

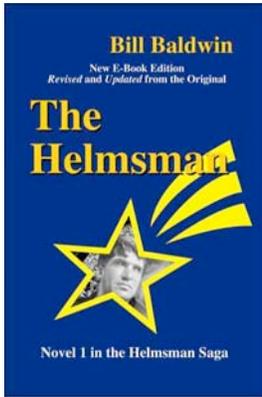
Bill Baldwin

New E-Book Edition
Revised and Updated from the Original

The Helmsman



Novel 1 in the Helmsman Saga



The Helmsman: this first novel in Bill Baldwin's Helmsman Saga is a futuristic, Military-Science-Fiction novel about intra-galactic competition and conflict. First published in 1983, it chronicles the adventures of StarSailor and extraordinary Helmsman Wilf Brim during an epoch of discord and outright war among various star-nations—within a galaxy that could be a far-future version of the one in which we live.

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The Director's Cut Edition

by Bill Baldwin

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HELMSMAN'S
WINGED COMET

By Bill Baldwin

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The Siege, 1994
The Defiance 1996
"Last Ship to Haefdon" (nv) *Oceans of Space*, ed. Brian M.
Thomsen & Martin H. Greenberg, DAW 2002
The Enigma Strategy 2009
The Turning Tide, 2011

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CHAPTER 1

Only three travelers shambled from the coach at Gimmas' badly lighted Eorean station. Two of them disappeared into the ozone-pungent darkness even before the train's warning lights were out of sight along the causeway. Alone on the platform, Sublieutenant Wilf Brim, Imperial Fleet, dialed his blue Fleet Cloak's heating element control another notch toward "warm," then clambered down the wet metal steps from the elevated tracks. The whole Universe seemed dismally cold around him as he reached the landing. He listened to wind moaning through the station shelter while he oriented himself, then picked his way around ice-crusting puddles barely visible beneath infrequent Karlsson lamps and started out toward the dim shape of a distant guard shack. He was shamefully aware of the single traveling case following him. It fairly shouted his humble origins, and he was joining an Imperial Fleet once commanded exclusively by wealth-privileged officers — until First Star Lord Sir Beorn Wyrood's recent Admiralty Reform Act (and six years of war's insatiable attrition) forced inclusion of talent from whatever source it could be obtained.

Shivering despite the warm, high-collared cloak, he peered at the predawn sky. Enough light from the star Haefdon now filtered through the clouds to disclose the fundamentals of sprawling Gimmas/Haefdon Fleet Base: Lines of low, gray-painted buildings, a world of dissected starships, and forests of shipyard cranes stationary against a starless sky. Along the waterfront, indistinct shapes of more or less intact vessels hovered quietly on softly glowing gravity pools while the outlines of others projected above covered wharves and warehouses, all a uniform shade of weather-faded gray relieved occasionally by stains of oxidation or charring. In the distance, mountainous forms of capital ships dominated a lightening horizon

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from still another complex. Brim shook his head bitterly. Fat chance for a Carescrian Helmsman aboard one of *those*!

He stretched to his nearly six-iral height and yawned in the clammy dampness. The sky was now spitting snow occasionally, with a promise of more substantial amounts soon to come. He sniffed the air, sampling the odor of the sea as it mixed with ozone, heated lubricants, and the stench of overheated logics. At best, the Eorean Starwharves – one of fifteen starship construction-and-maintenance complexes on the watery planet of star bases called Haefdon – could accurately be described as an untidy sprawl. To the twenty-one-year-old Brim, it was far more than that: it was also the realization of a dream that only recently seemed impossible. His fellow cadets (and many sullen instructors) quietly did their utmost to make it thus, and prevent his recent graduation from the prestigious Helmsman's Academy near the Imperial capital planet, Avalon. He somehow had prevailed, determined he could raise himself from the grinding poverty of his home in the Empire's Carescrian Mining Sector. A combination of fierce tenacity, hard work, and native talent finally won him his commissioning ceremonies and this lonely outpost in the Galactic Fleet. He counted on those same attributes to take him a great deal farther before he traded in his blue Fleet Cloak – a lot farther indeed.

Picking his way carefully over a series of glowing metal tracks that paralleled a high fence, he stopped at the gate house to rap on the window and rouse its single, nodding occupant. Inside, the ancient watchman wore age-tarnished medals from some long-forgotten space campaign. He was tall with thin shoulders and enormous hands, a beak of a nose, sparse white hair, and the sad eyes of a man who had seen too many Wilf Brims enter through his gate and never return. "A bit early," he observed, opening the window no more than a crack to admit the other's proffered orders card, while denying passage to as much of the cold wind as he could manage. "First ship, I'll wager," he said.

Brim smiled. Metacycles ago at the massive Central Terminus of Gimmas/Haefdon Fleet Base, he had indeed conceded the remainder of his sleep to excitement and anticipation. "Yes," he admitted. "In a

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way, at least.”

“Well, you're not the original early riser, young man,” the watchman chuckled, “nor I suppose the last, either. Bring yourself in here while I try to find where you belong. And don't open the door more'n you must!” While Brim parked the traveling case and made his way into the pungent warmth of the shack, the old campaigner placed his orders card in the side of a battered communications cabinet (which also doubled as storage for six cracked and stained teacups, none particularly clean). Presently, a shimmering display globe materialized over the crockery. He studied the contents. “Hmm. All the way from Carescria,” he observed without looking around. “Caught in the League's big sneak attack, I suppose?”

Brim only nodded to the man's back. “Lose anybody?”

Brim shut his eyes. Did people *have* to ask? All he personally wanted was a chance to forget. Even after six years, the war's sudden onset was as real as the night before. Wave after wave of heavy cruisers from Emperor Nergol Triannic's League of Dark Stars attacking Carecra's famous asteroid fields; he'd been on home leave in the ramshackle orbiting “city” where his parents lived.” Concussion. Agonizing heat — his tiny sister's last, anguished screams. He shook his head. “Everyone,” he whispered almost to himself, “everyone except me.”

“Sorry,” the old man said. “I didn't mean to...”

“It's all right,” Brim interrupted dully. “Forget it.”

Neither occupant found more words until the old man broke his silence with another pregnant “Hmm.” He scratched his head. “T.83, eh?” Apparently, this needed no answer, for he continued moving age-spotted fingers over his small control panel, concentrating on rapidly changing patterns in the globe. Finally, he looked up to consult a large three-dimensional map tacked above a ragged chair. Tracing a long finger along the causeway, he stopped near the image of a tiny, fenced-in square. “You're here, now, d' you see?” he asked.

Brim peered at the map. “Yessir,” he said. “I see.”

“All right, then,” the watchman continued. “Now let me think, G-31 at, ah...” He peered nearsightedly at the globe again without moving the finger. “Oh, yes, G-31 at B-19.” Now he continued

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across the map until he stopped at a basin carved into a far corner of the island. “B-19,” he announced. “Your *Truculent's* moored here, Carescrian. On the gravity pool numbered R-2134. D' you see?”

Brim squinted at the map near the man's black fingernail. A tiny “R-2134” was just visible printed inside one of seven rectangular gravity pools bordering the circular basin. “I see it, all right,” he said.

“Bit of a distance on foot,” the old man observed, stroking his thin, stubbled chin. “First skimmers from the transport pool won't run for another metacycle or so, and I can't imagine the ship'll send one of their own. You're not even signed aboard as a crew member yet.”

Brim snorted. He knew what the watchman *really* meant – that they wouldn't send a skimmer for a no-account Carescrian. He'd been here before, often. The old man smiled sympathetically. “I *can* offer you a spot of tea to warm your stomach until then, if you'd care to have a seat.”

“Thanks just the same,” Brim said, making his way toward the door. “But I think I'll walk off some of this excitement before I try to check in.” He nodded. “R-2134. I'll find it.”

“Thought you might do something like that,” the old man observed. “You'll get there with no trouble. Just keep the set of blue tracks on your left. Snow won't stay on 'em.”

Brim nodded his thanks and stepped quickly into the cold, summoning the traveling case to his heel. A thickening carpet of snow lay over the still-sleeping complex, already hiding much of the unsightly dockyard clutter beneath a mantle of white. Carefully keeping the blue-glowing tracks on his left, he made his way along a dark concourse, noting that his pace curiously increased as soon as he cleared the gate. While he hurried along the rough pavement, he asked himself if it was the cold that made him hurry so — or was it the excitement?

On either side of the road, powerful forms of warships loomed through the falling snow, hovering ponderously over shallow gravity pools, dimly lit from beneath by the glow of shipyard gravity generators. Those near the water were often lighted. On a few, he saw occasional crew members performing routine poolside duties (cursing both their superiors and the snow, he guessed with a smile).

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The signs of life made him feel less alone in the sprawling confusion of hulls, KA'PPA masts, and ubiquitous cranes which now crowded the lightening sky.

Other ships — those grotesquely damaged or undergoing dissection for repair — hovered like metallic corpses over inland gravity pools half hidden by stacks of hullmetal plates and heavy shipbuilding equipment. Brim shuddered as he passed one particularly savaged wreck. On the convoy from Avalon he helplessly watched one of the escorts, an old destroyer named *Obstinate*, take a HyperTorp hit amidships. She had blown up with all hands. That crew would have deemed themselves fortunate indeed to bring her back to base at all, even in *this* condition! He shook his head; everything in the Universe *was* relative, as they said.

* * * *

Abruptly, he was there. A rusting sign announced “GRAVITY POOL R—2134.” Beyond floated 190 lean irals of T-class destroyer: starship T.83, I.F.S. *Truculent*.

He picked his way along stone jetties surrounding the gravity pool, seldom taking his eyes from the hovering, wedge-shaped form. In the amber glow of gravity generators below, shadows from ventral turrets moved gently over her underside as she stirred to urgings of the wind. Above, huddled battle lanterns still cast dim circles of light outside her entry ports, and a sparse web of emerald mooring beams flashed occasionally as the resting starship gently tested her anchorage.

T-class starships weren't big as destroyers went, and at rest they weren't especially pretty, either. But inside their pointed, angular hulls they crowded four powerful Sheldon Drive crystals and two brutish antigravity generators with at least triple the thrust claimed by other ships their size. These latter provided astonishing acceleration below LightSpeed, a regime in which much of their close-in patrol duty was performed. And every iral spoke power. They were rugged, sturdy machines with all the mass of space holes. In the hands of a

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good captain, any one of them was more than a match for the Cloud League's best. In excellent repair, they could attain speeds in excess of 35 LightSpeed, or 35 Light Years per Standard Metacycle; they had a cruising range in excess of 4000 light years.

Truculent's sharply angular hull formed a pointed, three-sided trilon resembling the curious lance tips of Furogg warriors from the K'tipsch quadrant. Her flat main deck widened cleanly from a needle-sharp bow nearly a quarter of its length to the rounded shape of an A turret with its long, slim 144—mmi disruptor. Faired in and raised three levels from this was the starship's frowning bridge, covered by a presently transparent “greenhouse” of Hyperscreen panels (required for hyperLightSpeed vision), which reflected the weak dawn in runnels of melting snow. Projecting from either side of this structure, bridge wings extended like shoulders nearly all the way to the deck's crisply defined edge. A sizable globe atop each of the wings housed fire directors controlling her seven main turrets. From the aft center of the Hyperscreen canopy, her tall, streamlined mast supported a long-whiskered KA'PPA-COMM system beacon that, by a curious loophole in Travis physics, enabled nearly instantaneous communication both below and above the velocity of light and over enormous distances.

Immediately aft of the bridge, the starship's silhouette fell sheer to the single-level 'midships deckhouse, which extended into the aft third of the deck. Wide as the bridge itself, this was flanked by four stubby launches, two in succession to port and two to starboard, protected by the projecting bridge wings. A swiveling, five-tube torpedo launcher was mounted on the flat surface of its roof.

Behind this, a two-level aft deckhouse completed the top deck centerline superstructure. The torpedo launcher abutted its second-level torpedo reload and repair shop. Torpedo magazines and general repair shops occupied most of the first-level space — vital necessities for the long tours of blockade for which she and her sister ships were commonly employed. Slightly aft and outboard of this deckhouse, W and X turrets with 144—mmi disruptors occupied the widest, and most vacant, portions of the upper deck.

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Like all other surfaces of *Truculent's* hull, her stem was also a triangular slab of hullmetal. From his studies at the Academy, Brim knew this one measured 97 irals along the “top” edge with its inverted apex only 21 irals below. Pierced by four circular 3.5-iral openings, the surface was otherwise featureless. Each of the openings (outlets for the ship's Drive crystals) was presently sealed from Haefdon's elements by a system of circular shutters.

Both ventral decks were also virtually featureless, except for 144—mmi disruptor turrets mounted fore and aft along each centerline. Those on the port surface were designated “B” (forward) and “Z” (aft); those starboard, “C” and “Y.” On each side of her bridge wings, “T.83” appeared in square Avalonian glyphs.

Wistfully, Brim pondered her size. Even with her powerful sort of beauty, she still lacked the sense of hauteur he associated with big capital ships like the ones based just over the horizon. “Pick and shovel” were words that came readily to mind. Smiling wryly, he allowed as to how he was fortunate indeed just to have a berth on her at all. Not many Carescrians ever made it out of the asteroid mines.

As he stared through the hissing snow, a hatch opened in the deckhouse just opposite an arched gangway to the waterside jetty. Presently, a huge starman lumbered through, watched his breath congeal to steam, and pulled a too-short Fleet Cloak closer to his neck. Reaching inside the hatch, he removed a broom.

“Shut the xaxtdamned hatch, Barbousse!” a voice echoed through the cold air.

“Aye, aye, ma'am!” The clang of hullmetal rang out as the hatch slammed closed. Shrugging, the oversized seaman triggered his broom and began clearing snow — precisely in time for Brim and his traveling case to meet him at the end of the gangway. The man piled considerable snow over Brim's booted feet before he recognized something was amiss. He looked up with a startled expression.

Brim smiled. On this first contact with his first ship, he was determined nothing would, or could, go wrong. “Morning, Barbousse,” he said with all the equanimity he could muster.

In sudden confusion, Barbousse dropped the whirring broom as his hand jerked to spasmodically salute. The device promptly spat clouds

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of snow over Brim's face and cape, then rolled backward toward the tumbling water of the basin, burbling evil satisfaction. By reflex, each bent at the same time to check its travel — and nearly knocked the other from his feet. At the last possible milliclick, Brim grabbed the throbbing machine from the edge of sure destruction and switched it off, letting it spit snow and particles of rock into the water. He handed it carefully to the seaman while he brushed debris from the front of his cloak and desperately bit his lip to contain his amusement.

“Oh... ah, sorry, sir,” Barbousse stumbled mournfully.

Brim forced himself under control. “Think nothing of it, Barbousse,” he said with his last shred of dignity. He spat gritty stone crumbs into the water, then stepped left toward the gangway. At that very moment, Barbousse attempted to remove himself from the path by stepping right. In midstep, Brim deftly switched to *his* right — as Barbousse dived left. Once more, Brim jogged right, blocked again by the wretched Barbousse, who now wore a frantic look in his eyes.

“FREEZE, Mister!” Brim commanded, stopping himself short in the trampled snow. “And don't drop the broom!” Barbousse froze in apparent rigor mortis, began to topple toward the water, caught himself again, and came to an uneasy rest. Calmly as possible, Brim walked past and onto the gangway, only to stop once more in his tracks. Carefully, he turned to check on Barbousse; the man was still standing before the gangway, broom in hand at parade rest. “Carry on,” he ordered smartly, then hurried up the steep incline toward the ship.

Stepping over a high sill, he drew the hatch closed and breathed deeply of starship odors: the too-fresh redolence of ozone and rank stench of electronics mixed with odors of hot metal and scorched sealants. Food. Bodies. And on every starship in the Fleet, an unmistakable scent of polish. He chuckled as he made his way along the short companionway — *everything* military smelled of polish. Before him, a petty officer glared at her hovering display. Her desk plate read, “Kristoba Maldiva, Quartermaster.”

“All right, Barbousse,” Maldiva growled without looking up. “What now?”

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“Well,” Brim said, “you might start by signing me in...”

Maldive wrinkled a large, thin nose and continued to stare into the display. “Sign you *what?*” she demanded, fingers flying on a nearby control panel. Hues and patterns in the globe shifted subtly (Brim politely avoided reading any of them). “What in Universe do you mean by th...?” she continued, then stopped in midword when her narrow-set eyes strayed as far as Brim's cloak and the sublieutenant's insignia on the left shoulder. “Oh, Universe,” she grimaced quietly. “Sorry, sir; I never expected anyone out so early.” She stared down at the desk. “We don't often get a chance to sleep so long. And the skimmers...”

“It's all right,” Brim interrupted. “I walked.”

Maldive looked up again. “Yes, sir,” she said with an embarrassed smile. “I see you certainly did.” She inserted Brim's card in a reader, then peered at the display. More soft hues and patterns filled the globe. “Everything seems in order, sir,” she said. From her desk she hefted an old-fashioned book, elegantly bound in polished red fabric with gold trim. *Truculent's* emblem of a charging bull Hilaago (deadly predator from the planet Ju'ggo-3 in the Blim Commonwealth), was engraved in its front cover. “Sign here, sir,” she grunted, opening the heavy book on the desktop facing Brim. “We'll have you aboard in no time at all.”

Brim bent to the book and signed full fingerprints of both hands. “Well,” he asked with a smile, “how was that?”

“I'd bet you're in, sir,” the Quartermaster said, returning the smile. “Can you find your way to the wardroom? It's on the same deck level. We'll need a few cycles to make up your cabin. “

“I'll find it,” Brim said with more confidence than he actually felt. He'd been at pains to learn the starship's layout in the Academy library back on Avalon, but now everything looked unfamiliar and confusing.

“We'll come for you there when your cabin's ready,” Maldive promised. “And you can leave that traveling case with me, too.”

Brim nodded thanks and shook his head. What a difference the tiny device on his left shoulder made! Having someone else look after his luggage was a far cry from life on the ore carriers at home.

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Of course, *there* he would have been counted fortunate indeed to have any baggage at all — aside from what he wore on his back or could carry in a pocket.

Along the companionway, he paused at a gleaming metal plate set with old-fashioned rivets. “I.F.S. TRUCULENT,” it read, “JOB 21358 ELEANDOR BESTIENNE YARD 228/51988.” The plaque might have been polished every metacycle on the metacycle from its looks — and by persons who cared considerably for the ship. A fine portent, he decided, and gave it a few good strokes of his own with a sleeve. He smiled. Something like that might even bring good luck.

Finding the wardroom proved easier than he expected — he was lost only twice. He opened the door almost bashfully — officers' country had been strictly off limits as recently as six days ago. With sincere relief, he discovered it was unoccupied and stepped over the high sill. A large picture of Emperor Greyffin IV, “Grand Galactic Emperor, Prince of the Reggio Star Cluster, and Rightful Protector of the Heavens,” adorned the forward bulkhead (identical poses stared beatifically from every available wall in the Empire). Battered recliners lolled here and there along a narrow deck dominated by a massive carved table with ten matching chairs. Eight places were set at the table; two additional chairs faced only polished wood.

Beyond the table, a window opened through the aft bulkhead into a tiny, dark pantry. From within this space, two incredibly rheumy eyes peered at him from atop a thin nose, which ended in a bushy white mustache. This time, it was Brim's turn for surprise. He jumped. “Er, good morning,” he said.

“It certainly does, sir,” the face stated with conviction.

“Pardon?”

“But then I understand *all* you young fellers love snow.”

Brim was just opening his mouth again when he was interrupted by the appearance of a Great Sodeskayan Bear with engineering blazes on the high collar of his Fleet Cloak. The newcomer — a full lieutenant — peered through the door, appeared to immediately grasp the situation, and wiggled long, unruly whiskers. “Lieutenant Brim?” he asked.

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“Yes, sir,” Brim answered. “Ah...?” He inclined his head toward the pantry door.

The Bear smiled. “Oh, that's Chief Steward Grimsby,” he explained. “He's all right; he just doesn't listen anymore.”

“Doesn't listen, sir?”

“Well, not in the half year since I signed on he hasn't.”

Brim nodded, more in capitulation than anything else.

“Don't let him bother you, friend,” the Bear said. “He seems to anticipate most everything we require. Anything else, we get for ourselves.”

“I, ah, see, sir.”

The Bear grinned, exposing long, polished fangs, each with the tiny jeweled inlay all fashionable Bears seemed to consider indispensable. “Sir' is not really my name,” he said, extending a large furry hand. “On the Mother Planets, I am called Nikolas Yanuar Ursis, but you should call me 'Nik,' eh?”

Brim gripped his hand. “Nik it is,” he replied. “And you seem to know mine's Wilf Brim, Wilf *Ansor* Brim, that is.”

“Kristoba told me you were here,” Ursis said, drawing a battered Sodeskayan Zempa pipe from a pocket of his expensive-looking tunic. Six strong fingers delicately charged its bowl from a flat leather case, and he puffed vigorously until the hogge'poa glowed warmly, filling the wardroom with its sweet, heavy fragrance — object of centuries' aggravated complaint by suffering human crewmates all over the Universe. “You don't mind, do you?” Ursis asked, settling into one of the less seedy recliners.

Brim smiled and shook his head. Hogge'poa never especially bothered him. Nobody seriously expected the Bears to stop anyway, but the tolerance had less to do with altruism than with recognition of the extraordinary genius by which Bears engineered HyperSpace Drive systems, and besides, female Bears simply *loved* the smell of it.

“Fresh from the Academy, eh?” Ursis asked, crossing his legs comfortably. His high boots were perfectly polished, as if he expected an imminent inspection.

“I only graduated last week,” Brim admitted.

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“Then you came in from Avalon on *Amphitrite*, didn't you?”

Brim pursed his lips and nodded. Indeed, he had arrived in the big converted liner only the night before. “Convoy CXY98,” he explained.

“Word has it we lost heavily in that one,” the Bear said.

“More than half the cargo vessels,” Brim asserted. “Twelve, I think.”

“And most of the escorts,” the Bear stated.

Brim nodded again. The Eorean Complex boasted an accurate rumor mill. “I watched old *Obstinate* blow up no more than a c'lenyt off our port bow,” Brim said.

“No survivors you could see?”

“I can't imagine anything living through that blast,” Brim answered. “All four Drive chambers seemed to blow at the same time; there wasn't even much wreckage.”

Ursis got out of the recliner thoughtfully. Standing, he was average for a Sodeskayan native: powerfully barrel chested and slightly taller than the three irals Brim claimed for himself. Like other Bears, he had short pointed ears and a short muzzle for natural heat retention on the cold planets of his origin. He looked Brim in the eye. “Two cousins,” he pronounced slowly. “Voof.”

“I'm sorry,” Brim said lamely.

“So am I,” Ursis said with a faraway look in his close-set predator's eyes. “But then Hagsdoffs always gore the hairiest oxen first, don't they?”

“Pardon?”

“An old saying from the Mother Planets,” Ursis explained. “And it is I who ought to be sorry for unloading troubles on you.” He put a hand on Brim's arm. “Your people suffered with mine in the first raids.”

Brim bit his lip.

“Despots like Nergol Triannic strike Bears and men alike,” Ursis said. “Our work is to finish him — and his thrice-damned League — eh?” He puffed thoughtfully on his Zempa pipe. “Some news of your coming preceded you, Carescrian. Many of us have looked forward to your arrival with great interest.”

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Brim raised an eyebrow.

“Soon, my new friend, we will talk of many things,” the Bear said. “But for now, the Drive demands my presence. And I am certain you will be delighted to see your cabin, which at last seems to be ready.” He nodded toward the door.

Brim turned. A starman waited outside in the companionway.

“This way, please, Lieutenant,” the young woman said.

“Later...” Ursis declared, leading the way through the door.

Within a few cycles, Brim stood proudly in a tiny stateroom, the first in his memory he would not share with someone else. Luxury like this was a far cry indeed from Carescria and her ore trade, and he had paid dearly to win it. For the moment at least, all seemed worth the price.

* * * *

He had only just stowed his traveling case beneath the narrow bunk when he noticed a message frame that had materialized on the inside of his door.

“Yes?”

“Captain's compliments,” the frame said. “And interviews will begin in her office at standard 0975.”

Glancing at his timepiece, Brim saw he had more than three metacycles to wait. “Very well,” he answered, then settled back on his bunk as the indicator faded. Clearly, he was one of *very* few early risers aboard *Truculent*, at least when she was in port.

Well before standard 0975, Brim climbed two levels to the aft end of the bridge tower. Near the ladder, a door was engraved simply “CAPTAIN,” below which removable adhesive stickers spelled out “R.G. Collingswood, Lt. Commander, I.F.” While he waited, he was joined by a second sublieutenant with Helmsman's blazes on his collar. The newcomer was pink and chubby and had an uneasy look about him. His belt divided an expensive-looking tunic into two rolls which flubbered up and down as he hurried. “I thought I'd *never* find

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the Captain in this awful warren,” he grumped in a high-pitched voice. “What time is it anyhow?”

“If you're scheduled at standard 0975, you've made it,” Brim assured him, checking his own timepiece. “We have nearly a cycle to go.”

“No little wonder,” the man said, panting, then suddenly looked at Brim with something like recognition. “You're not that Carescrian sublieutenant, are you?” he asked.

“I am,” Brim asserted, immediately on the defensive.

The other grunted. “Well, you certainly don't *look* odd,” he observed.

From bitter experience, Brim knew Imperials often had no idea they were giving offense; and now was not the time to teach this one. “Ready?” he asked evenly.

“As I'll ever be, I suppose.”

Brim rapped firmly.

“It's open,” a voice called from inside.

Brim pushed the latch plate.

Inside, with her back to the door, Lieutenant Commander, I.F. Collingswood stared intently at a display. Soft chords of stately, unfamiliar music beguiled Brim's ears from the background. “Come in,” she urged without turning around. “I shall be finished momentarily. “

Brim led the way, then stood uncomfortably in the soft, haunting music until she cleared the display and swiveled her chair, looking first at one and then the other. She had a long, patrician nose, hazel eyes, and soft chestnut curls. Graceful fingers interlaced on her lap.

“Well?” she asked.

“SubLieutenant Wilf Anzor Brim reporting for duty aboard I.F.S. *Truculent*, ma'am,” Brim said with as steady a voice as he could muster. In the following silence, he realized he was very nearly terrified. He also noticed he was not the only one — his overweight counterpart hadn't even opened his mouth. Still in silence, he offered his orders card, carefully turning it for insertion in a reader.

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Collingswood read the printed name, then — accepting the other's without a glance — placed both behind her on the desk. She frowned. “So you're Brim?” she asked in a quiet mezzo.

“Yes, ma'am.”

“That makes you Theada,” she said to the other.

“J-Jubal Windroff Theada the Third,” he said, “from Avalon.”

“Yes,” Collingswood said with a frown. “At one time, I knew your father.” Silent for a moment, she smiled distantly, then went on. “I suppose both of you are fresh from Helmsman's training,” she said.

Brim nodded. “Yes, ma'am,” he said again. The other continued his silence.

A tiny smile escaped Collingswood's thin mouth. “Ready to take old *Truculent* into space from the command seat, then?” she joked.

“I'd gladly settle for *any* seat up there, ma'am,” Brim said with a grin. For the first time, it occurred to him the woman was dressed in a threadbare sweater and short skirt that revealed slim legs and soft, well-worn boots. Somehow, even at her leisure, she looked every inch a captain.

“You are the one who piloted those horrible ore carriers, aren't you?” she asked.

“Yes, ma'am,” Brim answered, again braced for the inevitable insult.

“Hmm,” she mused, “I understand they require some rather extraordinary flying.”

Brim felt his face flush and kept an embarrassed silence.

Collingswood smiled again. “You'll *show* us your talent soon enough, Lieutenant.” she said. “And you, Lieutenant Theada. Shall I put you in the command seat straight off?”

“W-Well, Captain,” Theada stammered, “I only h-have about three hundred metacycles at the controls... and some simulator time. I don't know if I'm actually ready f-for the left seat right away“

“You'll build your metacycles quickly in *Truculent*,” Collingswood interrupted with just the shadow of a frown. Then her neutral smile returned. “Lieutenant Amherst will expect you to check in with him; he's our number one. And of course you must see Lieutenant Gallsworthy when he returns to the ship. He's chief

The Helmsman

Helmsman — you report to him.” Abruptly, she smiled, then swiveled back to the display. “Welcome aboard, both of you,” she said in dismissal.

Brim led the way out the door. Just as he stepped over the sill, Collingswood turned his way again. “By the by, Lieutenant Brim,” she said, looking past Theada. “When you address me, it's 'Captain,' not 'ma'am.’” She smiled with a warmth Brim could actually feel. “Nothing to worry about,” she added. “I thought you'd want to know.”

When Theada disappeared along the companionway without uttering another word, Brim decided *his* next move should be to report to *Truculent's* first lieutenant. He tracked the man down in the chart house portion of the bridge at work before a small disorderly table that projected one of the ship's ubiquitous display globes. “Lieutenant Amherst?” Brim inquired politely, eyeing a richly lined Fleet Cape carelessly heaped on a nearby recliner.

“Never forget it,” Amherst growled coldly as he turned from his display. His were the same aristocratic features as Collingswood's, only strongly masculine. He had a thin, straight nose with flaring nostrils, two narrow mustaches, a lipless slit for a mouth, and wavy auburn hair. It was the eyes, however, that set him apart from Collingswood. While hers greeted the world with easygoing intellect, Amherst's revealed the quick, watchful manner of a true martinet. “You certainly took your time reporting, didn't you?” he sniffed, ignoring Brim's original question.

“I was with Captain Collingswood, sir,” Brim explained.

“Plead your rationalizations *only* when I ask,” he sneered.

“Lieutenant Theada came to see me straight off — as befits a proper Imperial officer.” He swiveled his chair and smoothed his blue-braided breeches where they became close fitting just below the knees. Elegant knee-high boots exuded the soft luxury of expensive ophet leather (which Brim had seen before only in pictures).

“Colonials always have *so* much to learn about proper deportment,” he sighed, then peered along his nose at Brim. “You Carescrians will probably prove the worst of all.”

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Brim held his temper — and his tongue. After the Helmsman's Academy, Amherst's manner was all too familiar.

“Well?” the other demanded suddenly. “What have you to say for yourself?”

“I was with the Captain,” Brim repeated, “at her request.”

“You'll soon learn to be smart with me, Carescrian,” Amherst snapped, eyes flashing with quick anger.

“I meant no insult, sir,” Brim stated evenly, still under relatively firm control.

Amherst glared coldly. “I shall be the judge of your pitiful insults, SubLieutenant.” He joined long fingers at the tips, contemplated the roofed structure they formed while Brim stewed in uncomfortable silence. “I believe I shall do the whole crew a favor,” he said presently, looking Brim in the eye for the first time. “The sooner your kind display your *true* abilities, the sooner we can replace you with your betters.” Abruptly, he turned to his display. “Imagine, “ he muttered to no one in particular, “a Carescrian with a cabin of his own!” He shook his head and moved long, pink fingers over the control panel. “We are scheduled out of here the morning after next,” he chortled. “And *you* are now posted as co-Helmsman for the takeoff. Old Gallsworthy ought to be in a *spectacular* mood after another two nights' gaming. He'll make short work of your no-account talent.”

Trembling with frustration, Brim remained in the doorway, waiting for whatever might come next.

“You may go,” Amherst said, turning his back. “You have the remainder of today and tomorrow to enjoy the ship. After that, good riddance, Carescrian. You have no place with a gentleman's organization — in spite of what Lord Beorn's perverted Reform Act might allege.”

Brim turned on his heel, and with the last vestiges of his patience eroding like sand on a beach, he stormed off to his cabin.

* * * *

The Helmsman

Long Metacycles later — he lost track of time — Brim sat, head in hands, on his bunk, halfway between murderous anger and deep, deep despair. It was cadet school all over again. The few Carescrians who even made it to the Academy had to be better than *anyone* else just to be accepted as living beings. And the very weapon Imperials always used was a person's own temper. He shook his head, painfully rehearsing his meeting with Amherst for the thousandth time when a mighty pounding rattled the door to his cabin. “Wilf Anzor, my new friend, come! Now is the time for libations in the wardroom, eh?” In all his twenty years, Brim could not remember a more welcome sound.

Now, late in the last watch of the day, the wardroom was dim with hogge'poa smoke and crowded by people who had clearly collected from all over the base. Brim picked out uniforms of spaceframe structure masters, logic boffins, and a whole cadre of Imperial officers — many with impressive ranks. Most of the latter wore insignia from other ships. And beautiful women! They were all over the room. Some young, some not so young. His eyes had just fallen willing prisoner to an artfully tousled head of golden curls and soft expressive eyes when Ursis returned with two largish goblets of meem — and another Bear in tow.

“Come, Anastas Alexi,” Ursis called to the smaller edition of himself. “Let me present new Helmsman just reported in. Wilf Anzor, you must meet glorious engineering officer, and my personal boss, Lieutenant A.A. Borodov!”

Borodov grasped Brim's hand in a firm hirsute paw. “Brim?” he exclaimed. “But I have heard of you — greatest Helmsmen of all in latest Academy class, is it not so?”

Brim felt his face flush. “I am pleased to meet you, sir,” he stammered.

“Ah-ha!” the Bear exclaimed, turning to Ursis triumphantly. “Blush gives him away, would you believe?”

Ursis chortled heartily. “All's dark when snow flies blue, eh?” They both laughed.

“Well, Wilf Anzor,” Borodov rumbled on. “Many of us have looked forward to flying with you at helm. Tonight we shall drink

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toasts to your Carescrian ore barges.” He placed a paw on the chest of Brim's uniform. “I myself started Drive work on same star beasts, eh? Many years before you were little cub.” He chuckled.

“Destroyers should prove easy work in comparison, believe me.”

He turned suddenly and caught the arm of a dainty lieutenant. “Ah, Anastasia,” he said. “You must meet our new Helmsman, Wilf Brim!”

“Beautiful woman here is Anastasia Fourier — weapons officer, Wilf,” Ursis added with a wink. “So small for such large job...”

“Big enough to bruise *your* shins, you chauvinist Bear,” Anastasia said as she kissed his furry cheek. Her face was almost perfectly moon shaped with wide-set eyes and heavy, pouting lips. She had a high-pitched voice and talked at such a rate that Brim marveled she could make herself understood at all. Her Fleet Cape revealed just enough in the way of curves to assure Brim that great intrinsic worth lay beneath. Her wink made him believe that much of it might, under proper circumstances, be readily available. “If this is the kind of company you keep, Lieutenant,” she squeaked, “I shall have to keep a close eye on you, and the sooner the better.” Then, suddenly as she appeared, she was swept away giggling on the arm of a smiling commander. He wore the insignia — if Brim's eyes didn't lie — of a battlecruiser.

Ursis touched his arm. “When you stop drooling, friend Brim,” he said, “I want you to meet our Dr. Flynn — keeps us alive and moderately healthy despite all efforts to contrary.” The Medical Officer was short, fair, and balding, with a reddish face and quick smile. His uniform was also — noticeably — standard issue.

“Xerxes O. Flynn at your service,” he said with a wide-eyed leer. “You look terrible.”

Brim flinched. “Pardon?”

Flynn shrugged. “I need the practice, Brim,” he said with mock seriousness. “These Bears keep the crew so filled with Sodeskayan wood alcohol nothing has a chance to get started.” He cocked one eye and stared in the direction of Brim's ear. “You certain you haven't brought *some* sort of epidemic with you? I mean, Number One is spreading the word you're unsanitary or something!”

The Helmsman

When all three howled at this bit of rare humor, Brim's temper threatened to erupt anew. Then suddenly he perceived an important difference. These people were laughing *with* him. Before he knew it, he was laughing, too, for the first time in years, it seemed — perhaps longer than that.

“And you'd better meet *this* lovely lass,” Flynn panted, grabbing the arm of a plain young woman with her back to Brim. “Sophia, my dear,” he said. “I want you to meet Wilf Brim, your new partner in crime. Sophia Pym, Wilf Brim.”

Ursis grinned. “Lady Helmsman, would you believe?”

Relaxed for the first time since boarding *Truculent*, Brim turned and extended his hand. “I didn't catch your last name,” he said, smiling. Then his heart literally skipped a beat. Sophia was talking to the girl with the tousled hair. He said something inane, took Sophia's proffered hand, and tried not to stare at her friend. When a voice from somewhere pronounced, “Margot Effer'wyck,” the rest of the wardroom ceased to exist.

If this tall, ample young woman was not the most beautiful in the Universe, she nonetheless appealed to Brim in a most profoundly fundamental manner. Her eyes flashed nimble intelligence. Her oval face was framed by the loose golden curls that drew his gaze originally, and her skin was almost painfully fair, brushed lightly with pink high in her cheeks. When she smiled, her brow formed the most engaging frown he could imagine. Whatever it was she had, it was sufficient for him. “Margot,” he stammered. “That's a beautiful name.”

Her cool blue eyes remained neutral, but the large hand and tapering fingers in his grip were warm and friendly to his touch. “I like the name, too,” she said, “even if everyone does use it these days.”

Brim watched her full, moist lips, and suddenly he was a bashful schoolboy allover again — he couldn't even look her in the eye! On the left shoulder of her cape, she wore insignia of a full lieutenant, and her name tag read, “CHIEF, THREAT ASSESSMENT SECTION, TECHNOLOGY DIVISION.” An impressive-sounding job for one so young. Even her uniform looked perfect (and reminded

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him, for the millionth time, of his own shabby, regulation-issue blues).

While Flynn and Sophia (what *was* her last name?) exchanged words, with considerable friendly laughter, he met her glance again. This time, some of the coolness was replaced with interest. "You're new aboard *Truculent*, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes," Brim answered, wretchedly wishing he could think of something more clever to say. "I reported this morning."

The smiling frown reappeared. "You drew a good ship," she said, looking about the room. "And a lucky one, too. People like to share the wardroom when she's in port." She laughed. "I think they secretly hope some of the luck may rub off."

"Not you, though?" Brim asked with a grin.

Margot's eyes sparkled. "Perhaps me most of all," she said, laughing again. "I accept all the good luck I can get." Suddenly she gazed at the blazes on his collar. "What made you become a Helmsman?" she asked.

"Oh, I'd done a bit of flying before I was called up," Brim explained modestly. "But I think the Admiralty was getting desperate, if you want the absolute truth."

Her eyes drew his. "I'd certainly say so," she agreed with a twinkle. "It's known that only madmen fly those ore carriers."

Brim took a deep breath. Everyone seemed to know about him. "Being a Carescrian," he answered coldly, "I was fortunate indeed to achieve the exalted status of 'madman.' It put me at a Helmsman's console. Most of my contemporaries were privileged to suffer radiation sickness in the cargo holds..."

"I'm terribly sorry," she said, wincing. "I suppose I know better than that." She put a hand on his arm. "Your name came up at a party the other evening. They say you are a superb Helmsman."

Brim grimaced. "They should have informed you I am also an unreasonably touchy Carescrian," he said, suddenly ashamed of his outburst. "Will you forgive me?"

"I shall call it *even*," she said, color rising in her cheeks. *I have not loved my words, nor my words me/nor coin'd my voice to smiles....!* "

The Helmsman

Brim frowned, concentrated for a moment, then snapped his fingers and grinned. “*Nor cried aloud,*” he continued, “*In worship of an echo in the crowd.*”

Her sudden smile seemed to light the room. “You know *that?*” she asked.

“Star Pilgrim,” Brim said. “I suppose I’ve read a lot of Alastor’s poems.” He smiled, a little embarrassed. “I’ve had a lot of time on those old carriers — and secondhand poetry books are pretty cheap.”

“But *nobody* reads poetry anymore.”

“Evidently *you* do,” Brim said with a smile. “And I do. I’d like to think neither of us is a nobody.”

A new look was now on her face, one that hadn’t been there before Alastor. “Whom else do you read?” she asked.

“*Father of this unfathomable Universe/Hear my solemn song, for I have loved your stars...*”

“That... that’s ‘Solitude’ by Nondum Lamia,” she said with delighted eyes.

“Yes. That’s right,” Brim said. “Verse two.”

“And how about, *Roll on, thou deep and star-swept cosmos — roll/Ten thousand starfleets sweep thy wastes in vain...*”

“Yes!” Brim said, frowning again. He raised a finger. “*Lacerta. Rime of the Ancients,* I think. *Men mark their worlds with ruin — their power/Stops with their puny ships; upon the starry plain...*”

Clearly speechless, she shook her head. “That’s beautiful,” she finally whispered. Then she raised her hands, abruptly serious. “It’s nice to know I’m not *totally* alone sometimes...” Her voice trailed off.

Taken aback, Brim raised his eyebrows. “I don’t understand,” he began, but was interrupted by an elegantly uniformed commander.

“Sorry, Lieutenant,” the man said without bothering to introduce himself. “It’s about time I escort this young thing back to headquarters.”

“My date seems to be here,” Margot said, instantly recovering her previous mood of reserved amiability. “I’m very glad I met you, Wilf.” Their eyes met once more, lingered for a heartbeat. “Until the next time,” she whispered in a husky voice. Then, before he could answer, she was on her way through the crowd.

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Entranced, Brim shamelessly stared as she walked away: long, well-built legs revealed below her cape through skintight trousers, feet in tiny, ankle-length boots. “You are spilling your meem, friend Wilf Anzor,” Ursis said, once again breaking into his reverie.

“Yes, thanks,” he mumbled, shaking his head.

“Quite a lady, Miss Effer'wyck,” Flynn sighed. “But then you've already noticed, haven't you?”

Brim felt his face flush. He was sure he had already made a fool of himself.

“I think you may have to admire that one from a distance,” Sophia observed tactfully. “Turns out she's already spoken for: The Honorable Commander LaKarn, Baron of the Torond, no less.”

“Story of my life,” Brim grumped good-naturedly. “Too late for everything.”

“Well, perhaps not quite *everything*,” Sophia observed.

“You've still got more than a day before you face old Gallsworthy on the bridge.”

“It's true, Wilf Anzor,” Borodov interjected. “Lots of time to spend learning those deep-space whiz-clanks you Helmsmen play with on the bridge.” He winked meaningfully.

“Not that we'd want you to disappoint Number One or anything so subtle as that,” Flynn said under his breath.

Brim grinned. “I think I'm beginning to understand a lot of things,” he said.

Borodov put a hairy finger on Ursis' cuff. “After chill and darkness of storm, wise Bears run without snow, eh?”

Ursis raised an index finger. “Is much truth in that, Anastas Alexi,” he said sagely. “Without snow, indeed.”

By the time Brim returned to his cabin, the face of Margot Effer'wyck was already vague in his mind's eye. If nothing else, he had learned long ago to take life one step at a time.

* * * *

The Helmsman

Weary Metacycles before Haefdon's dawn lightened Gimmas' cloudy sky, Wilf Brim was already busy on *Truculent's* empty bridge. "Good morning, Mr. Chairman," he said, settling carefully in the right-hand Helmsman's seat.

"Good morning, Lieutenant Brim," replied the Chairman's disembodied voice. "What service can we render?"

Brim peered into the darkness through the Hyperscreens where yesterday's snowfall had again relapsed to driving sheets of rain. Below, wet hullmetal decks gleamed under hovering battle lanterns; beyond, the Eorean Complex was revealed by half-lighted shapes of sleeping starships, grotesque forms on other gravity pools, and the ever-present shipyard cranes. Compulsively, he pulled the cloak tighter about his neck, though the air was warm and dry. "Simulation, Mr. Chairman," he said at length. "All systems."

"All-systems simulation, Lieutenant," the Chairman repeated. "Starboard Helmsman's console in simulation mode." Soft-hued patterns filled the displays before him, moved and changed. "Will you require special circumstances?"

"Later, Mr. Chairman," Brim answered, concentrating on the start-up data flashing past his eyes. "Right now, you can do something a bit easier — like the last takeoff here on Haefdon. Do you still have that stored?"

"A moment, sir," the Chairman answered. Presently the Hyperscreens became opaque, flickered, then abruptly came to life in the illusion of gloomy daylight, this time a mile or so out to sea from the complex. "Found it," the Chairman intoned.

Brim looked around the simulated seascape, checked systems parameters once more on his displays, then gently lowered his hands to the consoles. "Mr. Chairman," he said, "we'll take this one from the very beginning ...

All that morning and far into the afternoon, Brim exercised *Truculent's* controls, simulating takeoffs in good conditions and bad. Like most contemporary starships, she employed antigravity generators for Hypolight-speed travel, switching to her four matched Sheldon Drive crystals (for both propulsion and negation of

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relativistic mass/time effects) only when it was desired to surpass the critical velocity of LightSpeed.

Specially designed for blockade and close-support work, all T-class starships flew with two oversized CR-special 258x gravity generators astride the keel at the deepest (and aftmost) point of the hull. These powerful units provided extraordinary acceleration and maneuverability when working close in to planetary systems where HyperLight travel was impractical (and potential targets were themselves either accelerating from or decelerating to zero velocity). A third unit of normal output and configuration was housed in a long chamber over the keel directly beneath the bridge. This generator supplied direct thrust along the ship's vertical axis for intricate maneuvering or warping into an anchorage.

As the session wore on, *Truculent's* Chairman provided antigravity failures of every kind and significance, then added steering-engine problems and systems troubles as the session progressed. By mid-afternoon, the bone-tired Carescrian felt rancid with dried sweat from metacycles of mental and physical effort. But he was also reasonably certain he could fly the starship through anything the Universe might throw at him. In the back of his mind, he knew well enough that simulators never *really* duplicated real-life flying experience, but the combination of a day's practice on these well-maintained controls *and* nearly three years' bullying deteriorated Q—97 ore carriers in and out of asteroid-cluttered HyperSpace provided him with considerable confidence in himself as well as the ship. Compared to even the best Carescrian C-97s, *Truculent* came off like a scalpel to an ax — not altogether shabby, he allowed (smiling at himself), for a “pick and shovel” tub like a destroyer.

Tired as he was, he lingered at the console, working the controls even after technical ratings began to appear here and there on the bridge to bring their respective systems on line for the morning's takeoff. But when two yeomen noisily commenced work on the principal Helmsman's console to his left, he knew it was time to wrap things up. “Mr. Chairman,” he announced, “I'm finished with the controls.”

The Helmsman

“A moment, sir,” the Chairman said, then, “Simulation terminated. Starboard Helmsman's console returned to direct connect.” The Hyperscreens faded momentarily, then restored themselves to the dreary landscape of Haefdon. It was again snowing outside as spume tore from wind-lashed whitecaps in the basin and the last yellowish tinges dissolved from the low-hanging clouds. Brim laughed grimly to himself. Weather on Haefdon was so bad — so horrible — even poor Carescria seemed appealing in comparison.

He slid wearily from the recliner, then dallied for a moment, staring through the Hyperscreens at the driving snow. While he watched, haloed headlights from a distant surface vehicle caught his eye as it picked its way through the shipyard in the direction of the basin. Abruptly, the vehicle turned onto *Truculent's* jetty and pulled to a hovering stop under the battle lanterns at the gangway. Brim frowned, thankful it was not he who was out on a night like this.

He had just started back to his cabin when it occurred to him that nothing more seemed to be happening on the jetty. The skimmer continued to hover in the driving snow, but no one got out, or in. The whole affair piqued his tired curiosity — now what?

As if in answer, two men appeared on *Truculent's* gangway, trudging through the driving snow toward the jetty and its waiting skimmer. Heads down and capes plastered to their bodies, they gave mute testimony to the wind that he knew was howling through the nearby lifelines. One of them, by his very size and gait, was surely the inane Barbousse.

Curious, Brim considered. Where was a man like Barbousse going in a skimmer, especially with *Truculent's* lift-off little more than a few standard metacycles away? He watched with renewed interest. Shortly, the two reached the skimmer, now hovering in a cloud of stirred-up snowflakes. They hammered on the forward compartment until they were joined by an agitated driver waving his arms and stamping his boots emotionally. Presently, Barbousse stepped to the man's side and plucked him from his feet by the scruff of his collar. This had an immediate quieting effect, and the three of them opened the passenger compartment of the skimmer and peered into its darkened interior.

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Shortly thereafter, Barbousse disappeared through the door — - only to emerge almost immediately, this time with the limp figure of a man in his arms. His companion from *Truculent* reached inside the skimmer and withdrew a Fleet Cape, which he used to cover the motionless individual, then completed some sort of transaction with the driver of the skimmer. This finished, he turned on his heel to follow Barbousse back up the gangway to the ship.

As the skimmer pivoted and started its journey back along the jetty, Brim scratched his head. Who? he asked himself, but deep inside, he feared he already knew.

The bridge was again deserted some four Standard Metacycles before *Truculent's* scheduled takeoff time, though things were well astir below as ratings prepared the ship for flight. "Morning, Mr. Chairman," Brim said, again settling into the right-hand Helmsman's station. "Today, we'll do those checkouts for real."

He worked without interruption until the Bears arrived at their power consoles, by which time most of the other stations were occupied and the bridge was humming with activity. "Don't they let you sleep in new cabin of yours?" the Bear asked with mock solicitousness as he strode along the main aisle of the bridge. "Power-systems log says you've already checked everything couple thousand times." He chuckled. "You have no trust in Chairman, maybe?"

Brim felt his face flush. "I thought I'd better get everything right this morning if I hope ever to do it again," he said with a chuckle.

Ursis smiled. "Is worth doing," he pronounced seriously. "No fool, Bear who first said, 'First impressions are lasting.' You must have been listening, eh?"

"Just scared," Brim said honestly.

"Probably good time for being little scared," a displayed image of Borodov interjected darkly from the power exchange deep in *Truculent's* hull. "Word is they *carried* him aboard!"

Brim looked the old Bear's image in its eye. "Gallsworthy?" he asked.

"Is same," Borodov answered. "Bad, they say."

The Helmsman

“I think I watched it from here on the bridge, then,” Brim said. “I wasn't certain at the time.”

The old Bear looked thoughtful as Sophia Pym arrived, towing a flabby Theada to his jump seat at the side of the bridge. The latter's eyes widened considerably when he caught sight of Brim at the right-hand console. “You may well find yourself on what you call 'hot seat,' Wilf Anzor,” Borodov pronounced soberly.

“We've seen him like this before,” Ursis interjected.

Brim smiled and looked at the two Engineering Officers. “What are you trying to tell me?” he asked.

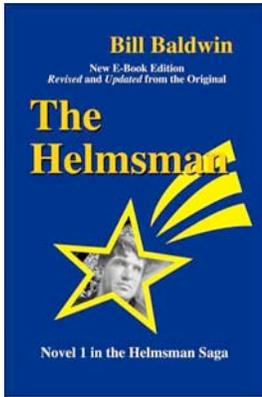
“Simply this,” Borodov explained with a serious mien, “Nikolai Yanuarievich and I, we can make seem like *Truculent's* power systems won't run. None of you humans will be able to tell difference — begging your pardon.”

“Many of us in crew do not think is fair you must go through with this, Wilf,” Ursis added.

Brim glanced at his boots, wrestling with his emotions. He wasn't used to Imperials who even cared if he lived or died. Finally, he shook his head, looking first at one and then the other. “Thank you,” he said quietly. “Thank you both. But sooner or later, I'm going to have to face up to this, and I suppose now is as good as any other time.”

“Is brave decision you make, Wilf,” Borodov said.

“Is also too late to change mind,” Ursis interrupted, inclining his head slightly toward the back of the bridge. “Now comes Gallsworthy.” Without another word, the Sodeskayan dissolved into a suddenly quiet bridge.



The Helmsman: this first novel in Bill Baldwin's Helmsman Saga is a futuristic, Military-Science-Fiction novel about intra-galactic competition and conflict. First published in 1983, it chronicles the adventures of StarSailor and extraordinary Helmsman Wilf Brim during an epoch of discord and outright war among various star-nations—within a galaxy that could be a far-future version of the one in which we live.

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