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THE GREY SHORE OF CONSCIENCE

by Michael Seeley

"Duty is the great business of a sea officer. All private considerations must give way to it, however painful it may be."

Horatio Nelson

I

"Charles my dear, why must you always prim yourself the most before you go and hang someone?"

My valet had finished darning my best coat that morning. The coalblack on my shoes glistened, but the clumsy Scot had managed to tear a run in the stockings. He muttered an apology in his imbecilic brogue and sent for a new pair. It was with some vexation then that I walked late into the dining hall, Mary's throne-room. I tried not to fidget under her gaze as I adjusted my cravat and settled for the now-cold breakfast.

"And what makes you think we'll be doing anything of the sort?" I said. "A Board has yet to try him, and there's no promise that I'll even be on it." My best uniform put the lie to that.

Mary sniffed. "Three men saw him do it, and you're a post with more seniority than most in Portsmouth. He'll hang, and you'll have to make him," she said. She slipped a long finger through the next page of the *Times* and slid the front page towards me. "Besides, it's all in the papers. 'Midshipman Stabs Captain!' 'Peck Bleeds - Another *Bounty*?' That boy, Baker, has a better chance at King George tossing him the crown than an acquittal."

"I'd rather not discuss it," I said around a mouthful of rasher. "And I hardly expect that an attempted murder between officers will lead to another mutiny. What's more, heaven knows those devils on the *Bounty* received their just desserts. Bastards."

Mary thrust down her teacup with a force that rattled the china. "Captain Charles Whiteweather, I do not much care if you use that foul tongue among your Jacks and your Tars, but you may keep it on your gundeck or find this little boarding house closed to your affections." With a humph, she snatched up the rest of the newspaper and stalked from the room. As the maid finished clearing, I chuckled and sipped my tea.

The skies above Portsmouth were raining when I left our home for the quay. Mary had insisted on moving from London, for she cared little for society news and less for debutante balls. Whether or not I had liberty to stay beyond a day's refitting, she wanted to catch sight of me whenever *Hector* was in port, and I was delighted at her sacrifice. The townhome was less expensive, and our reunions were most warm.

A lieutenant tipped his hat to me as we hurried past in the downpour. I had my choice of three boats when I reached the docks. I spent an extra pence for the fastest and pulled my greatcloak tighter as I huddled into the seat. The jollyboat rode the waves as we wound through the ships, few now that the fleet was blockading Robespierre and the other tyrants on the Committee for Public Insanity across the Channel. Despite the downpour, though, I had to admire my own frigate as they pulled us alongside: a fifth-rate, *His Majesty's Ship the Hector*

bristled with 38 guns, could fire more than 500 pounds of shot in a broadside, and crammed 284 souls between her decks. And I was master of each of them.

"What ship?" the officer of the watch called over the side.

"*Hector*," an oarsman hollered back.

The announcement sent the men scrambling as their own captain waited to come aboard. I gave them half a minute before I started up the ladder. The bosun piped me over the side, and my lieutenant was waiting with the marines for the salute. "Mr. Jameson, I'll have a report on the ship in my cabin in five minutes," I said.

"Aye, sir." I made to leave, but he continued. "Captain, we've had a midshipman from the *Relentless*. The Vice-Admiral sent his compliments and asked that you receive the messenger at your earliest convenience."

I nodded. "Very good. I'll see him presently." I had expected a personal summons to the *Relentless*, in truth. I scowled as my best uniform soaked further. What a waste.

"I've stowed him away in my cabin. I'll bring him up, sir."

I was already returning the sentry's salute outside my cabin and only listened with half an ear. Once inside, I paced across

the tiled room that served as my office, dining hall, and occasional gundeck when we beat to quarters. Rain continued to patter on the stern windows in my sleeping cabin. I stripped off my hat and greatcoat and hung them against the bulkhead. Rivers sailed down the coat and dripped into a small puddle on the floor. I straightened my appearance in the mirror and then returned to the greatcabin to settle at my desk.

I had picked up a single provisions report from the purser when the knock came. "Come," I said, standing.

A boy, no more than fourteen, with all the requisite acne, shuffled into my cabin. "Good morning, sir," he said.

"Speak up, boy," I said.

"Morning, sir. Midshipman George Fairfield off the *Relentless*."

"That you are," I said and extended a hand. He gave a limp shake and hunched back into himself. I waited. After a moment, I said, "Your compliments?"

His face colored. "Oh, yes, Captain. Vice-Admiral Willard sends his regards. And begs me deliver this letter." He handed over a damp missive with the wax still intact. It had my name scribbled across it in Willard's scrawl and the official air of an order. The Vice-Admiral was a quick man and brooked no

disagreement. He was well on his way to advancement in the Admiralty in London, a fact due no doubt to his marriage to the Second Secretary's cousin. If he wanted something, I would be doing it.

Fairfield shuffled his feet and might have even cleared his throat. I let him fidget as I took my penknife to the wax. The cover letter was brief.

Captain Whiteweather,

Greetings,

I'm assuming you know of the unfortunate business on the Louise. Some blackguard spilled his tongue to the papers. Captain Peck is recovering. I'm convening the Board for tomorrow. Best get this ugly business underway as quick as we can. I expect you to do your duty.

Sir Maximilian Willard,

3rd Viscount Willard, Vice-Admiral of the White, &c.

I pursed my lips at the final line. Was there any doubt as to that? I flipped to the official commission.

By the Commissioners for executing the Office of the Lord High Admiral of Great Britain and Ireland &c and of all His Majesty's Plantations &c.

The Third Viscount Willard, Vice-Admiral of the White, &c.

To Captain Charles H. Whiteweather, appointed Post-Captain aboard His Majesty's Ship the Hector,

By Virtue of the Power and Authority to us given We do hereby request and require your presence aboard His Majesty's Ship the Relentless tomorrow at Ten O'clock in the forenoon, under the convening of a General Court-Martial to try Jonathan M. Baker, Midshipman, His Majesty's Ship the Louise. Jointly and severally with other captains commissioned, you are required forthwith to go on board and take upon you the responsibilities of a Board member, acting in accordance with the demands of Justice, patriotic duty, and all punishments and jurisdictions meted out by the Articles of War.

Hereof nor you nor any of you may fail as you will answer the contrary at your peril. And for so doing this shall be your Warrant. Given under our hands and

the Seal of the Office of the Admiralty this Twelfth day of April, 1794, in the Thirty-Fourth Year of His Majesty's Reign.

By Command of their Lordships

The midshipman was still squirming when I looked up. I ignored him and penned a quick response to the Vice-Admiral. As I blotted the ink, I said, "My compliments back to Vice-Admiral Willard. I will see him presently on the morning."

"Thank you, sir," mumbled Fairfield before taking his retreat.

Lieutenant Jameson came in on his heels with a report of the ship, and I was buried under requests for new halyards, complaints about air bubbles in the pitch, overly maggoty horsemeat, and the general running of a naval vessel. The rain never abetted and I kept the hands busy to keep their minds off the downpour. At sundown, I bade my compliments to the company before putting off in the ship's boat towards the quay again.

The cook had prepared a peppery stew that burned the cold out of me. Still, I swirled my bread around in it but couldn't savor the—

"...even listening, are you?"

I looked up and grimaced. "I'm sorry, Mary. What were you saying?"

"I was just commenting on how preoccupied you look. Was something amiss on the ship?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. But you were right, as usual. Willard has appointed me to the Board."

She nodded. "And that worries you."

I shook my head. "I've served on them before."

"You're dodging, dear."

"It's an ugly business. I won't deny it. Boys do not strut into the greatcabin, bow, say good morning, and plunge a dirk into their captain."

She put down her fork. "I expect you'll find out his motives at trial."

"And that's what worries me, Mary. It's Richard Peck. You know him."

She nodded. She did.

Even packed with people, the *Relentless'* cabin made my own look like a landau, those cramped, intolerable carriages that circle the Admiralty looking to chisel honest sailors.

The crew had pulled out the partitions, clearing the space for the throng that had come to witness the trial. They had shifted two small tables for the five captains to sit. The public galleries had been roped off along the sides of the cabin, and perhaps half a hundred people packed the space. Officers, their wives, and society gentlemen and ladies gawped around each other to get the first glance at either Baker or his victim.

The five of us paraded in, flanked by a healthy compliment of marines. I confess that I was awed by the company. While Mary had spoken correctly that I was a senior post, I was in the company of four others whose careers had outshined my own, if nothing else by their years in the service. The Vice-Admiral, of course. But also Sir Josiah Russell, 74-gun *Defiant*, William Reynolds on the *Pursuit*, and Edward Pellew of the *Indefatigable*, an impressive third-rate only just refitted with 42-pounder carronades.

The bustle in the cabin continued. As we settled at the tables, the Vice-Admiral looked over at me. "You look nervous, Whiteweather."

I coughed. "Just anxious to begin, sir."

"As we all are," huffed Russell. He picked a clump of food from his teeth and flicked the remainder of breakfast to the deck.

Pellew, a wiry, quiet man, looked on with distain but said nothing. I too kept my peace.

Willard cleared his throat and addressed the court. "Ladies and gentlemen, please be seated. We'll begin, I think."

Although I had at least supped with each of my fellow captains, I had never met the judge-advocate, Sir Henry Symonds. I had heard of his ruthlessness though. Best not be the defendant in his dock. Rumor had it that he had been sent down from London, that the Admiralty hired the fastest coach to get him here in time. I was apt to believe it. Peck was the victim, after all.

Symonds was a bull of a man, a great scar along his ear and neck from a duel in his teens. At a nod from Willard, he lumbered forward, tugging his jacket into alignment. He bellowed

the court to order and swore each of us in, noting particularly the nature of our duty to mete out punishment where due. "And lest we forget, gentlemen, the seriousness of our role in this day, we are here to enquire into the vicious stabbing of Captain Sir Richard Peck, to try the accused Jonathan Baker, Midshipman, and determine the causes and circumstances that preceded this grave matter. His Majesty the King, and all the confines of Justice, demand that we not shirk from this responsibility. The court is open and yours, President."

Willard nodded his thanks and turned to the captain of the marines. "Let's have the prisoner."

The court hushed as the marines ushered Baker in. I knew he was only a boy, a midshipman. But his wrists swam in the manacles and his uniform hung like wet washing from his drooped shoulders. He gaped about, perhaps for Mother, but the marines dragged him before our tables, unhanded him and took a step back. Baker would remain standing for the entirety of the trial, watching as we decided whether he'd live or die.

The judge-advocate read the letter of complaint to Baker, indicting him before the assembly.

"First witness," barked Symonds. "And stand straighter, man," he hissed at Baker as the latter quailed before him.

Willard looked down at the court's report. "We'll have Hakeswell, able seaman."

Hakeswell was an old hand, tattoos in blue on his leathered neck and chest hair sprouting from the best shirt he could find, a grubby white tunic long since yellowed. "Sirs," he said with a jovial nod in a quick Cockney accent.

Symonds swore him in, and Hakeswell produced his required statement. "I don't have my letters, sir. So, I begged the good surgeon to put the story to paper. It's all true, that it is. We were talking, I was pressing good Captain Peck's uniform, and in burst—"

"Thank you, Hakeswell," said Willard. "We'll have your statement and proceed to questions. Mr. Symonds?"

The judge-advocate snatched the crumpled paper from Hakeswell and cleared his throat with a rumble before reading. "'A report from George Hakeswell, able seaman and valet to Captain Peck, transcribed by Dr. Edward Green, surgeon, *His Majesty's Ship the Louise*. On Tuesday, April the 9th, I was preparing Captain Peck's uniforms in the sleeping cabin as the good Captain Peck wrote reports with Lieutenant Morgan in the greatcabin. It was about midmorning, because the hands had just received their breakfast, and I was anxious for my own. Next door though, I heard a knock

and conversation. I paused then, because I had been humming, and the talk was louder than my tune. Then, all of a sudden, screaming and a scuffle."

Here, the public gallery began murmuring, shifting in their seats. A stern look from Symonds though and they silenced. He continued.

"I burst into the cabin to find Jonathan Baker, midshipman, swinging his drawn dirk, the captain bleeding, and the lieutenant reaching for his sword. The devil wasn't through and lunged for the captain once more, so I tackled him, and together with the good lieutenant, held him down until the marines burst in and took the lad in chains. I swear upon the Holy Scriptures that the words I write are of a true nature and accurate account. Signed George Hakeswell, able seaman."

Throughout the reading, I stared at the defendant. He drew further and further into himself, as if he could hide from the damning facts falling like hammer strokes. And yet, at each mention of Peck's name, his eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared, much like an animal. I have hunted the stag, shot him, and seen him rear up with more hate and righteous indignation than fear in its face at its moment of death. Baker was that stag.

Willard looked about us. "Questions, gentlemen?"

Pellew leaned forward, steeping his fingers. "Mr. Hakeswell, you say that their conversation was such that it overtook your humming."

"Aye, sir."

"What were they saying?"

"I don't rightly know, sir. Alls I could tell was that something put the good captain to anger. Then the fight, sir."

I said, "What was Baker like that morning?"

Symonds broke in. "If Hakeswell has knowledge of that, he will be able to speak. But only if he knows," he said.

"I don't know, sir, more's the trouble. As I said, the hands had just received breakfast, but I was still about my duties for the good captain."

"Had you seen him the prior day?" I asked.

"Aye, sir."

"And then?"

Hakeswell shrugged. "He seemed normal, sir. Drooping about the ship, carrying the blue with him. Normal, Captain."

"His normal disposition was sadness, Hakeswell?" said Pellew.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I don't know what dispo—"

"Baker was a sad boy, in general?"

"Oh aye, sir! Like a prisoner in jail, he was. Don't expect it was so hard for him, though, sirs. He being an officer and all. It's some of the rougher lot below-decks that have the right to be—"

"Thank you, Hakeswell," said Russell with a suppressed belch.

"He'd already stabbed Captain Peck once, but Baker tried again?" asked Willard.

"Yes, sir. The good captain was only got in the arm, sirs, no death blow, and the look in the boy's eyes was for death, that it was. He tried again."

"Although he was acting normal the day before, and though you have no knowledge of his mood that morning, Mr. Hakeswell, can you tell us any reason Baker might have for committing such a heinous act?" said Pellew, now tapping his steepled fingers together and staring at the table.

The valet's face scrunched then. "Nothing definite, sir."

"But something?"

"Some ugly rumors." The valet glanced at the galleries, many seats filled with women. "Not proper for present company, sirs, all respects."

Pellew leaned forward. "In the interests of justice, I think you may—"

Captain Reynolds spoke for the first time. "I think we've heard enough. No need for conjectures."

"Indeed. The fleet has better uses for its time than scuttlebutt," snapped Russell.

"What?" Pellew said. "I think even rumors may play—"

"That's enough, I believe. Symonds, next witness," said Willard.

"Sir," I whispered to Willard. "Hadn't we better investigate every—"

"You'll find, Whiteweather, that investigation ceases when you have a criminal holding the bloody knife. *Next witness*," he barked.

Hakeswell nodded his thanks to the court and with a glare at Baker shambled from the cabin.

Symonds produced the surgeon next, Dr. Edward Green. Unlike most sawbones in the service, he actually had medical training, a fact which may have saved Peck's arm in the aftermath of the stabbing. He was a mousy man with spectacles drooping from his nose and a slight limp that made him look weak. He glanced over at the defendant, and there was a sadness, or a guilt, in the doctor's face as he stood before us. He took the oath and read his statement.

"...just finished setting a topman's ankle, having tripped in the night watch, when shouts of 'Pass the word for Dr. Green, at once!' echoed up the passageway. I burst onto the deck and grabbed the first hand I could find. He sent me along to the cabin. There I found Hakeswell sitting on Baker, the lieutenant with sword drawn, blood everywhere, and Captain Peck swooning. I passed the word for my tools. Turner, the surgeon's mate, is exceptional and was at my side in under a minute with the instruments. Meanwhile, the marines came and arrested Baker. I cleared away Captain Peck's desk and laid him upon it. I cut away his uniform and looked to the wound. Although it was deep, we saved the arm." He swore to his statement's accuracy and not

knowing what to do with his hands, shuffled and clasped them behind his back.

"And have you served in battle before, Doctor?" asked Reynolds.

"Aye, sir. Three actions on the *Louise*."

"And the butcher's bill was not empty I take it?"

"Sir?"

"In those actions, you treated wounds, yes?" Reynolds snapped.

"Why certainly."

"Stabbing wounds?"

"Yes, sir."

Symonds stepped up to our table. He held a bundle, wrapped in cloth. He laid it upon the table and uncovered it. Inside was a dirk, covered in dried blood. In fact, after four days without cleaning, the gore had started to rust away at the metal.

"Do you recognize this, Doctor?" he asked.

"I believe so. It's Baker's. It was on the floor in the cabin that morning."

"Indeed. Your personal knowledge assured, it is entered into evidence, barring any objections from the defense." Symonds looked over at Baker, who had just enough time to open and close his mouth like a fish before the judge-advocate said, "It is so entered."

Russell snorted back phlegm and leaned forward. "As you've seen stabbings then, Dr. Green, and you recognized this weapon, would say that the wounds to Captain Peck's arm were consistent with the type inflicted by a dirk?"

"Yes, sir. Either a dirk or a French *poniard*."

"In what way?"

"In my estimation, there could be no other cause. As I said, the punctures were very deep, with rips along two edges, as if the assailant had yanked the blade back, sawing the flesh in order to free it for another blow."

"Right," said Willard. "I think that will be all."

"I have another question," Pellew said. He turned to the surgeon. "Doctor, what was your reaction on seeing Baker subdued in the cabin, the apparent attacker?"

"Naturally, I was horrified."

"And why is this?"

Green shuffled his feet about, not looking over at Baker.

"Well, sir, we were friends, as it were."

"Oh?"

"Yes, sir. Baker was a lonely lad when he came aboard the *Louise* six months past. And he only grew worse from there. But I found him to be an excellent whist player, a game I enjoy heartily. We became fast companions over the cards."

"You knew him, then. Did you think it in Baker's character to do such a deed?" asked Pellew.

"No sir," said the doctor with much heat.

"Dr. Green, if you don't believe he was a violent lad, have you any other reason to suspect Baker's motive?"

"I do, sir."

Willard opened his mouth to speak, but I cut him off. "Please tell us, Doctor, in the interest of justice."

"Perhaps two weeks ago, I couldn't sleep one night and went up on deck," Green said. "I found Baker there. He didn't hear me, didn't appear like he was listening to anyone. He was just

staring down into the water. I had to say his name thrice to catch his attention; he kept gazing down into the deep."

"Go on," said Pellew.

"Well, sir, he looked up, and I saw in his face a change, as if another path had opened. He said, 'Dr. Green, might I see you in your cabin?' When we arrived, he drew close and whispered, 'Doctor, I must first swear you to secrecy.' I agreed. 'I need you to look—"

"That is quite enough!" barked Willard.

"Yes, I think whatever this meeting in the night, it bears little on our purpose here," said Reynolds.

Green spluttered, "But sir—"

"We've had quite enough of your services. Thank you, Doctor," said Symonds, walking forward to loom over the man.

Pellew said, "Vice-Admiral, we have a duty—"

"Note your concerns in an addendum, Captain Pellew. I will not subject this court to flippant rumors and merry chases. Next witness," said the Vice-Admiral through clenched teeth.

The marines ushered the cowed surgeon from the room. As he left, he stopped to look back a moment at Baker. I will long remember his expression.

"Lieutenant Charles Morgan," Symonds announced before swearing him in. Baker stiffened, his chains clanking at the movement.

The *Louise's* first lieutenant had an easy way about him. He swaggered to stand in front of us before producing his statement. It ran like Hakeswell's. He'd been discussing ship's business with Captain Peck when a knock came at the door. Baker entered.

"...the midshipman stomped into the room in a rush before turning and slamming the door," continued Morgan. "He stepped up to the captain, who said, 'Mr. Baker. What is the meaning of this? Whatever is troubling you can wait.' Baker never stopped. He said, 'You know well enough, you bastard! Wait? When I'm at your beck and call, full moon or not, sore from the last bout!' Without another word, Baker drew his dirk and attacked.'" The report continued. After he finished, Morgan folded his paper neatly, tucked it into his jacket, and turned to the captains for their questions.

"What were you and the captain discussing, Lieutenant Morgan?" said Pellew.

The lieutenant shrugged. "Nothing of any great import, Captain. Ship's business. If I recall correctly, there was some anger among the topmen as to the quality of sail we've been receiving from the Yard. They put it to me to speak to Captain Peck. Naturally, I obliged."

"Your talk wasn't one that excluded Baker or concerned him?"

"No sir."

"Nothing to make him angry?"

"Certainly not, Captain Pellew."

"After his first strike, what did Baker do?" asked Willard, sneering over at the defendant.

"It is as I said, sir. The captain reeled, bleeding. But it was only in the arm. Baker missed, so he tried again for the heart."

"And you grabbed for your sword?" asked Reynolds.

"Aye, sir."

"Would you have killed him?" said Russell.

"Of course, to protect Captain Peck. I would have presumed it my duty to do so."

"Good," said Russell and rapped the table with a knuckle.

"Mr. Morgan. That phrase of Baker's in the cabin. Please repeat it for the court," I said.

A brief look of annoyance crossed the lieutenant's face. But he nodded before reaching again into his jacket. He took his time straightening the page. "The captain was bothered by the intrusion and said, 'Mr. Baker. What is the meaning of this? Whatever is troubling you can wait.' Baker seemed not to listen. He said, 'You know well enough, you bastard! Wait? When I'm at your beck and call, full moon or not, sore from the last bout!'"

"And he attacked next, without another word?" said Pellew.

"He did, sir. It took us both by such surprise. The captain reeled away bleeding, and Hakeswell rushed in to tackle Baker."

"What does Baker's phrase mean, Mr. Morgan?" I asked. "It's rather cryptic."

The lieutenant shrugged. "Indeed, Captain Whiteweather. I'm afraid I couldn't understand him, myself. Hardly surprising though, is it? The madman. Keeps to himself. Touched by the sea, most like." A few in the crowd tittered at this.

"And yet filled with such rancor," said Pellew.

"Aye, sir."

"You can't shed any light on it?"

"I wish I could, Captain Pellew."

"And you have no other suspicions as to why Baker did this?" I said.

Morgan looked me in the eye. I had seen such a face before, on our lush cook when a barrel and a half of grog had gone missing.

"No, sir," he said. "Nothing at all."

Pellew looked at me, but we said nothing.

"Very good, Mr. Morgan," said Willard. "You're dismissed. Symonds?"

"Vice-Admiral, you will find that the morning has escaped us. The prosecution has a sole remaining witness, being of course the victim himself. Might we recess before continuing?"

"Very well," said Willard. "We will adjourn for lunch. Captain of the marines, remove the prisoner. We will resume in one hour." The Vice-Admiral stood and led us from the cabin. He offered no invitation to sup before disappearing into his first lieutenant's cabin.

I had climbed to the quarterdeck to check the wind – a fierce addiction all sailors find impossible to resist – when I saw him. He had the sling across his arm and the raven's features I remembered well. His black hair, tinged with grey, had slipped its queue and moved in the breeze. He perched against the rail, scowling at the water. I retreated, lest he see me.

Hector's boat waited alongside at my pleasure, so I ordered the hands to row back to our ship. I ate cold chicken and washed it down with red wine. I said nothing.

Soon enough, we were back in the cabin, and the judge-advocate ushered him inside. If they hadn't met him, all officers in the service had heard of him. He was a strong Whig, possessed a formidable record, and above all, was the nephew by marriage of the recent First Lord of the Admiralty, the First Earl Howe. Heaven and earth moved at his connections. He would lead the fleet one day. Despite my anger at the Board's thickheaded handling of the witnesses thus far, I had to weigh the prospect of crossing Peck carefully. Better to be cut out amidst an enemy squadron along a lee shore than make an enemy of Captain Sir Richard H. Peck.

Symonds gave a slight bow to the witness. There appeared a moment of awkwardness when it came time to administer the oath.

Peck's right arm was in the sling. With a clearing of the throat though, Symonds covered quickly.

As he read his statement, Peck's eyes darted about the room, his aquiline nose and bony jaw twitching in agitation.

"...suddenly, Baker was advancing towards me with the look of madness in eyes. He said, 'Wait? Not for you, you bastard!' And then he drew his dirk and launched himself at me. He stabbed my arm and tried again, but my loyal valet charged into the cabin then and subdued him." He continued, detailing his treatment with Dr. Green and finished with a reaffirmation of the truth of his words. He sniffed once and jerked his chin towards us for the questions.

"Thank you, Captain," said the Vice-Admiral. "Your testimony matches the rest of the record. Allow me to say how grieved we are for these proceedings."

"Indeed, sir," said Peck.

"And yet," said Captain Pellew, "Not everything matches exactly. Captain Peck, might I beg you to repeat Baker's words in the cabin?"

"Aye. He said, 'Wait? Not for you, you bastard!'"

"Nothing else?" asked Pellew.

"No."

Pellew asked for Symonds' notes. Russell yawned.

After examining the record, Pellew turned back to the witness. "You do not recall him saying 'You know well enough, you bastard! Wait? When I'm at your beck and call, full moon or not, sore from the last bout!'" he said, reading from the record.

Peck stared back without answering.

"Did he say those things?" I pressed.

"Certainly not," said Peck. "I'd have remembered."

"Liar!" shouted Baker, rattling his chains.

"You insolent pup!" yelled Peck while the marines grabbed the defendant by the elbows.

Symonds leapt up from his desk and clomped over to Baker. He stabbed a finger at the boy. "One more outburst from you and I'll have you gagged, do you hear me? This is a court, not some bawdy, public circus at Leicester Square!"

The crowd's whispers exploded at the exchange, and it took half a minute to calm the assembly into silence once more.

At last, Pellew steepled his fingers and leaned forward.

"Returning to the incident, you do not remember those words?" he said.

"Where are you going with this line of questioning?" snapped Reynolds. "It's clear that in the scuffle the two witnesses heard different accounts. It matters little."

"Indeed," said Peck. "If Lieutenant Morgan heard differently, that's fine for him." He hefted his sling. "The fact remains."

"Indeed it does," said Willard, looking at us.

"Yet Captain Peck, there must have been some reason for it all. Some argument you and the midshipman had, some censure you gave him," I said.

"Nothing. In fact, I think the sea touched him. Lunacy."

"Are you quite certain, Captain Peck? It seems most irregular for—"

"You question me, Whitewether? Do you not think I know it to be irregular, *sir*? The devil stabbed me aboard *my* ship, in *my* cabin! Do not presume to condescend to me!" he thundered.

"Indeed," said Willard after a moment of silence. "I believe you forget who is on trial here, Captain Whiteweather. It would behoove you to remember."

"Of course, sir," I said, color rising in my cheeks.

"And if there is nothing else for the good captain..." said Symonds.

"Thank you, Captain Peck," said Willard.

"Yes, sir," he said. He looked over at Baker, a sneer just hidden. "I expect justice to prevail."

"Assuredly," said Reynolds as Peck stalked from the room.

Symonds finished a notation in his record before standing. "That is our final witness. Right. Mr. Baker. The evidence has been laid before you. Have you a defense?"

III

When he stepped before the Board, Jonathan M. Baker appeared to possess all the murderous disposition and violent nature of a settee.

As during the examination of the prosecution's witnesses, he remained chained and standing. Although the manacles made it impossible, I would not have been surprised if he'd wrung his hands. However, led by the marines before us, he straightened and seemed to collect himself. The judge-advocate swore him in. The lad stared at us.

"Your statement, Mr. Baker." said Willard, after a sufficient pause.

Baker nodded. "Aye, sir." He unfolded a paper and read without any inflection. "'In my extremity, I am guilty of the charge and must accept punishment. I trust only in the court's leniency.'" He dropped his hands and was silent again.

Russell barked a short laugh. "You deny nothing?"

"That's correct, sir."

He turned to slap Reynolds on the shoulder. "And I was expecting hours more."

Willard smiled.

"I take it then, Mr. Baker, that you have no desire to recall the prosecution's witnesses for a cross-examination as to their statement of the facts?" asked Symonds.

"No, sir."

"Then I suppose we are left to clear the court and allow the Board to determine guilt and sentencing."

Baker said, "But sir, I would like to recall Dr. Green as to my character. He's on my witness list. As well as the carpenter, the purser..." He trailed off, looking at the judge-advocate.

Symonds drew to his full height. A wicked smile had blossomed across his thin lips. The opening curtain had just been drawn for him. "I'm afraid that won't do, Mr. Baker," said Symonds.

"What?" squeaked the boy.

"You will not be allowed any character witnesses."

"And why not, sir?" he said, color coming back into his cheeks. "The doctor's aboard. We heard from him."

"We did indeed. Of course, you might question Dr. Green's statement of the facts, dispute his analysis of the knife wounds. But since you deny nothing, this seems a squandering of our collective time. But as to your character, he may not speak."

"Sir, I have the right—"

"Indeed, you do, Mr. Baker. However, that right may only be preserved before this proper court if you follow its proper procedure. You did not. Therefore, no character witnesses."

"And what have I done incorrectly then?" he snapped.

"For my proceedings in Portsmouth, in order to preserve judicial efficiency, any such witness that a defendant desires to speak for his character must be listed and delivered to the court within a reasonable time before trial, not less than three days," the judge-advocate rattled off without pause.

"It happened four days ago!"

"The rules are clear. That left you a day," said Symonds.

"I sent a messenger with my witnesses."

"Ah yes. Your cousin, also a midshipman. Indeed. Alas, he was not received in time. Perhaps in the future, you'll employ a better courier, Mr. Baker," said Symonds. "No character witnesses. Proceed with your defense."

The wind had been knocked from his sails, and the boy fell back on his heels. "I..." he started. His face paled, and he swallowed. Then gagged. Before he retched on the floor, however, the boy pulled himself together. "I have nothing more," he said.

"I must only ask that the court look at my previous record. I believe I have always been a good asset to His Majesty and the fleet. I can only apologize for my behavior; I was brought to it."

I started to ask how, but Symonds announced, "Very well. We will clear the court! Captain of the marines?"

Before I could say another word, the marines were there among the crowd, shuttling everyone through the cabin doors and out into the harbor's sunshine. Others took Baker and dragged him off. In less than three minutes, the five of us and Symonds were alone.

"Shall we be about it then?" asked Willard.

"Meaning?" said Pellew.

"The formalities. We must read the *Articles* and then the facts." Symonds passed the Vice-Admiral the latest copy of the *Regulations*. Willard paged through it until he came to the *Articles of War*. He laid the book on the table, tapping the section.

If any officer, mariner, soldier or other person in the fleet, shall strike any of his superior officers, or draw, or offer to draw, or lift up any weapon against him, being in the execution of his office, on any pretense whatsoever, every such person being convicted of any such offense, by the sentence of a court-martial, shall suffer death..

"Clear enough," he said.

"And with the boy admitting it, we're done here," said Russell.

"Wait a moment," I said.

"What?" snapped Reynolds. "It's settled."

"Indeed," said Symonds. "The law is clear."

"I feel we have not fully examined the facts."

"I agree," said Pellew.

"What more is there?" asked Russell. "The boy went mad and stabbed his captain. Witnesses saw him do it. He admits it."

"What of the rumors Hakeswell mentioned? And the surgeon's story?" I said.

"Irrelevant," said the judge-advocate.

"No," said Pellew. "And I could not escape the feeling that Lieutenant Morgan was lying. Or, if not lying, then not being forthright. There are other circumstances here."

"That's right. And a guilty plea? On a charge like this? There is something afoot, gentlemen. We have a duty to look into it," I said.

"I don't think so," said Willard. "We aren't interested in conjectures or stories. Only facts. A midshipman, intent on murder, assaulted his captain. That captain is Richard Peck, a most noble and respectable officer, not a blemish to his name. Unless we wish another *Bounty* on our hands, this discussion is over."

"I don't think it is, sir," I said. "The board is hung."

Reynolds laughed. "Much like Baker. A poor choice of words, I fear."

"Be serious," said Pellew. "There are mitigations here, and I will not sit idly by—"

Willard slammed his fist on the table. "Damn the mitigations, Pellow! Do you wish to see a guillotine in Piccadilly?" he snapped. "It is insipid talk like that, *sir*, that opens the fleet to mutiny and England to Jacobinism. Robespierre does not care about our mitigations! We cannot be weak."

At the outburst, the table went silent.

Symonds nodded. "Well said, *sir*."

The Vice-Admiral straightened. He adjusted his cravat, calming himself. "Besides which, it doesn't matter. This is no county court. This is a military tribunal within His Majesty's Navy. We don't need your approval, gentlemen. File an addendum. Three for guilt, the vote carries."

It was decided, and the court was reconvened. As the marines brought Baker in front of us again, I studied his face, tried to get some clue. If possible, however, he looked worse than before. I suspected he had indeed retched during the recess.

Symonds took no notice. As soon as all were assembled, he cleared his throat and read, "Midshipman Jonathan Baker, the Board hereby finds you guilty under Article XXII of the *Articles of War*. You shall be taken from this place and hung by the neck until you are dead, so help you God."

IV

"Charles? You've barely touched it," admonished Mary as I nodded to the maid to take away the beef that night.

"Unfortunately, I find that my appetite has rather left me," I said. It had been a quiet dinner.

She sniffed. "Yes. It was in the evening paper."

"There was quite a crowd."

"I'm sorry, dear."

"I don't suppose they mentioned anything beyond the gist of it."

"Hmm?"

"No rumors? No motive?"

She shook her head. I sighed.

Just then, there was a sharp rap at the front door. We paused, looking at each other. Mary raised an eyebrow in question. "I've no idea," I said.

Another few moments and the maid ushered Captain Edward Pellew into our dining room. He made a bow to Mary but addressed me.

"Captain Whiteweather. I must first apologize for intruding upon your supper."

"Not at all, sir," I said.

"In the interests of what we discussed this afternoon, perhaps you would be willing to grab a boatcloak and accompany me on an errand into town?"

He might have said anything, I was so shocked. "Indeed, sir," I sputtered, standing. "Mary, my apologies. I'm sure you understand."

She nodded. "Of course, dear. Don't be long. Good evening, Captain Pellew."

"And you, madam."

Mary called the maid for tea as I hurried from the room and snatched up the oilskin in the hall. When we were again upon the street, I turned to the man. "Now sir, what is this about?"

He was already walking down the lane, and I had to increase my stride to keep pace. He turned. "I have a brother-in-law in the army. He's commandant of the barracks here."

"Yes?"

"Baker's been placed there until the execution."

"Ah," I said. "An interview?"

"Indeed, if you're willing?"

"Of course."

With a nod, Pellew drew his own cloak about him against the chill and turned, not wishing to speak again. Public servants lit the streetlights as we walked through the gloom. We exchanged muttered greetings when we drew close beneath their lamps but otherwise said nothing in the darkness. A small squall started up as we crossed the town square to the barracks beyond. A brief conference with the sentries and their turnkey was leading us to the cells. Outside one, he pressed the key into Pellew's hand.

"Commandant's compliments, sirs," said the turnkey. "He asked that you be discreet; he'd, uh, like to avoid the Vice-Admiral's scrutiny."

"As would we all," said Pellew. The turnkey saluted and left.

"Why is he here?" I asked. "Surely a brig aboard would be just as secure?"

"Indeed. But the town's chaplains have better access on land," Pellew said as he slipped the key into the lock. We entered.

Baker was sitting at a small desk, reading by candlelight. There was a pallet and a bucket besides. He stood at our entrance, surprise on his face. "Sirs?" he said with a salute. He was still in his best dress uniform from the trial, although a smear of something black had touched his right cheek.

There were no other chairs, so we stood awkwardly for the interview that followed.

"This is admittedly most irregular," said Pellew for the opening volley.

"Sir?"

"Why did you do it, Baker?" I said.

Even in the pale candlelight, his face reddened. "I mentioned at the trial, Captain Whiteweather, that I was driven to it."

"Indeed. But we're here for what you didn't say. Why did you meet with the surgeon two weeks ago?" I said.

He remained silent, head bent.

Pellew said - quite coldly, I thought at the time - "Baker, the trial's over. You've been sentenced."

"Aye, sir."

"We're here to help. Tell us," I said.

Again, he stayed quiet.

Pellew turned to the door. "Alright. Good evening, Baker."

"Wait," Baker said. Pellew turned back. The midshipman let out an audible sigh and raised his eyes to look us in the face. "It was Captain Peck. He..."

"Go on," I said.

The boy clenched his fists. "He had his way with me."

"What?" said Pellew.

"Three times, he had me to his cabin and... he had his way with me."

"Good God!" I said.

"Yes. I suspected as much," said Pellew.

"You went three times?" I asked.

Baker bristled. "He's the captain, sir," he said, heat in his voice. "After the first, I avoided him as much as possible, but when the captain demands your presence in the cabin before witnesses, refuse at your peril."

Of course. The *Articles* were clear on disobeying orders, casual or otherwise, and the lad's neck would still have faced the noose.

"It wasn't fair," whispered Baker.

"Why not bring it up at trial?" I said.

"I couldn't."

I shook my head. "This shame is not yours, Baker," I said.

"Why, no more than the victim of a highwayman."

The boy shook his head. "It isn't that, sir."

"Then what?"

"My cousin," he said.

"Hmm?" asked Pellew.

"My cousin, the one I gave my witness list to. He's a middy on *Defiant*, Russell's ship. Peck warned me that he'd ruin both of our careers if ever I spoke. Russell is one of his toadies, and he'd do it for Peck. James is as close as a brother, and I couldn't bear the guilt for such a thing. I just couldn't!"

"Son, he buggered you!" said Pellew.

Baker took a step forward. "Do you think I am unaware, Captain Pellew?"

"Peck could hang for it," I said.

Baker huffed. "Never."

"Article XXIX! Any person, it lists! Any person caught committing the unnatural, unholy act of sodomy is to be punished with death."

"Aye, sir, it's all well and good to be in the *Articles*, but the *Articles* are not justice. You have to convict him before a court-martial too. No one will convict Peck."

"You'll find, Baker, that some have the spine for such hot work," said Pellew. "Unless of course, you write off our visit tonight as base curiosity and impartial interest."

The midshipman gasped. "You would try him?"

"Yes, Baker, I would have it done. But only through your help," he said.

He paled. "I cannot."

"You must," I said. "What hope have you otherwise?"

"An innocent death," he whispered.

"Hardly, lad, after you confessed," I said.

"Innocent of James' ruin."

"At the expense of your own and a miscarriage of justice besides," I said. "There is no evidence without your testimony."

Only rumors and conjectures. And we've seen how receptive the fleet is to such things."

The midshipman refused to look at us.

Pellew said, "If not for yourself, Baker, then for the next midshipman on Peck's mind. You have a duty to do. If you don't, he'll never stop."

Then we held our peace, letting him think. He said nothing for some time. The candle flickered in the corner, casting shadows on his gaunt face.

At last, Baker said, "What would you have me do, sirs?" he said.

Pellew glanced at me and nodded. "We would have you write a true account. It would have gone better before you... well, never mind. What's done is done. Draw up an account, and we will take it from there," he said.

"And my sentence?"

I waved a hand. "It will be at least a week. Symonds must compile the record and present it to the Admiralty. Time is of the essence, but we have it yet."

There was light in his eyes. "Very well. I'll do it, sir," Baker said.

Pellew stepped forward and clapped him on the shoulder. "Good, Jonathan," he said, deliberately using his Christian name. "Take heart. You acted wrongly, I'll admit, but you have been wronged even so. No one will deny your cause."

We shook hands and left him there. Once outside the barracks, Pellew turned to me. He drew close to be heard above the rain. "And I may count upon your service in this matter?" he asked.

I thought for a moment about crossing Peck, about my prospects for the future. Then I considered a darkened cabin, a captain's summons, and a boy's cries in the shadows. "Indeed, sir," I said.

"Right. And your discretion?"

"Of course."

"Very good. Then we'll see it through."

We parted, and I walked home in the rain. When I reached our parlor, I shook the water from my coat and slipped the soaked boots from my feet with thoughts of warm brandy and toast. Mary met me in the hall though, and her expression, as if in a storm, sunk such notions.

"Charles, you've had a letter."

"This late?"

"It came not ten minutes ago." She passed it to me. The seal of the Admiralty was embossed in the wax. I opened it and read.

Charles?" she asked.

"It seems I've been called to London. Immediately."

V

I stifled a yawn as I climbed the steps of the Admiralty building in the morning fog. It was buried behind Whitehall, and I glared at every Parliament member strutting by. I had a crick in my back and a foul mood to match it. I'd secured the final place on the dawn post-chaise from Portsmouth the previous day, and the lengthy trip over rough cobbles and hard gravel had done little to ease my annoyance. Arriving after the Admiralty had closed, I'd spent a restless night in a cramped inn. I'd had nothing from Pellew and hoped he and Baker were making what progress they could. Like Peck's summons to the cabin, one did not refuse an order from the Admiralty.

The doorman nodded without much looking. Like all the civil servants at the Admiralty, there was an entitled attitude about their service, for they dismissed hopes and dispensed careers as tailors stitched seams. I joined a line for one of the bureaucrats hunched over his cluttered desk, examining logs and

receiving appointments. The incessant chattering of two junior lieutenants hopeful for a new commission grated my ears as I waited.

At last, the mousy clerk adjusted his spectacles and looked at me. "Next," he said, unnecessarily.

"Good morning," I said. I passed over my letter. "I have an appointment with one of the Secretaries."

"Ah, yes. Name?"

"Charles Whiteweather, post-captain on the *Hector*."

He licked his fingers and began paging through the log. The spectacles drooped further down his nose the more his brow furrowed. "I think you must be mistaken, sir."

"What?"

"I'm terribly sorry, sir." He didn't sound it. "There's no appointment listed."

"I came all the way from Portsmouth!"

"I don't doubt it. All the same."

"And this letter?" I snapped, waving it about.

He shrugged. Then his brows furrowed again. "Oh," he said. "Captain Whiteweather, was it?"

I nodded.

"I did have this delivered for you this morning." He dug about in his desk and pulled another letter, again with the Admiralty seal, and passed it to me.

"Thank you," I said through gritted teeth and stepped out of the line. I tore open the wax.

By the Commissioners for executing the Office of the Lord High Admiral of Great Britain and Ireland &c and of all His Majesty's Plantations &c.

Sir Phillip Stephens, First Baronet, First Secretary of the Admiralty, &c.

To Captain Charles H. Whiteweather, appointed Post-Captain aboard His Majesty's Ship the Hector,

By Virtue of the Power and Authority to us given We do hereby request and require you to take His Majesty's Ship the Hector to sea with all possible speed and join the blockade of France in the Channel. You are to take, burn, or destroy any enemy shipping you encounter, relying upon your officers and crew to their utmost capacity.

Hereof nor you nor any of you may fail as you will answer the contrary at your peril. And for so doing this shall be your Warrant. Given under our hands and the Seal of the Office of the Admiralty this Fifteenth day of April, 1794, in the Thirty-Fourth Year of His Majesty's Reign.

By Command of their Lordships

It was a form letter. I've received dozens of them over my career and always by courier. Not once had I ever been summoned to London for typical orders like these! Thinking I had missed something, I read it again. "What a waste!" I muttered. I made to stuff the paper back into its envelope when I noticed another sheaf inside. I wrenched it out, tearing a corner in the process. It was unsigned, in a small, crimped handwriting I didn't recognize.

Captain Whiteweather,

You will find that your career will quickly flounder if you squander it chasing down pernicious rumors and slandering the good names of good men. I suggest you do not, in the future, place your nose where it is not warranted.

Before I could think on it, someone called, "Whiteweather."

I turned and frowned. "Captain Pellew!"

He stuck out his hand and I took it. His uniform was wrinkled and there were lines etched deep in the bags under his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

I held up the letter. "I was summoned, sir, just after we saw Baker."

He raised an eyebrow. He pulled a similar letter from his crumpled jacket. "As was I. Just got in from the overnight run. Some devil took the last spot on the morning carriage yesterday."

I chuckled. "That would be me, sir."

Pellew sighed. "Let's see what this is about then."

I had a sinking suspicion, but I stepped out of his way and he spoke with the clerk. At one point, I overheard "The deuce! Are you hard of hearing, man? I have a letter," but I ignored their talk as best I could. When he had finished, Pellew stomped over to me, tearing open another letter. His cheeks were reddening. He scanned it then threw it to the floor.

"I received the same," I said.

"We've been had," he hissed.

"Aye, sir. Can you manage the return trip?"

"I'll be damned if I cannot."

He turned, leading the way towards the exit. Halfway to the doors though, I paused. Across the hall, Sir Henry Symonds loomed over some diminutive captain I didn't recognize, shaking hands. The judge-advocate saw me but didn't break away from his conversation. Symonds did, however, smirk and offer one broad wink. Pellew didn't see him and hurried on. I scowled and followed.

We bustled into the street, hailed the first landau we came upon, handed over the exorbitant fare and proceeded to the first mail coach leaving for Portsmouth. We talked little as the carriage rattled along down the lanes, through the surrounding hamlets, and into the English countryside. I tried watching the poplars. With springtime, each bloom was magnificent. Yet, my mind returned to the unsigned paper and the bizarre summons.

At last, I couldn't keep my peace. "Do you think..."

Pellew held up a hand. He started to speak, but a sharp jolt from a rock beneath the coach's wheels sent us reeling. When he recovered, Pellew said, "I know no more than you."

We lapsed into silence again and said nothing the rest of the day, even when the carriage picked up more passengers at

waystations and changed teams when one horse threw a shoe outside Surrey. By the time we careened into Portsmouth, the sun was beginning to set. Pellew rapped on the ceiling and called to the coachman. "Half a sovereign more if you take us to the barracks!"

"Right, sir!" the man shouted back.

Pellew leapt from the carriage as it rolled to a stop, slapping the coins into the coachman's hands with hardly a thanks. I followed in his wake as he burst up to the sentries. "The prisoner, Baker. He's here?"

The two redcoats looked at each other. "Sir?"

"Listen!" Pellew snapped. "Baker. Midshipman. Stabbed Captain Peck."

"Oh, him!"

"Yes. Still imprisoned here, isn't he?"

"Why no, sir. Didn't you hear? They collected him this afternoon."

Pellew was already moving in the direction of the quay, and I just trailed after, my stomach sinking. Before we reached the docks though, a single cannon fired in the harbor. Never

breaking stride, Pellew and I each drew out our pocket-watches. It was the regulated hour. Cursing, we redoubled our pace.

The docks crawled with sailors. "Make way, there!" shouted Pellew. The Tars parted, knuckling their foreheads in salute as we pushed to the edge of the crowd. As expected, the yellow jack was flying above *Relentless* and every ship had launched a small boat to circle the flagship in witness.

"Who's it for?" I snapped to the closest sailor.

"Don't you be knowing, sir?" he asked in a brogue as thick as my valet's. "It's that lil' boy. The one stabbed his captain!"

I slid to a stop.

It had already happened. One by one, the boats turned and paddled back to their respective ships. The sailors on the docks returned to their tasks, ordered about by their officers. Pellew and I could do nothing but stare in silence. If I squinted hard enough, I could see him hanging from *Relentless'* yardarm in the sunset.

"Damnation," Pellew whispered at last. He said nothing more.

I didn't know how to answer. "Is that it, then, sir?" I said.

He looked at me, as if to ask, "What more is there now?" but kept his peace.

"Can there be any doubt?" I asked.

"Not in the slightest."

"He was at the Admiralty."

"And our letters, the unsigned one. His handwriting," he said.

"Sir?"

"It was the same from the court record."

We stared as the last of the sunlight faded into the harbor.

"Peck?" I asked.

"A good man, with a good name not to be slandered. The finest in His Majesty's Navy," Pellew said, scowling. Again, silence. When everyone else had trailed away and we were alone on our dock, Pellew said, "Home to Mary?"

I shook my head. "No. Not tonight. I'll go aboard. We must be away shortly." Frankly, I could not face her, not now.

"My orders too."

I pursed my lips. "I will write to his family," I said. "They deserve to know."

"I was thinking the same. It's the least the service owes him."

"Yes, sir."

He shook my hand. "Goodnight, Whiteweather." I heard him swear once as he walked away into the gathering shadows. I called a boat for the *Hector*.

Jameson met me on deck. As my lieutenant held his salute, I turned back to stare at the yellow flag on *Relentless*, but I couldn't make out Baker at this distance. I sighed. "A report, Lieutenant," I said. We had orders for the Channel. The pitch still had bubbles, the horseflesh maggots, and new halyards needed ordering.

There was a war on, after all, and there are many faces to duty.