



Napoleon's Gambit

A novel by Eric Goldman

Sailing through history ...
to commit the perfect crime

Chapter Five

January 12, 2010

Wearing my stiff new uniform blues, I enter the Admiral's office and salute. He waves his hand at the couch, walks around his desk and sits on its edge. His gleaming black shoe swings in an arc as he crosses his legs. He looks at me, "Report."

"I opened a bank account with TSB as directed, sir. Deposited the check, and it cleared. I now appear to own twenty million dollars." I shake my head in wonder.

"Don't get any ideas, Captain, about spending the money foolishly." He laughs at my rueful grin. "Have you accomplished anything other than amazement that the check didn't bounce?"

"Aye, sir. I have signed a deal with a shipyard to build the boat. The yard is in Canet, on the French coast of the Mediterranean, about

sixty kilometers from Spain. With a little luck, the boat should be ready in about eight months.”

He nods. “How much?”

“About five million Euros for a standard one, but her rig and all of her systems are in addition to that. Maybe a few million on top to debug. I think we’ll be close to budget to build her.”

“And the electrical problem?”

“I visited a company north of Boston, called BHG Inc.” I hand him my prepared report and he reads:

Bacterial hydrogen generators produce hydrogen by exposing algae to sunlight. A glass spiral is wound in a helix, like a shell. A small pipe, with a special algae growing on its surface, runs down the middle of the glass spiral. The pipe carries fresh water to the algae’s roots, and the algae’s antennae wave in the air inside the spiral and soak up sunlight through the glass walls. Photosynthesis separates out the hydrogen, which is pumped into a tank. The hydrogen, along with air, feeds into fuel cells to produce electricity. The fuel cells produce two by-products: heat and fresh water. The water is used on the boat; the heat, to warm the water and the boat or to pre-heat the cooking elements.

Cassius finishes reading and looks up.

I say, “The spirals look promising, sir. But they don’t produce enough electricity yet. Carl Greenwood, the CEO, said they are genetically re-engineering the antennae on the algae, to make the receptors bigger. He thinks it will come close to what we need.”

He nods again, and pauses, his chin on his chest, thinking. After a few moments, he looks up. “You are doing well, Captain. What about navigation?”

“I have spoken to a Doctor Selenol, sir, an astronomer at the Royal Observatory.”

I outline my plan to use photographs and charts of the sky from

known positions, mount a camera on the boat, snap shots of the sky where the boat is, and compare them to the database of images. I end by saying, “The Doctor thinks it may work. He’s modifying some software and collecting the charts we need. Should be ready to test in a few months.”

“Did he not ask why we might need a backup system?”

“Yes, sir. I told him that it was a contingency in case terrorists knocked out the system. He said *Good God!* to that, and offered his help immediately.”

Cassius laughs. “Excellent. Any problems to report? No, that is indeed good news. Dismissed.”

“It would make much more sense to me, sir, if you told me what the mission is. Wouldn’t you like to maximize the mission’s chances of success?”

“Of course. But if I tell you about the mission and you can’t build the boat, I’ll have to kill you.” Again, that toothy smile and the calm voice, “Dismissed.”

“Aye, sir.”

We exchange salutes.

January 14, 2010

I report for duty to HMS Temaraire, the base’s gymnasium. I make my way to Sensei Takano’s dojo, pause at the door, bow and enter. The Sensei, wearing a white gee with a frayed black belt, waits silently. I remove my shoes, bow my head, and raise my eyes to him.

He’s short and wiry, broad shouldered and with huge hands. He shakes my hand with a strong grip and his smile reveals even teeth. He leads me to the change room and orders me to strip to my underwear. He walks around me twice, muttering in Japanese. I don’t understand a

word, but he stops in front of me, and nods.

He hands me a gee, waits while I slip into it, tie the flaps, and knot the belt. A white belt, as expected - each Sensei grades his new pupil. He leads the way to the dojo, its pale wooden floor cold on my bare feet. Along one wall is a row of green lockers.

The Sensei crosses to a locker, opens its metal door with a clang and removes two wooden sticks, each about two inches thick and six feet long. He hands me one and I heft it, finding the balance point.

He walks to the middle of the room, faces east, places the stick to his right side and kneels. He waits while I do the same, taking up station behind him. He bows to honor the dojo, and I bow too. He turns to face me and we bow to honor each other. Then, somehow, he stands about three feet in front of me, the stick poised, his face placid, his body still, apart from a slow steady breathing. His eyes glitter with concentration. He waits while I leap to my feet and face him. He nods and swings his stick mightily, at my head. I manage to block it, but I stand, trying not to howl in pain and grab my arm to rub it.

He says, "Yes," shaking his head sadly, "as I suspected. You have put all your training into your natural weapons."

I nod, my arm numb. "Sensei Takano, my previous Sensei was from the old school, who believed the original translation of the word *Karate* was the art of empty-handed fighting."

He grunts. "And this Sensei. He fought a man with a sword with his empty hands? And now, for you to learn quickly how to survive hand-to-hand combat -." He throws up his hands in futility. "To learn how to save your life with a sword, to do this in only a year and in only three hours a day at that, you will have to pay the price in blood."

Sensei tests me with his hands and feet and again with the sticks. We work for twenty minutes, break for five, and start again. Three hours pass and I'm light-headed with fatigue. We end the session with the

customary bows to the dojo and each other. I limp out, sore, bruised, but happy. He could kill me any time he chose to, but I know I'm in good hands.

January 16, 2010

Sergeant Davis, my weapons instructor, is about my height but heavier. His beer belly stretches his camouflage fatigues into a tight curve, giving him a pregnant look. His voice is harsh, worn out from speaking above the roar of gunfire from the range nearby. He greets me with: "Damn sods, will leave that fucking door open!"

He stalks off to slam the door. His right forearm bears a tattoo of a chain wound round and round, ending in a bed on his bicep. Handcuffed to the bed is a nude woman, spread-eagled. He slides into his chair, puts his feet up on the desk, looks me up and down and says, "Who are you?" And seconds later, adds, "Sir."

I eye him for a second. "Joshua Rick."

He yanks his feet off the desk and sits up. "You're the one!" He stands. "Sock it to them, sir. This way, please." He leads the way into the armory.

I say as casually as possible, "Sarge. This may seem a little strange, but could you tell me what weapons I'm to be trained on?"

He stops so suddenly that we almost collide. "You shitting me, sir? That would be a first."

"Well consider it so, Sergeant. This mission is so secret, that even I don't know what's up yet. Do you?"

He looks about him, steps a little closer, and says in a whisper. "Sir. If I may offer a bit of personal advice? When it's your ass on the line, you shouldn't leave it waving in the wind so. All I can tell you is, the Admiral ordered me to equip you and train you on enough hardware

that I knew you were into something real.”

I look at him blankly, then say with irritation. “Would you be kind enough to stop talking about it then, and show it to me?”

“Of course, sir. Follow me.”

He turns and walks briskly along a corridor. Down several flights of stairs, unlocking metal doors with keys from the bunch dangling at his waist. He grabs the correct key first try, despite it being invisible below his gut.

We reach a door at which an armed rating stands guard. He snaps to attention at the sight of the Sergeant, salutes me, and hands us the sign-in book. We enter a room about the size of several tennis courts in either direction. The door through which we entered is the only hole, and rack after rack of gleaming barrels fills the walls. The Sergeant leads the way to a number of guns and boxes stacked on a table. “This, sir, is your arsenal.”

A medium-caliber automatic pistol with a large clip, which looks like an FN-7. An M-85, the sniper’s rifle. A hand-held sub-machine gun and a shotgun.

Modern-day pirates still prey on unsuspecting yachts. If I’m going to circumnavigate, I’ll be sailing through their waters. I’ll need a pistol, shotgun and possibly the sniper’s rifle. But a sub-machine gun?

A few wooden crates stand behind the weapons. I raise an eyebrow at them, and the Sergeant says, “A rocket launcher, sir. And smoke and hand grenades. Silencers for the pistol and rifle, cases for all of them, as they’re going to sea, tools and spares.”

I stare at the collection of gear and smile. Why not? “Okay, Sarge. Can we start with the M-85? I’ve wanted to shoot one ever since I first read about them.”

He hands me the weapon. A dark gray synthetic material covers the barrel with a lighter tone on the stock. It fires a 7.62 caliber round: a shot which does a lot of damage. The gun is lighter than I imagined, and

warmer than steel. He measures the butt while I hold it to my shoulder. “This way, sir,” he says. He takes the gun from me and we leave the armory. The rating records the serial number of the M-85 and my details. The Sergeant walks to a workshop and adjusts the rifle’s stock. He leads me along a corridor, and we enter the range.

I sight down the gun’s twenty-four-inch barrel. “Feels good, Sergeant.”

He leans in to point, “Here, sir, she’s ready for the muzzle flash suppressor and I’ve left the standard sight on for this first time. It’s the Schmidt & Bender. I assume you’d like to start with a sight test of two hundred meters?”

“Sure, Sergeant.”

He clips a target to the board, dials in two hundred and hits the go button. As the target travels away, he loads ten rounds into the magazine and hands me the rifle. I set the scope to the correct range and lie down on the ground. Cock the rifle. Click open the tripod and settle myself in behind the stock. I relax my body and ensure that the barrel points at the target. I breathe deeply, and as the gun-butt raises and lowers with my lungs, I note the rise and fall of the scope across the target. I close both eyes to wet them, open both and draw a bead with the right. I breathe deeply. Holding my breath, I slowly lower the gun until the scope registers the bull’s eye on the cross hairs. Still not breathing, I gently squeeze the trigger ten times in rapid succession.

“Fuck me gently with Big Bertha,” says the Sergeant, lowering his binoculars. He turns to look at me, astonished. “One fucking hole! Where did you learn to shoot like that, sir?”

“In the Canadian Navy.”

“That right, sir? There was a bugger in Afghanistan, from Canada. Scored a kill from a mile and a half. They wanted to give him a medal. Sod wouldn’t take it.”

He takes the rifle from me and says, “The sight is a little low and left, sir. I’ll get it seen to.”

“Thanks, Sarge. Put it away for me, will you? I’ll see you tomorrow. We can try out the shotgun.”

January 17, 2010

I knock on Ses’s office door. She opens the door and studies me. “Did you know your eyes match your uniform?”

“No.” I laugh. “That’s strange. It’s one of the first thoughts that went through my mind when I saw you at Heathrow.”

“We could be twins.”

I recoil in mock horror. “No. I don’t want to think of you as my sister.”

She smiles pensively. She straightens her shoulders and says briskly, “Did you read your textbook like a good boy?”

“Yes, ma’am. Ah, sorry. Forgot. I was just trying to show you that we can skip class – I’m a well mannered fella already.”

She laughs and shakes her head. “All students want to play truant. Don’t you want to spend time with me?” She smiles widely and shrugs.

“Ses, I would be happy spending time with you in a traffic jam. When I said skip class, I was thinking of us doing something, but not in your office.”

“Like what?”

“Don’t know. Just a thought.”

She glances at her watch and frowns. “I don’t really have much time, Josh. I’d like to do something, but maybe some other time?”

I nod.

“Do you have any questions regarding your assignment?”

“Apart from the obvious one, of why I’m studying all this?”

She shakes her head. “If you’re going to ask me that question each time we begin a lesson, we may as well cancel class. I don’t know any more than I knew last time.”

I smile. “Purely rhetorical. No, I have no questions. It seems straightforward. Don’t insult anyone and they won’t call you out. And that means don’t look at a man’s wife or female relation in any way other than the way you would do so in front of her mother.”

She laughs. “I suppose if you stick to that, you’ll be okay. But let’s move on. We’re going to look at beliefs. They were more religious than us, for the most part.”

She tells me how more people believed in God, perhaps because less believed in science. She moves onto cursing and how it’s usually linked to beliefs. But I can’t concentrate. “Ses,” I break in. “I’m not that good with people, I guess.”

She stops speaking and puts her head to one side. A smile hovers, and she nods. “You’ve not been paying attention, Josh. How did you get from curses based on taboos, which meant religion then versus sex now, to the fact that you’re not good with people?”

I smile, embarrassed. “You’re right. I wasn’t paying attention. But there’s something I’d like to ask you. It’s personal.”

The smile fades, but she nods.

“I don’t know how to ask this, so I’m just going to say it. Are you seeing anyone? Is there someone special in your life?”

She hesitates. “Yes.” She turns away and looks down at the ground. My plucked-up-courage smile fades. Then she raises her head. “But...,” she shrugs. “It’s complicated.” She leans forward. “Josh. I really do want to get to know you better. I do.”

I hide my disappointment. “You know, ever since I met Admiral Stoke, I have this feeling I’ve fallen down a rabbit hole. Any moment now, I’m going to start speaking in a little girl’s voice, and you’re going

to turn into the Walrus.”

She shakes her head slowly and then nods. She picks up her notes. Just as she’s about to read, she looks at me. “Why the Walrus?”

“He sold the Oysters on a walk, and then ate them.”

She nods and then grins. “You should be so lucky.”

I laugh and blush. She smiles and lifts her notes, and we return to cursing and how it differed in the eighteen hundreds. I pay some attention. Greed is a powerful motivator. To carry on with this is lunacy, but I’m not going to let sanity stand between my dreams and me.

September 26, 2010

I’m in Canet, taking delivery of *Bit-by-Bit*. Behind me is the fabrication hangar in which she was built. I stood on its crane’s gantry each time I visited the yard these past nine months, photographing *Bit-by-Bit* from its bird’s eye view.

The photos show her being laid-up, then her hulls and nacelle standing on concrete blocks, then with the bulkheads installed, next her motors and drives in place, and then her cabinets, fixtures and deck. Then she’d been painted midnight blue, her rig had risen, and just a few weeks ago, the black carbon-fiber covers of her four Bacterial Hydrogen Generators were installed on the corners of the couch-house roof.

Standing on the drydock wall, I gaze at her sitting on the trailer, waiting to kiss the water for the first time. My dream brought to life and pride of ownership flushes my face.

I climb the trailer, sit in the soft leather helmseat at the inside navigation, and rotate the seat round and round, surveying my new home and boat. A heady scent of leather, fiberglass and wood fills my nostrils. The

salon drifts past my eyes in splashes of gold maple, blue ultra-suede, and silvered steel. She's almost ready for her mission, while I don't even know what mine is.

A yard worker knocks on the hull and holds up a bottle of Dom Perignon. It's time. I leap to the dock. She inches towards the launch ramp. Holding the bottle's neck, I slam it against the trailer and christen her *Bit-by-Bit*, prefacing it with an unspoken *HMS*. They release the brake and she rolls into the water.

Along with people from the yard, I step onto her deck and go below to check for leaks. Inserting her twin ignition keys, I click one stop over and check the instruments, and then turn the keys the next stop to start the motors. Standing at the starboard outside helm, I order the mooring lines untied, and engage reverse gear on both motors. *Bit-by-Bit* backs away from the trailer. We head out of the harbor, turn into the wind and raise the mainsail.

A slight breeze dances across the water, and the sun sparkles on every wavelet. Everyone on board is smiling as we unfurl the genoa. We sail away from the coast at three and a half knots, in five knots of wind. I can't resist a whoop of glee.

November 05, 2010

I arrived back in Pompey this morning and now head for my first meeting with Cassius in six weeks.

I walk along the Camber Dock's wall, past King James Terrace. A smell of salty fish and diesel hangs. Rusting fishing boats float on the oil-slicked sea, their decks hidden by slimy nets and greasy dredges. I shiver inside my uniform coat.

As I enter Cassius's office, he lays some paperwork aside and looks at me critically. "Does the boat work?"

"Almost, sir. I'll be okay on the voyage to Fiji, but I won't be able to run in automatic mode sometimes. StarFix, the navigation system, works – more accurate than me with a sextant by far, but not as good as GPS – it's margin of error is about half a mile versus thirty feet."

"Right, then," he says, leaping to his feet. "Let's collect Lieutenant Lorimer and take a look at it, shall we?"

"A look, sir?" I say uncertainly. I mutter that I'm not ready for an inspection. *Bit-by-Bit* is a mess. But Cassius is already out of the office in his haste to see what I've spent his money on. I lag behind as he strides along the corridor to Ses's office. I haven't seen her in six weeks, either, although we have spoken every day by phone. Ostensibly the call was to update her on the boat's status, but there were days when we never mentioned *Bit-by-Bit*.

Cassius unclips his security card and strides toward her office door, but then he stops suddenly. He turns to look at me some distance behind. He replaces his card and knocks. He enters when she opens the door, his back to both of us when she sees me. Her eyes light up and her smile lifts my mood. I feel my face answering in warmth. But when I say hi, Cassius whirls around and looks at her, at me, and back at her. He shakes his head, dismissing a thought. "Come along, Lieutenant, come along. Let's go and see this yacht we've all worked so hard on."

I work on a suitable reply, but he grabs her by the arm and whirls her about toward the door. Then he releases her and laughs. He struts to the bookshelf on the 1800s, runs his hand across the spines of the books, and laughs again. He shakes his head, smiles at Ses, nods at me, and once again takes her arm. He leads her out of the office.

We walk to PNRC's exit and enter the Dockyards. Around the quays, to the smaller berths, with Cassius setting a brisk pace. There's

a spring to his step I haven't seen before, and he smiles widely at everyone.

The docks, the boats, the water, all shine in the weak sun, yet it seems colder. We pass a sentry on duty at a gate and there's *Bit-by-Bit*, floating easily in her berth. She's plugged into the shore power, her hydrogen generator covers closed against prying eyes. She's clean, as I rinsed off the sea-spray and salt. But sail bags cover her trampoline – I was going to air and dry the sails this afternoon. Her decks on either side of the coach-house hold a few more bags, and the cockpit is cluttered with tools and spare anchors.

Cassius stands on the dock for a moment, taking in her lines. He turns to see me ambling up. "Captain. This boat is not in a ship-shape condition. Where did you learn to sail? Why is all the gear not stowed?"

His huge smile clashes with the words. I shrug. "I did say, sir, that she wasn't ready for an inspection. And the rest of her is worse. Why don't you both come back tomorrow?"

"Nonsense," he says and laughs. "It's perfect!" And he throws his arms wide to encompass the boat. He grabs Ses by the elbow, walks her to the port transom, and pushes her onto the bottom step. She seems not to want his physical touch, but she boards, Cassius one step behind her. I follow.

Where would one begin, showing off BeeBee? She's at her best under sail, and with her decks all ahoo there's not much place to walk about. They stop in the cockpit, Cassius with his foot on an anchor, and Ses leaning against the cockpit table, looking around.

"She's beautiful, Captain," says Ses. "I'm not sure about all the black winches and sail covers. All that black stuff on the coach, and the boom and mast – she's a little funereal for me. But she's much bigger than I thought."

"She weighs twenty-eight tons."

“Sir. You’re never supposed to tell a lady’s weight,” she says with a smile.

Cassius looks at her. He turns to study me, and frowns. I smile, “Don’t worry, sir. I don’t know how much you weigh.”

Ses chuckles, and he spins toward her and shakes his head. He snaps his head towards me and a gleam of anger appears in his eyes. “Captain Rick. Why don’t you get on with the tour? We don’t have all day.”

“Aye, sir. This way.” I turn to the port hull, and walk back to the steps we have just ascended. I kneel at their top and open a hatch. Point downward and explain that the fat black tube in there is one of her two electric motors, each one rated at 250 HP. Between them, they are capable of propelling her at eighteen knots. I close the hatch, point at the hull, look Cassius directly in the eye, and say, “Hull. Sir.” I pause and see Ses smile in the background, but as Cassius breathes in, I continue, “Fiberglass here, but the stressed areas, the bulkheads and mast mount, for example, are a composite of Kevlar and Carbon-fiber.”

I point out the three helm stations, one on the aft of each hull, and one in the coach. He nods, “But why three helms when there’s just one of you?”

“The external ones allow me to stand on the side of the boat I’m trying to dock, sir. I have to see the dock and be close enough to jump off and tie her up.”

He nods, smiles at me and walks the remainder of the boat. Makes no comment on the dishwasher, washing-machine and dryer, examines the galley and bar, and spends a few minutes studying the controls at the internal helm.

In all this, Ses looks about silently, smiling at me, and nodding. Now, behind Cassius’s back, I smile at her. She mouths, “How are you?”

Surprised by the mime routine, I make a circle with my thumb

and forefinger, smile, and say, equally soundlessly, “Peachy. And you?” She can’t decipher my lip pattern and she looks blank, and then we both giggle. Cassius whirls from the nav-desk. He flushes as he takes in our faces, and his eyes narrow. He studies us alternately. His eyes burn as he locks his gaze with mine. “Leave us Lieutenant. Dismissed. Wait for me in my office.”

Ses looks slowly at each of us and says quietly, “Aye, sir.” She salutes, smiles tentatively at me and salutes. I salute. Cassius stares at me as Ses leaves, and he waits till she’s out of earshot.

“I thought I told you there would be no fraternizing with Naval officers, Captain.”

His anger is too intense. First his warning, then his card at her door – he was going to let himself in. Then his hand on her arm. I take a step towards him. “You did indeed say that, sir. But it seems you yourself have not been obeying your order.”

His mouth drops in surprise. “Intuitive bugger, aren’t you?” He looks away to the sea, breathing heavily. I stand behind him, my fists balled, my face red. He laughs suddenly, almost a cackle, and then he whirls about to look at me, and he grins. He sits on the salon table. Swings his shoe backwards and forwards, and adjusts the crease on his pant leg. He giggles, and shakes his head. “The idea of it all. You versus me. What were you thinking? When I warned you to leave her alone, I was doing so for your own good, you fool. She’s too much woman for you.”

He stands suddenly, his face rigid, and walks to stop a foot in front of me. “Don’t fuck with me, Captain. Get the boat ready and sail it to Fiji.”

I stare at him, rage building. “You know what, Cassius.” And I thrust my face at his to whisper, “Sir.”

He recoils slightly, registering surprise, but he regains his poise.

“Dismissed, Captain.”

“See, Cassius, you’re on my boat. Dismiss yourself. I *will* continue on with this mission. But for the record, you are the only one -.” I pause and glance away. I look back at him, “No, I guess her, too. You two are the fraternizing Naval officers.” I walk toward him. “Now get the fuck off my boat, *sir*, before I throw you off.”

He backs away, staring at me, his mouth working. He turns, strides across the cockpit and leaps to the dock. He marches away and I stand for minutes, trying to calm myself.

I go for a run. Ten miles later, sweating, I return to see Ses walking up *Bit-by-Bit*’s transom steps. She knocks on the salon door. I jump onto the boat and she spins in surprise. “Josh. Oh I’m so glad you’re here. I need to speak to you.”

She sits in the cockpit. Her cheeks are rosier, her forehead paler and she’s ill at ease. She smells different, too. I look at her uncertainly and, searching for something to say, blurt out, “You wearing makeup?”

Surprised by my observation, she hesitates. She opens her mouth to speak and I say, “Why do you feel a need to talk? You and him – difficult as that is for me to understand - what’s it to do with me?”

She bites her lip. “Like I said: Teddy and me, it’s complicated.”

“Teddy, is it? No wonder he told me to keep my pecker in my pants concerning you.”

Her forehead creases in surprise. “He said what?”

I stare at her angrily, saying nothing. Her rage compresses her lips into a thin line and she stares down at the cockpit sole, not speaking. I glance away in disgust, thinking of his hands on her.

“Can I explain?” She asks quietly after a time, her eyes pleading.

I stare at her for seconds and then shake my head angrily. She shakes her head too, and draws breath to speak. I wave my hand in the air, “I don’t want to know. I can’t even think of him with you.”

She points a finger. “Don’t you accuse me of anything, Josh. You don’t want to know how and why. Okay, that’s your prerogative. But don’t criticize what you don’t understand.” She turns to the right and pain flickers across her face. She looks back and shakes her head gently, eyes filled with concern, “Don’t make him angry, Josh. He’s dangerous.”

I lean back, taken unaware. “He sent you to warn me?”

Her face crumples. “No. I care for you. I really do. I would like to leave him, but I can’t.”

“In my experience, Ses, most people mean *won’t* when they say *can’t*. Why not?”

“I’m scared of him, and you should be too.”

I shake my head and stare at her for a time. Then I nod slowly. “The warning seems heartfelt. I’ll take it in good grace. I don’t understand you, or him, or this mission. I said before, I’m not good with people. But I thought you and me...” I shrug.

A tear rolls down her cheek. I glance across the docks, out to sea. A gray mist has risen and the sun has run, leaving dark shadows. She says huskily, “Josh, I just need some time.”

I throw up my hands in frustration and she nods, and stands to leave. She takes a few steps towards the rail, turns, and says, “I almost forgot. The Admiral told me to tell you, your history lessons are cancelled forthwith. He said you knew enough.” She turns with finality and walks away.

My sweat is freezing on me. I head inside to shower.

November 30, 2010

After our run-in over Ses, Cassius surprised me by being civil, when I next reported to him. His manner has become almost jovial.

Captain Fulsome shows me in and I hand Cassius my report.

I have taken to writing my status down, so I don't have to say much. He reads that the boat and I are ready. I have merely to complete provisioning.

“Excellent, Josh. When can you depart for Fiji?”

“I leave on December fifth, sir. When will you be telling me about the special mission?”

“When you reach Fiji. If I told you now, you wouldn't believe it anyway – it's one of those things you have to see.”

I sigh.

He carries on, ignoring my frustration. “And the voice-actuated command system?”

“I plan on working on it on the way to Fiji, sir. I hope she will understand me by the time I reach it.”

He nods. “It's your neck if it doesn't work. I suppose you know what you're doing. By the way, Josh. I'll say goodbye now, as I'm leaving on the third – I'll be out of the office for a few days. Bon voyage and all that crap. See you in Fiji, Captain. Dismissed.” He waves at me and smiles.

I salute, leave and smile. I won't have to speak to him for the next three months.

December 3, 2010

I'm packed and ready, lying on the salon couch, reading. The boat dips, and moments later, Ses appears in the cockpit. She's in jeans and a ski-jacket, her hair in a ponytail. We last saw each other a month ago and my senses quicken. She smiles. I open the door and invite her in.

She shrugs off her jacket, shivers and I make tea. She sips, folds her hands around the mug for warmth, and says shyly, “There's a play I'd like to see – would you like to take me? And afterwards, perhaps we can get something to eat?”

I laugh in delight, but then frown. “This sounds suspiciously like a date. Does Cassius know?”

“Cassius? You mean Stoke? I guess he does have a lean and hungry look. Could we not talk about him for now? Please.” Her eyes melt my reserve. I nod.

She smiles and pushes a strand of her hair behind her ear. “You can call it a date if you wish – I think it’ll be fun. If we hurry, we’ll just make the matinee.”

I smile and nod. “What’s the name of the play?”

“Let’s make it a surprise.”

I change into jeans and a t-shirt in my cabin and shrug on a ski-jacket. We stride along High Street to Pompey’s Town Hall, stopping in front of the statue of Queen Victoria in the square. I look at her stern visage and say, “How you doing, old girl? I bet you’d trade a chest of opium for a cuppa tea right now.”

Ses laughs and we walk on, turn a corner and the New Theatre Royal appears ahead. A modern red-bricked building, with the old tin façade from the original Opera House tacked on in front.

The poster in the foyer depicts a woman urging a man on, her mouth open beside his ear, her hands on his back pushing him toward a dagger on the table. The man looks eagerly at the blade, his hand almost on its handle, but his legs angle rearwards in an unnatural stance. Gothic letters dripping blood proclaim *Macbeth* across the top.

“It looks like he’s toppling backwards and that she’s leaning forward to break his fall.” I say as Ses buys a couple of tickets. “The artist seems to have depicted the opposite of what Shakespeare had in mind.”

She nods and says, as we walk to our seats, “It could be, you know, that the artist knew something about men, or perhaps about Shakespeare, that we don’t. But the play is produced by a local

repertory company and I've seen their work before. I don't think we'll be disappointed."

The lights dim and the curtain rises. Lightning flickers and thunder booms. The three witches appear. The play rolls on and, eventually, Macduff enters with Macbeth's head dripping blood. The final flourish of trumpets rings out and the curtain falls to applause.

Outside, Ses turns and heads back along High Street. We walk quietly. The air is damp; it's dusk, and lights flicker on in stores as we pass. Minutes later, we enter Monk's Wine Bar, almost opposite the St. Thomas cathedral. A bay window overhangs the street, its table set with a white cloth, silverware and a candle, all sundered into a hundred dancing reflections in the leaded glass.

We are shown to a table and we order.

I say, "The locals were great. That was really neat. Thanks."

She looks around, pulls her chair in closer and smiles. "When First Witch told her master, the Tiger, *But in a sieve I'll thither sail*. You know, in Shakespeare's time, people believed witches could use a sieve as a boat. When she said that, I wished I was a witch – give you a good reason to take me sailing with you, in case you get holed by a shot."

I lean forward. "You want to come with?"

Then I sit back. "What do you mean *holed by a shot*?"

She looks away, touching her scar. "It's - it's just the historian in me coming out. I didn't mean anything, really. You remember we talked about those pirates a few months back, who shot those people and stole their yacht?"

We sit in silence for a while.

"That play," I say. "Macbeth, I mean. Interesting that we went to see it now."

"In what way?" She looks puzzled.

"I was thinking of ambition, greed, betrayal - that kind of thing.

It's been around since Eve."

She looks down at the table.

I say, "I always wondered if Macbeth would have done what he did, if it hadn't been for his Lady's tongue-lashing."

She looks up and smiles tentatively. "Tongue-lashing? You mean that in a sexual way?"

"Uh-uh, although that's implied. She knew he wasn't up to it. That's why, when she got his letter telling her what the witches said to him, she says, *Hie thee here my lad, that I may speak into your ear....*"

"You mean,

*Hie thee thither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,
And chastise with the valor of my tongye
All that impedes thee from that golden round...."*

"Exactly. That's exactly what I meant."

She half smiles at me, "So, what you trying to say, sailor boy? That the female of the species is more deadly than the male? Be careful, Josh – if we ever become lovers, I might bite your head off."

I look out the window. It's a black night, the sidewalk obscure. "You and Cassius. I can't figure you out."

She reaches across the table and takes my hand. It's the first time we have touched since we shook hands at Heathrow. Lilac wafts across the gap between us, and her skin feels soft and warm. I stare into those blue eyes: it's like I'm in freefall, surfing down huge waves, the threat of a broach imminent.

Some time later, I pay the bill and we leave. She lives in an apartment a stone's throw from the Cathedral. We stop in front. She says, "Thanks, love, it was brilliant." She steps closer and looks up into my eyes.

And then she says softly, "Damn you, Joshua Rick. It wasn't supposed to be like this." She looks away, and seconds pass before she

whispers, “You are a special man, Josh. I wish it could be different.” She reaches up and cups her hand behind my head, pulls my face down and kisses me on the lips. When I open my eyes, she’s already at the entrance. She doesn’t look back and I stand for minutes, savoring the feel of her soft, moist lips, and trying to trap her perfume molecules in my nose forever.

December 4, 2010

At yesterday’s training session, Sensei invited me to drink tea with him today. Almost a year we have worked together, and this will be our first tea.

He welcomes me into the dojo and leads the way to his office. I have never been in his office before, either. A small desk stands wedged into a corner. No chairs in the room, and the floor is bare save for a cane mat in the center. A tea service sits in the middle. Three of the walls are empty. On the wall opposite the door, hangs a sword on wooden pegs: a little less than four feet long, with a slightly curved blade and a lacquered black handle.

I give him the bonsai I’m carrying. An olive tree, in a ceramic bowl. “Sensei. Please accept this little gift in return for your wisdom and teaching. And for caring...” I smile tentatively, “about me. They said the tree would bear real fruit. Bitter, because the olives will be tiny.”

He laughs delightedly, examining the tree. “Thank-you, Josh. You will live on in my thoughts, each time I put one of these olives in a tiny martini.” We both smile.

He sits on the mat, and I sit opposite him. He places a cup before me, drops in a bag of Orange Pekoe and pours steaming water from a pot. “Drink. Real Japanese tea. From Sri Lanka,” he smiles.

I laugh and raise the cup, and we clink and sip.

“You look well, Josh, and happy. Your boat is ready. Yet, there is something else: the gleam is back in your eye. Perhaps your history teacher has visited you.”

I blush, smile and nod. “Yes, Sensei. She did. We... well, we went on a date.”

“A date! While the cat is away -.” He stops and stares out the window. He frowns and strokes the underside of his jaw. “But I did not ask you to tea, to talk about women. Can you tell me anything more about your mission?”

I have told him about Operation Green before, so now I tell him what I know of the secret mission.

He looks at me for some time. “And this is all you know of this operation in Fiji?”

I nod and he shakes his head. “You are not a fool, Josh. But to undertake a mission you know nothing about is foolish.”

I look away. “I’m confused, Sensei.”

“Of course,” he says, frowning. “Nothing stands on air, especially not thoughts.”

He waits for me to continue. When I remain silent, he says, “Matters of confusion arise, when morals collide with desires. Which of these troubles you?”

I nod grimly. “Both, Sensei,” I whisper.

He sips his tea and I do the same. He looks at me, “Josh, my son. Part of your worth, is that you do not see yourself for who you really are. You must learn to trust yourself. Without that, you trust no one.”

He called me *son*. I sit still, elation edged with responsibility, and then look up. “Sensei. You are right about the Lieutenant. In some ways, I do this for her, in the hope that it means I do it for us - her and me. I also do it, because the Admiral offered to pay me five million

dollars. And for the boat. It could be a good thing for humanity.”

He shakes his head gently. “You must look deeper inside yourself, son, to find the correct order for your reasons. You respect me, because I can kill you. But our planet can, too.”

I look at him, puzzled, but he shrugs and says. “These are good reasons, for all but the special mission.”

“You mention trust, Sensei. I don’t trust the Admiral. I’m not sure about the Lieutenant’s feelings, and Sergeant Davis would sell his mother for a nickel bullet. The admiral did say, that when he told me about the mission in Fiji, I could decide then if I was going, or not, and that either way, I would get to keep the boat.”

He frowns and nods. “I understand. You will decide later.”

“Yes. When I know more.”

We drink more tea. I look up again at the sword on the wall. “Sensei. Can you tell me about the sword?”

He says that it’s a samurai sword from the 16th century. Forged by a master craftsman from two hundred layers of steel, it is virtually shatterproof. When another sword strikes its blade, only a small chip results leaving the sword’s lethal edge intact.

“But Sensei. How did you come by it?”

He looks at me and blushes. “I earned it in the Kunité. What I used to think of as the ultimate form of combat: a full-contact elimination contest. Now, of course, gray-haired and wiser, I know there is no ultimate form of combat. Even the victor loses something on a battlefield.”

He looks up at the sword for a moment, and nods. Then he looks at me sternly. “But you, Josh. You will not stop your training, when you are sailing. You may remember – I have said it often enough: perfection is approachable, and you have yet some distance to travel.”

I smile ruefully.

He tidies the cups on the mat, and asks, “So, my boy. You are

ready to sail?”

I nod.

“And your history teacher? She is going with you?”

I shake my head. “She... well she and the Admiral... It’s hopeless.”

He shakes his head. “Like you, I hoped she would come to her senses.”

I smile sadly and stand to leave.

He reaches up to the wall and lifts the sword from its pegs. He holds the blade in front of my eyes. The sunlight gleams on its intricately carved steel and dazzles my eyes.

“I do not know who you will fight. But take this. It brought me luck, perhaps it will do the same for you.” He reverses the sword, slides it into its scabbard, and hands it to me.

I kneel, take the sword and bow deeply. I look up. “Thank-you, Sensei.” Its leather handle is worn white from sweat and the grip of strong men. I pull it a little way out of the scabbard and feel its razor’s edge. I pull it all the way from its sheath. It balances perfectly in my hand. Returning it carefully to its scabbard, I stand, bow and nod, not trusting my voice.

We shake hands, bow again, and he says, “Mind your back, Josh. And remember, my boy. A man’s honor is priceless.”

I walk back to the boat hefting the sword, smiling. I’m no longer entirely alone.