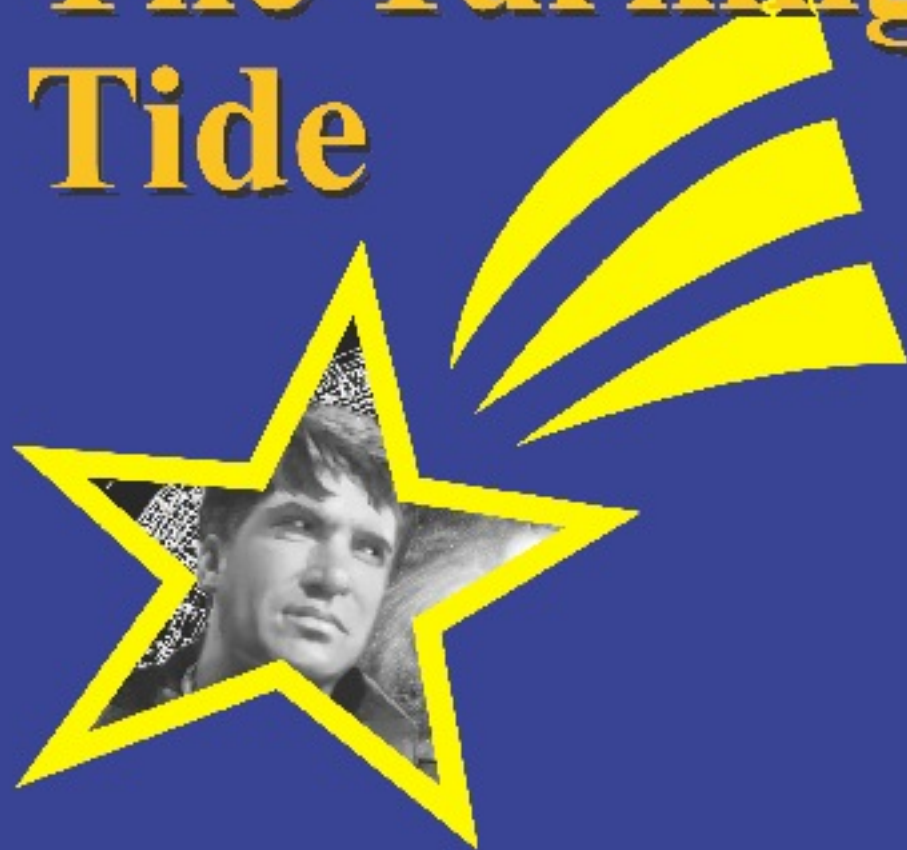


Bill Baldwin

The Turning Tide



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The best-selling Helmsman Saga continues about former-Admiral Wilf Brim. As the Second Great War rages, Emperor Onrad recognizes military missions unique to Brim's abilities that can be done, as well, by a civilian. Soon, Brim finds himself in the thick of it again-faced by circumstances so bizarre and dangerous he must rely solely on his most basic instincts for mere survival. Will this be the end of the Helmsman and his saga? Read on...

The Turning Tide

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THE TURNING TIDE

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Prologue

...nearly two Standard Years later

GANTACLAR HARBOR, IMPERIAL PROVINCE OF
CARESCRIA, LINFARNE/NAVRON, 32 OCTAD, 52016

“**H**ands to stations for landfall!” buzzed the cabin loud speaker. “Hands to stations for landfall! All passengers to seats immediately.”

The civilian packet ship was bumping down through remains of a huge storm that had rendered this whole region of Linfarne’s surface white with snow. Through Wilf Brim’s first-class stateroom Hyperscreen, the wintry landscape looked just as forbidding as he remembered from nearly 30 years in the past: *nasty*. Clusters of lights winked off here and there below while the star Navron brightened the Lightward horizon with a hazy brush strokes of pink and lavender.

Off to Starboard, he spotted the foreshortened outline of frozen Lake Kelton where wind-swept billows of steam signaled a runway melting for the packet’s landfall. The gray sprawl of Gantaclar Wharves cluttered the near shore. Before the Farthington-291 asteroid mines had become unprofitable some years ago, those wharves had been of considerable importance to the Empire. From the lack of lights there, Brim gathered that little of its former activity remained. But, if his speculations about the upcoming conference was anything in the neighborhood of accurate, war was about to change all that. Radically.

They flew a quick circuit of the lake, then turned and descended rapidly toward the surface, the packet’s Helmsman making constant—to Brim, *unnecessary*—corrections for what must have been a blustery wind. Back in ’89 when Instructor-Helmsman Jim Payne taught Brim to fly ore barges, he judged skill by the corrections people *didn’t* make on final approach. Brim still made those judgments.

The packet flashed low over a familiar rocky shore, flared, then touched down on her gravity foot in cascades of spray: nicely enough; Brim allowed the Helmsman that, at least. As they slowed and the spray subsided below his cabin Hyperscreen, he could see a side channel had now melted ahead, curving off to a jetty where six optical bollards flashed on either side of a rusty brow. *Time to get going*, he told himself, snapping his fingers to attract the single portmanteau he'd packed. So far as he could tell, his was the only ticket to this destination—and little wonder. Gantaclar was *ugly*.

By the time they came abreast the brow, Brim was at the boarding-lobby Hyperscreens, watching tractor beams flash from the bollards to the packet's anchor ports, drawing her smoothly to the quay. He smiled to himself: perhaps he'd judged the Helmsman too harshly...

When the gravity engines ground to a halt somewhere beneath Brim's feet, the silence was half startling. "All hands and passengers prepare for local gravity. Repeat, prepare for local gravity."

Brim steadied myself; he'd never been good at gravity switchovers. Somehow they... *ugh*... he could taste his gorge...

"You all right, Sir?" a Steward inquired solicitously.

"Yes, ...I'm fine," Brim choked, recovering as the local gravity took effect. It had always been that way with him; sometimes better, sometimes worse. He could never get used to the change—almost washed out of the Helmsman's Academy because of it.

"You sure you're okay, Sir?"

"Just open the hatch, please."

"Aye, Sir." Deftly, the Steward popped the hatch inward and carefully shoved it to one side. A blast of frigid air swept into the lobby along with the strong redolence of ozone. Brim heard a rasping screech outside as someone extended a poorly lubricated brow to the hatch. It connected with a CLANG; the Steward peered out to inspect with a professional aspect.

"Okay?" Brim asked, feeling impatient for some reason.

"Seems, safe, Sir," the Steward assured him, stepping aside.

Snapping his fingers for the portmanteau, Brim stepped out onto the small upper platform and paused for a moment, not quite ready for either the eerie silence or the half-familiar panorama of rusting gantry

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cranes, derelict holding bins, and abandoned C-97 ore barges beached in uneven rows along the snow-covered waterfront. His last view of Gantaclar had been a riot of clamorous, violent activity. Now, except for a small squadron of executive transports hovering on spanking-new gravity pads a thousand irals to Lightward, nothing except the packet on which he'd arrived seemed related to starflight at all. This wasn't the Gantaclar he'd known; this was the *ghost* of Gantaclar.

He carefully picked his way down half the steep, ice-speckled flight of stilled escalator treads—probably hadn't moved by themselves for decades. Below, a couple of military dock hands were talking with a cabby whose skimmer idled quietly a few irals from the brow. All three appeared to be staring up at him.

As he reached the bottom and stepped through the gate, a Chief Warrant Officer in the Imperial Carescrian Navy crunched forward through the crusted snow. He was heavy-set man with huge, grizzled hands and looked strangely familiar. "Admiral Brim," he said. "Welcome to Gantaclar, such as it is." With that, he clicked his heels and gave a military salute.

Instinctively, Brim returned the salute before he could check himself. "Thanks, Chief," he muttered as his cheeks burned. "Except ... I'm just Wilf Brim, these days. And I didn't catch..."

"Wouldn't expect you to recognize me, Admiral," the Warrant officer said. "We served together in Fleetport thirty durin' the Battle of Avalon. M' name's Blake, Chief Warrant Officer Harry Blake. I was a Systems Tech. aboard old Starfury sixty-five ninety-five the day that Gorn-Hoff got on our tail."

Brim shook his head. He'd been such a close acquaintance of death in the last few years, all the terrors of war seemed to blur together. He faked it. "Chief Blake, of course," he lied, extending his hand. "How could I forget?"

"Considering all you've gone through in the last couple o' Standard Years, Admiral," Blake said with a look of sympathy Brim didn't especially need, "I wouldn't be surprised if you couldn't remember your own name sometimes."

"Once in a while I can't," Brim quipped with a wry grin. Then he remembered the man's feelings. "But I deeply appreciate that *you* did."

“My pleasure,” the Dock Master said, suddenly beaming.

“I recognized you, too, Admiral,” the Cabby broke in. “Just tellin’ the Spaceman First here about you.”

Thinking rapidly, Brim blurted out, “Then I thank you, also,” managing what he hoped was a grin. “And, er, where did *we* meet?”

“We didn’t actually, Admiral” the man said. “But you were on the media a lot back, nearly two Standard Years ago when, ah...” He grimaced.

Brim felt his cheeks burn again. “It’s all right,” he said. “That, er, trouble doesn’t much bother me much any more.”

“Then you’re a bigger man than I, Admiral,” the Chief interrupted. “That was a put-up job if there ever was one—pure gorksroar, if you’ll pardon the expression. Everyone pretty well figured what was really going on.”

“Well, ...thanks,” Brim mumbled. “But please, I haven’t been an Admiral for quite a while, now. I’m simply Wilf Brim, now.”

“Gotcha’, Admiral,” the Chief said, opening the cab door. “Whatever you’re doin’ here, we’re wishin’ you the best of luck.” Suddenly, all three stepped back and saluted.

Brim managed another smile—funny how uncomfortable it felt after all the grief of his court martial. He returned the salute in spite of himself. “Thank you, friends,” he said with real humility.

“I’ll take you to Headquarters, now, Admiral,” the Cabby said, directing Brim’s portmanteau into the luggage compartment with a brief whistle.

Brim carefully stomped snow from his boots before he entered the cab. Then, before door closed, he had to ask, “Who sent you? I wasn’t expecting anyone to meet me at the brow like this.”

“Big guy, Admiral,” the cabby replied. “A Master Chief in the Imperial Fleet—had a raft of campaign ribbons. He was with one of them Bears from Sodeskaya: an old fella’.”

Somehow, Brim wasn’t particularly surprised. “A big Chief and an old Bear, eh?” he repeated before he could stop himself. “You wouldn’t remember the Chief’s name, would you?”

“Ouch,” the Cabby said, reddening, “Don’t think I was supposed to mention him. Me and my big mouth.”

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Well, now it's out, do you recall his name?" Brim asked, but he already knew. It couldn't be anyone else.

"Funny name," the Cabby said. "Something like ...," he frowned with concentration.

"Something like *Barbousse*?"

"Yeah, *that's* it. Kinda' thought you might have heard of him before."

Brim had heard of him before, all right. "And just why weren't you supposed to mention his name?" he asked.

"Well, Admiral," the Cabby said with a frown, "I think he had the impression maybe you didn't want to see him."

"I understand," Brim mumbled with the deep sense of isolation that had plagued him since the final day at the military tribunal. How could he ever explain to ...? "I'll keep it to myself that you mentioned anything," he mumbled.

"Thanks, Admiral. I don't like to rile Chiefs with that many hash marks."

Brim nodded. He understood *that* all too well: Master Chief Barbousse was not a man to cross. "You wouldn't remember the name of that Sodeskayan, would you?"

"Um, Borodon or somethin' like that," the Cabby replied, sliding into the driver's compartment "I think that's it—or somethin' close."

"How about *Borodov*?" Brim asked.

"Yeah, Admiral, that's it," the Cabbie said. "*Borodov*. Had a real gray muzzle and whiskers."

"Pretty well dressed?" Brim asked.

The Cabby hesitated. Well, um ...every one of them Sodeskayans looks kind of strange with their big, wooly hats and the boots and ..."

"I understand," Brim said, leaning back in the seat as the Apprentice eased the passenger door closed. In a way, the Cabby had answered his questions. He smiled. "Let's go find those reticent gentlemen," he said. "I've kept both of them waiting a long time..."

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A few hundred irals distant, a man known only as Covall the Wraith—a skeletal presence dressed in a dark cloak—concealed himself behind a rusting ore barge, watching through binoculars as Brim’s cab started off. Before it was out of sight, he thumbed a HoloPhone and waited.

“Yes?”

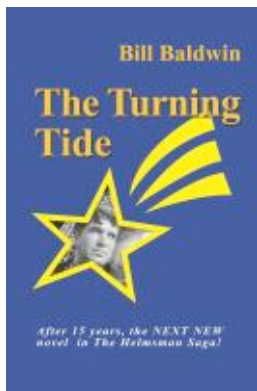
“As you suspected, *he* arrived aboard the morning packet,” Covall said, noting the phone’s display was blank as always.

“You are certain is was *him*?”

“It was *him*.”

“Return to the ship immediately, then stand by for further orders.”

“Yes, Sir,” Covall muttered into an already disconnected microphone, then trudged off toward the executive transport area, clutching the cloak around his scrawny neck. How he hated the cold!



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