that shone gold in the light of the battle lanterns. "It is the bright day that brings forth the adder," he thought, "And that craves wary walking."

"Good luck," he said, and returned to the pilot house.

Arcola steamed ahead all night, making seven or eight knots plus any distance contributed by the current. Jase planned to be off Greenville by morning. The last news was that Greenville was nominally Confederate, at least insofar as the Yanks had not bothered to capture the place—and if the Federals had left any coal there, or even wood, Jase planned to shift it to Arcola's bunkers.

The rising sun glared into Jase's eyes as Arcola steamed around Rowdy Bend on the last S-turn before Greenville, and it was a moment before he could shade his eyes against the sun and see the dark slablike silhouettes of the Eads ironclads lined up on the glittering water, black smoke boiling from their stacks as they raised steam.

"Yankees!" Dashiell gasped, then called down to the wheel. "Hard a-port! Call for more turns!"

"Belay that," Jase said, the words somehow squeezing past the heart that suddenly thundered in his throat. "Stand to quarters! Signal the engine room for

all possible speed!" He turned to the plump pilot who stared at him in horror. "They have to've seen us," he said. "If we run upstream, we're just farther from help. You get down, now, and find yourself some shelter." He followed the pilot through the pilot house roof while the men jumped to their places on the deck below. He gazed at the enemy flotilla through the armored slits.

There the enemy were, half a mile away, moored in a line, bow and stern, near the Mississippi bank of the river. He hoped they hadn't got up enough steam to maneuver. He'd better play it safe, keep close to the enemy so that they couldn't get up speed to ram him.

At least Arcola traveled with its guns loaded and run out. And the crew couldn't stray far from their stations, because there was nowhere else to go.

A trumpet call rang through the air from the enemy squadron. So much for the hope that Arcola hadn't been seen.

"Stand by the port battery. Bow gun, fire at will."

The Dahlgren thundered out almost as an echo to his words—Smith was good at his work. Jase blinked at the gunsmoke that swirled through the pilot house. From ahead he heard a booming clang as the ten-inch solid struck iron.

"Starboard your helm. Steady. Rudder amidships." He was aiming for the nearest enemy stern. The air intakes howled as Arcola built speed.

A quarter mile. Half a cable. The Dahlgren roared out again, and Jase heard the satisfying crack of splintering armor.

"Port your helm! Hold it! Now amidships!"

Arcola turned sluggishly away from the enemy's stern, white water creaming along the casemate. Jase didn't dare ram the enemy—it would slow down the battle too much, give the Yankees time to recover or maneuver. He'd be happy enough if they didn't ram his own boat.

"Port battery—fire as you bear!"

The thirty-two-pounders roared as Arcola swept past the anchored enemy. The Federals were so surprised they managed to fire only a single gun—Jase felt the ram shudder—and then they were past, and Jase stared at the next enemy, only a cable away.

The second ironclad managed to fire its whole broadside as Arcola sped alongside, the guns hammering at point-blank range. Crashes filled the air as armor shrieked, oak cracked, and the casemate shuddered to impact.

Arcola steamed past all four ironclads, dealing and receiving punishment as she went. Ahead were three Ellet rams: unprotected, unarmed wooden vessels that depended on speed and impact in battle.

"Mr. Smith! I want those rams smashed up!" Jase ordered. They were the only Federal vessels fast enough to catch Arcola.

Arcola fired a full broadside into each ram, solid shot mixed with explosive shell from the seven-inch Brooke rifle. This left one ram satisfactorily in flames, the other two riddled. Arcola swept on while the crewmen cheered.

"Howl! Ye ships of Tarshish!" Jase exulted, waving a fist from the pilot house. He looked aft as Arcola steamed around the next bend and saw that the enemy boats were starting to get under way, white water boiling beneath their paddleboxes.

It was going to be a race. Yankee persistence against the scant fuel remaining in Arcola's bunkers.

Jase slowed the boat to save fuel, called for Dashiell to steer the boat past Greenville, then dropped to the gun deck. A knot of crewmen were clustered around some people lying prone on the planks. Jase pushed his way through the cluster, saw four crewmen lying bleeding. The surgeon's mate and Miss 'Melia crouched over them. Their faces and hands had been lacerated badly, their flesh gouged and scarlet. Jase had never seen anything like it. "What happened here?" he asked.

"Gold." One of the crewmen gave a weary laugh, and Jase saw it was Euphemism.

"We've been shot full of gold."

One of the enemy solids had smashed into the casemate opposite a place where bags of money had been stacked. The force of the shot had transmitted itself

through the casemate and into the stack of specie, flinging gold quarter-eagles through the casemate like shrapnel and mowing down half the crew of one of the broadside guns.

"The wounds aren't serious, I think," 'Melia said. "We'll need some stitches. And I'll make up poultices to aid healing."

Jase told the wounded to consider themselves lucky that their injuries weren't any worse, and made his way to the boiler room, where he asked Chief Tyrus to give an estimate of fuel. "It's a hundred miles or more to Vicksburg," he said. "Ten hours or more of steaming. Can we do it?"

Tyrus considered for a moment, then shook his head. "No, sir. I might be able to stretch it to eight hours, maybe a little more. But that's all."

Jase rubbed his chin. "Sir?" Tyrus said. "There is one possibility for saving the boat."

"Yes?"

"Throw overboard the guns and the stores. And the ... the ballast."

Jase just looked at him. Tyrus swallowed. "Just a suggestion, sir," he said.

"Keep the engines at highest possible fuel efficiency," Jase said. "I'll let you know if I need more turns."

"Sir."

Jase returned to the gun deck. The wounded crewmen were sitting pillowed on sacks of specie, joking nervously with their friends as the surgeon's mate stitched up their wounds. 'Melia crouched beneath the breech of a gun, her medical bag propped open on the gun's wooden carriage.

"Comfrey poultices," she said. "They should help the wounded." Her hand made a pass toward a small stoppered phial on the deck, but she failed to reach it.

"Would you hand me that bottle, please?"

Jase picked up the bottle, saw the words "yellow jessamine" written on the paper label. It looked like some kind of root pickled in alcohol.

He knew what comfrey looked like. This wasn't it. Even in Latin.

A cold wind chilled his spine. He held the bottle to 'Melia. "For the lieutenant?" he asked.

Her hands closed round the bottle. Her dark eyes looked up into his. "I don't see any other solution," she said. "Do you?"

Jase licked his lips. "No," he said. "I don't."

"They do but jest," he thought, "poison in jest; no offense i' the world."

27.

The enemy pursueth the Argonauts

The black coal smoke that marked the enemy flotilla fell out of sight astern, but Jase had no doubt that they were pursuing as fast as their situation permitted. He and Dashiell conferred as to a place to conceal the ram, preferably somewhere where they had a chance to offload the gold. "I'll try to get you behind Cottonwood Bar," he said. "That's near Illawara. There's a road that runs south from there to Desoto Point, across the river from Vicksburg." There were other places where he could try to hide Arcola, but nowhere north of Cottonwood Bar offered a road that could take the treasure to the interior. Chief Tyrus managed to stretch the coal just that far. Arcola steamed in broad daylight through the Delta no-man's-land that had stealthily skulked up at night, and Jase found the strange flat country mesmerizing, the long wild shores with their cottonwoods and mangroves, their egrets and circling herons. It was nearly virgin wilderness, the only signs of human habitation being the landings, and sometimes the chimneys, that marked the plantations. Life and commerce was carried on entirely by water, with few or no roads to carry anyone or any thing more than an hour's walk from the Mississippi.

River commerce had dried up as the Yankees came south, and the country had died with it. The plantations were deserted by their owners, who had either gone to Vicksburg or gone for a soldier. The slaves marked time under their overseers and waited for liberation at the hands of the Yankees. There was no one to

maintain the levees, and before very long the entire country would return to a state of nature.

Jase paid visits to the wounded as the day went on. Everyone but Lt. Euphemism seemed to be doing well. At first he only coughed a bit, as if the powder smoke had caught in his throat; and he joked about his poor sea-legs that were making him feel sick to the stomach. But then his face flushed red and he swayed on his feet. 'Melia made him lie in her hammock and tended him carefully, gave him willow bark in case of fever.

By the time Arcola, down to its last few scrapings of coal-dust from the bunkers, made its careful way up the chute behind Cottonwood Bar, Euphemism had gone cold and clammy, and gasped for breath. He was unable to leave the hammock. 'Melia and the surgeon's mate put their heads together and decided to give him poppy in order to make him more comfortable.

As soon as the ram was moored in the sheltered chute behind Cottonwood Bar, Jase released Chief Tyrus and the engine room crew from duty, and gave them a bag of silver dollars. "Get to Illawara," he said. "Rent or buy every wagon you can find, and bring them all as close to this place as you can."

"Cotton wagons, sir," Dashiell offered. "The planters hereabouts will all have a great many cotton wagons. To bring their cotton to the gins, sir, you see."

"Bring them," Jase told Tyrus, and began the business of setting up lines and blocks to carry the gold to shore.

Faren Smith and the crew of the Brooke rifle remained at their stations, the rifle trained out over the Mississippi at the bottom of the chute. The rest of the crew began transferring the money. Jase had a pair of lines rove through tackles ashore, with and a pair of slings on each, so that the gold could be moved quickly, one sling moving inland while the other traveled to the ram, and once ashore he set up a kind of bucket brigade to pass sacks of gold into the cover of the trees. With over a hundred pairs of hands at the work, the unloading went swiftly, far more swiftly than it had taken the crew to dig the money out of the hole and transport it along the narrow woodland trail to the ironclad.

Lt. Euphemism continued to decline. He lay in the hammock coughing continually, barely able to speak, growing weaker by the hour. 'Melia tended him carefully. Jase saw the expression of tenderness and concern in her eyes as she nursed her patient, and a chill went up his back. After a while Jase couldn't bear the sight any longer, and went ashore to supervise the unloading.

He hurried things along, but it didn't go quickly enough. Two hours after Arcola moored, Jase heard the thudding engines and thrashing paddle wheels of the Federal squadron. He jumped for one of the lines and swung hand-over-hand back to the ram, then ran up the casemate and stood peering aft.

Davis and his squadron came into sight below the chute, steaming in their line to Vicksburg, the four huge ironclads led by one of the light, fast Ellet rams. Jase clenched his teeth and willed the Yank lookouts to gaze only downriver, to keep their attention focused on what was in front instead of the rust-red river monster that crouched in hiding behind them.

Exultation blazed in his heart as the Federals kept their line, as the lead ram began its long curve to port that would take it into the next bend—and then one of the ironclads fired a gun, the hollow thud following the flash and spurt of smoke by a long half-second, and the Eads boat began a turn, swinging out of line, presenting its broadside, then its bow guns as its side paddles drove it back up the river, as it stood it directly for Arcola. The other boats, too, began to make lumbering turns.

Jase gazed down at Arcola, at his beautiful boat. Behold a ram, he thought, caught in a thicket by its horns.

Jase turned to the crewmen swinging sacks of specie from hand to hand. "Smartly, there!" he said. "They've spotted us!"

He entered the casemate and went aft to where Faren Smith waited beside the seven-inch rifle. "At least we outrange them," Smith said, and patted the breech. "Leave it to me, sir. I'll keep 'em at a distance while you finish the job."

Jase looked over his shoulder, where Euphemism's hammock swung between a pair of



the broadside guns. "Let's get the lieutenant ashore," he said, then looked at 'Melia. "And you, miss," he said.

'Melia quietly reached for her bags, but Jase heard Euphemism's weak voice.

"No," he said. "No, the Yankees are coming. I must take my station."

Euphemism tried weakly to climb from his hammock, but 'Melia approached and held him down with very little effort. Jase approached the hammock, looked down at Euphemism's drawn face, the white protruding eyes that glimmered wetly in the light of the open gunports. A shiver ran up his spine at the sight.

"Your station's ashore, lieutenant," Jase said. "You're assigned to guard the gold."

Euphemism shook his head. "No," he said. "Must fight my guns." But then coughing began to rack him, and Jase signed to the crew to untie his hammock and carry him to the lines that could swing him ashore.

"Hurry, there!" he shouted at the people on the other line, filling their sling with sacks of money. He didn't want to watch Euphemism being hustled out a gunport, so he stalked aft again, peered out the aft port at the advancing Federals thrashing against the current toward Arcola.

"We're at long range," Smith remarked. "I could probably hit them from here, but I doubt I'd do any damage."

Jase thought about it for a moment. "Open fire now," he decided. "I want a lot of smoke to hide what we're doing on shore."

Smith nodded, peered over the sights for a moment, and tugged the lanyard. Like a wild beast flinging itself at the bars of its cage, the Blake rifle lunged back into the casemate till it slammed against the limits of its tackles. The eerie receding wail of the spinning shell was followed, a scant few heartbeats later, of the clang of the seven-inch bolt slamming home on Federal iron. The gun crew cheered as they slammed the iron shutters over the port and jumped to reload the huge metal beast. They opened the shutters and hauled it again to the port, the crew almost horizontal as they dragged the gun along the deck, Faren Smith riding the carriage forward with his thumb placed over the touch hole to prevent accidental firing.

Jase stuck his head out a side port so that he could watch both the unloading and the approaching Yankees. The lead Federal ironclad appeared unchanged except for the fact that the crew were slamming closed the iron shutters on the forward gunports. Their own smoothbores were out of range, and they were taking care that no chance shot got through an open port.

Smith got off a dozen more shots, all hits, before the lead ironclad's forward ports opened and its forward battery of four nine-inch Dahlgren smoothbores rolled out. They went off in a regular salvo, and Jase ducked back into the casemate before he could lose his head to the solid iron shot that were suddenly tearing apart the air outside. He waited inside the port, heart hammering, for the sound of a shot striking home, but heard nothing.

The Yankees had missed completely. And, as if to mock their efforts, Smith ran the Blake rifle out the port and fired one accurate shot in reply, the seven-inch bolt bounding off the Yankee casemate with the sound of a ringing bell.

Jase waited for another Federal salvo—another four misses—before ducking out the port and traveling hand-over-hand along one of the lines that had been run to shore. He dropped to the ground and sprinted along the line of toiling men—the enemy salvos ripping the sky overhead seemed to have accelerated their efforts—till he reached the growing pile of money, where he saw a pair of big muledrawn wagons being brought up through the boggy ground. Chief Tyrus swung down from one of the wagons and ran forward to report.

"Sir," he said. "The whole countryside is bringing their wagons. I'll start loading these two as soon as we bring them up."

"Belay that. I want your people unloading the ram. Once we get it ashore, we can worry about getting it onto the wagons."

"Ay, sir."

Jase returned to Arcola and its fight with the Yankee squadron. For the remainder of the afternoon Faren Smith continued the unequal contest. The

Federals couldn't get all their boats positioned to fire up the narrow chute, and had to settle for using two at a time, the rest of their flotilla hovering behind, waiting their moment to attack. Their firing improved, and before long a nine-inch solid slammed into Arcola every few minutes, bounding off Argus McBride's railroad iron with a shriek, a clang, and a shower of sparks. The stacks and air intakes were riddled, and one of the aft gunport shutters was disabled by a lucky shot. The enemy's howling iron solids killed a half-dozen Confederates engaged in transferring money, and several times cut the lines by which the gold was being taken ashore.

Smith, for his part, managed to drive the first Federal ironclad out of the fight, but it was promptly replaced by another, with fresher crews and unexpended stocks of ammunition.

After two hours of the pounding Jase could hear the armor beginning to break, the oaken beams that supported the casemate cracking with each hit. The casemate filled with smoke, heat, and noise, the boom of the Blake and the crash of Yankee shot.

Just hold out till nightfall, Jase thought. They have tied me to a stake, I cannot fly.

At dusk he saw that one of the Eads boats was moving upstream, and despair howled through his veins as he realized why. The Yank was going to enter the chute at the top of Cottonwood Bar and catch Arcola between two fires.

But night fell before the Federal boat came down. Apparently they were wary about feeling their way down the chute at night. The Yankees withdrew to repair damage and wait till morning. Smith, staggering with weariness, reported to Jase that the Blake rifle had only five rounds left.

"I could put one of the thirty-two-pounders in the aft port, sir," he said.

"Plenty of ammunition for those."

Jase shook his head. He felt as if he were already in a kind of mourning.

"You've done well," he said. "Get something to eat, then help move the gold."

The last bags of specie came ashore around midnight. Arcola bobbed high in the water, completely unballasted. Jase considered his situation. In the morning, the Yankees would attack down both ends of the Cottonwood Bar chute, catching Arcola between two fires. Jase didn't have enough coal even to get up steam, let alone maneuver. The armor on the aft end of the casemate was about to cave in. His crew was exhausted, and the gold was ashore and would need guards.

He ordered all the guns loaded, double-shotted, and run out the ports. Then he ordered Arcola set on fire and had men stand by the lines to cast the ironclad adrift down the chute.

Maybe she'd take some Yankees with her when she blew up.

He stood by the bank as flame glowed from the iron monster's ports. He ordered the lines cast off, and watched as Arcola slowly gathered way, drifting stern-first for the Gulf of Mexico.

My God, he thought, she was a sweet boat. Done everything he asked, and more.

Even now he wanted to put men aboard her and steam out to fight the Yanks, give Arcola a proper warship's funeral, the enemy's broadsides thundering like volleys fired over her grave.

Sadness rose in him like a tide. His boat. When she floated down the chute toward the enemy, she would take a piece of his heart with her.

He felt a hand on his arm and gave a little start of surprise.

"I'm sorry about your boat," 'Melia said.

He turned away from her, watched Arcola drift slowly away into the night. "She was a means to an end," he said.

"The lieutenant died two hours ago," 'Melia said. "It was very peaceful. I told him we'd beaten the Yankees, that they were running away."

"That was good of you," Jase said.

Her fingers tightened on his arm. "And now we're rich," she said. "And together. Forever."

Jase spat on the ground. "Let's get out of here," he said, "before it starts raining guns."

28.

The Golden Fleece is brought home in triumph

Harry Klee, Put-Up-Your-Dukes, and the crew of the General Bee met them in Vicksburg, after the money was ferried across the Mississippi under the guard of Arcola's crew. During the night of the fog, Bee, without a pilot, had anchored out of the channel to wait for daylight. They'd heard Arcola steam past but hadn't dared to follow. While trying to catch the ram the next morning, they'd blown a steam line, and while barely able to make turns had been surprised by an Ellet ram, probably the one that had passed Arcola in the night. Bee had been rammed amidships before her gunners could score a vital hit on the enemy, and the crew ended up floating down the Mississippi on the coal barge while Bee filled and sank.

So Jase's first and second command had been wrecked by the enemy. Jase figured he'd better stay off the water for a while.

In Vicksburg, Jase commissioned a train to take the specie inland along the Southern Mississippi Railroad. Arcola's crew provided an escort. The train stopped at Jackson, then Meridian, where the money moved south along the Mobile & Ohio to Mobile. The money crossed Mobile Bay by steamer, then headed east on the Mobile & Pensacola, then north on the Alabama & Florida to Montgomery. From there to Atlanta via the Montgomery & West Point, and the West Point & Atlanta. At every stop detachments left the escort. Reliable men carried trunks and barrels to reliable places. Each crewman was assigned a place of return in order to collect his share. Jase left Miss 'Melia at Mobile, sitting atop a ton and a half of gold buried in the cellar of a modest house she'd bought with cash. From Atlanta to Augusta, from Augusta to Charleston—tons of gold left the train at every stop—then to Florence, to Wilmington, to Goldsborough, and finally to Richmond, where—with army playing, and an honor guard at the salute—Jase and the crew of Arcola handed over to the Confederate treasury a sum somewhat in excess of forty-four million dollars. "There's more where that came from," Jase said. "We couldn't get it all."

"Would you care to go fetch it, captain?" Secretary Benjamin asked. "We are able to afford to give you another boat."

"I believe my health requires a furlough," Jase told him.

The crew of Arcola were given discharges or long furloughs. Jase was promoted captain and permitted to shake the papery hand of Jefferson Davis while a band played "Bonnie Blue Flag." He bought a civilian suit and took the train south to Charleston, the place of his birth, where he began to work at ways of investing his share of the money.

29.

Jason is King in Corinth

Jase hadn't given 'Melia an address at which he could be reached, had just told her that he'd write. And then not written.

He was not very surprised, though, five weeks after his arrival in Charleston, to step out of his new town home to find Miss 'Melia standing on the curb opposite, silhouetted by the sparkling waters of Charleston Bay. Small, in a modest brown dress, her eyes shaded by round smoked glass, the spectacles like the double bores of a shotgun aimed between his eyes.

It was not surprise, surely, that caused his heart to drop from his ribs, to stop his breath in his throat.

Jase crossed the street, touched his hat. "Miss 'Melia," he said.

"Captain." She had a walking stick in one hand, and her black medical bag in the other. She put both objects in one hand and put her free arm through his. "Shall we walk?"

"If you like."

They walked along the waterfront promenade. Gulls cawed overhead. The masts and funnels of ships, blockaded here for the length of the war, stood against the

horizon in a black tangle.

"You didn't write," she said.

"It's been a busy time," Jase said.

"That is your new house, I believe? If your neighbors are not to be disbelieved?"

"Yes."

"You are spending freely? And no one questions it?"

"I tell them it's prize money from the cruise of the Mobile."

She sighed. "Alas. No such story is available to me."

"You're the daughter of a wealthy and prominent citizen. There is no reason why you should not spend money, and on any scale you like."

Her shotgun eyes turned to his. "People talk."

"Let them. What do you care?"

Poisons people, he thought, and worries about what the neighbors say.

She turned away, eyes scanning the bay. Then she stopped, turned to face him.

"It was to be forever," she said. "Forever!"

"Miss 'Melia," he said, "what promises did I ever make you?"

"That woman in your house!" she said. "The one with the yellow hair and the two children. Who is she?"

"My wife."

Jase winced as her gloved hand gripped his arm. "You left me and married some stranger?"

He straightened, looked into the black lenses. "I've been married for seven years. The boy and girl are mine."

There was more to it than that, if he'd wanted to tell her, concerning how limited were the options of a young officer's when he'd got a child on the daughter of a superior officer. How marriage brought a degree of patronage in an overcrowded service. How the patronage had gone North with his father-in-law, and left him with fewer options than ever.

Till now. Till he had a fortune in his hands.

"You promised!" she said. "You said it would be forever!"

"I promised you a share equal to mine," Jase said. "And I kept my promise."

Her chin trembled. "So I'm just a means to an end?" she said. "Like Arcola? Like Pendergas?"

"Just like I was a means to your end." he said. "Like your father served you. And Euphemism."

She leaned closer to him, the words hissing out. "I killed a man for you!"

Scorn forced a bitter laugh from his lips. "And the other men? The crew of the Felicity? Who'd you kill them for?"

The hand on his arm lost strength, and the color drained from her face. "They would have sold the secret to the Yankees," she said. "Or taken the money themselves." Her lips shivered, and her voice was weak.

"We have made a covenant with death," Jase said, "and with hell we are in agreement." He took her hand from his arm and separated himself from her. She clutched at her stick and medical bag with both hands, swayed on her feet.

"We got what we wanted, mostly," Jase said. "And what we didn't get, we can't have. We're too dangerous to be together." He raised his hat. "Keep well, Miss 'Melia."

He left her there on the waterfront, knuckles white as she clutched her medical bag, the gulls calling over head.

And he thought to himself, Thank God that's over at last.

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