

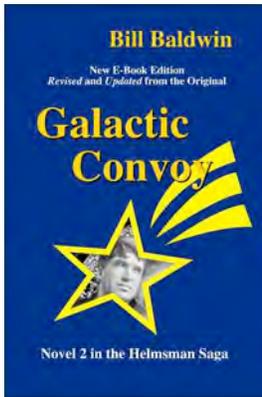
Bill Baldwin

New E-Book Edition
Revised and Updated from the Original

Galactic Convoy



Novel 2 in the Helmsman Saga



Galactic Convoy: this second novel in Bill Baldwin's Helmsman Saga is a Military-Science-Fiction novel about intra-galactic competition and conflict. First published in 1987, 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.

GALACTIC CONVOY:

Director's Cut Edition

by Bill Baldwin

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GALACTIC CONVOY

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HELMSMAN'S
WINGED COMET

By Bill Baldwin n

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The Defenders, 1992
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

ELEANDOR-BESTIENNE

Wilf Brim pointed into the shimmering globular display and glared across the drafting console, angry now in spite of himself. “If Nik Ursis says a waveguide installed like that could short the vertical generators,” he insisted to a determinedly unpliant Senior Engineer, “then a xaxtdamned waveguide installed like that could short the vertical generators. *Nobody* understands antigravity like Sodeskayan Bears, and you bloody well know it!”

“Bears or no Bears,” the engineer sniffed, haughtily, “I was not placed in my position of trust and authority to question Admiralty plans, Lieutenant.” He was a tall, aristocratic man whose expression was the perfect physical manifestation of bureaucratic arrogance, though his features themselves were indifferent to the point of banality. “I build starships strictly to specification,” he continued, “and I greatly resent the interruption of my busy day with complaints from flight crews. You may be certain your superiors will hear of this insubordination. Imagine, summoning a senior engineer—with wild tales of design flaws. Certainly you do not believe we meet production quotas by challenging Admiralty design teams, do you?”

“Voot’s beard!” Brim exclaimed. “This has nothing to do with a challenge.” He pointed to a drafting console. “Look for yourself—your design diagrams are just plain *wrong!* A hit anywhere near the KA’PPA tower could cripple *both* vertical gravity generators, trip ‘em out completely. And verticals are the only things *I* know that keep starships from falling out of the sky, at least when they’re

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anywhere near something that's got gravity—like for instance the planet we're standing on."

Beside him, Nik Ursis, a Great Sodeskayan Bear, frowned, shifted his peaked officer's cap between furry russet ears, and thrummed six tapered fingers on the console, clearly struggling with his own temper. Presently, he smiled, diamond fang stones gleaming in the bright lights of the quiet drafting room. "I thank you for support, friend Wilf," he said in deep, carefully measured words, "but we have reasoned fruitlessly for more than twenty cycles, and I for one possess sufficient of nonsense." With that, he gripped the massive drafting console and ripped it from its mountings in a cloud of sparks and acrid smoke. "Perhaps *now*, my good man," he said, turning to the startled engineer, "you will have easier time shifting mind from symbolic diagrams to reality, eh? In spite of what you might think, starships have no lifting devices such as wings, or such—only Vertical Gravity Generators keep them up. They are of *critical* importance, yet these could be disabled by as little as chance lightning strike on KA'PPA tower." Before the civilian could recover, Ursis lifted him by his ornately embroidered lapels to a position no more than a milli-iral from his huge, wet nose. "When I replace you on feet, Mister Senior Engineer," he growled ominously, "you will locate workable drafting display and carefully study what Lieutenant Brim and I have attempted to explain this afternoon. You understand now, perhaps?"

The man's face drained of color. "B-but the p-plans s-show..." he stammered, pointing to the darkened drafting console as if it were still a functioning instrument. All the bluster had suddenly gone from his voice.

"*Defiant* is first warship of class," Ursis stated firmly. "Imaginary machine pictured by precious plans has never so much as lifted from image of globular display, much less cast off for deep space. There are *bound* to be errors. Is what you engineers are *for*—to catch mistakes before they hurt someone." His laugh returned again, this time with a little of his normal humor. "Wouldn't be so good if one of your creations lost Verticals and fell out of sky, now would it? Someone could be hurt!"

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The man only stared into the huge Bear's eyes, mesmerized.

"Well, civilian engineer?"

"No."

"No, what?"

"N-no...ah, I, ah, w-wouldn't want a starship t-to f-fall out of the sky...."

"And what will you do to ensure such does not happen?"

"F-fix it—t-the waveguide so the verticals are b-better insulated from energy strikes..."

"Excellent," the Bear exclaimed, gently placing the engineer on his feet. "Your cooperation is most gratifying, civilian. I shall mention it favorably to my superiors. But," he added, "your equipment here is poor. Behold, Wilf, this very drafting display does not function."

Brim could only nod as he fought the gale of laughter that threatened to overwhelm his control. "I'd noticed that," he choked.

"You should endeavor to find workable instrument," Ursis advised the man seriously. "*Immediately*. Otherwise, by time you order waveguide reversed, will be difficult operation—every metacycle that passes sees new equipment installed in *Defiant's* already crowded machinery spaces. Eh?"

"Of *c-course*, Lieutenant," the engineer whispered as if he were badly out of breath. Suddenly, he turned and ran madly along the consoles until he disappeared through a door at the end of the room.

Ursis pursed his lips and frowned. "I only hope he really will *do* something about waveguide," he said, "instead of just covering mistake with minor insulating job. Once hull is buttoned up, there will be no way I can check." Then he smiled wryly and shook his head. "Groaning trees and growling wolves are all same in spring snowstorm, eh?"

"Huh?" Brim responded, looking up from the wreckage of the drafting table.

"Old saying from Mother Planets," the Bear answered with a grimace, "and—it seems I shall *never* learn to hold temper," he observed. "Now we are probably *both* in trouble."

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Brim shrugged. “A little, maybe. But it’s at least possible now that something may be done to protect the verticals. If we’d kept our mouths shut, nobody would even have looked. Besides,” he chuckled as they boarded an elevator for the observation balcony, “I’ve dealt with bullies all my life. Once you scrape away their rank, as you did so well, they’re all the same sort of cowards.” He winked. “Now, if you want to talk about *real* trouble, imagine us fighting a dead ship after something like a lightning strike tripped the verticals at low altitude—maybe during a landing. *Universe...*”

* * * *

Nergol Triannic’s all-consuming galactic conflict seemed terribly remote that day among the ancient starship yards of Eleandor-Bestienne. Outside a lofty Engineering Tower in the Orange-Eight district, cobalt skies and soft puffs of summer clouds ruled the late afternoon over Construction Complex 81-B. On an open balcony, a warm breeze rustled the blue Fleet Cape at Brim’s neck and raised whitecaps out on Elsene Bay. It carried with it the clean fragrance of green vegetation, tempered by frequent whiffets of hot metal and fused logics from the frantic wartime construction below.

The object of Brim’s attention—emerging from the waterfront clutter of bowing, swinging shipyard cranes—was the flattened teardrop shape of a half-finished starship hull that rested on a tangle of rusting construction stocks: I.F.S. *Defiant*, Imperial hull designator CL-921, and the first ship in a whole new class of light cruisers. As such, she was new in *many* ways—and subject to all the ills of each. The morning’s waveguide incident was only one, albeit the most serious of a hundred-odd irregularities and disorders uncovered since the starship’s keel was laid. In spite of her great promise for the future, *Defiant* was starting life as a most troublesome ship...

While Brim mused, he overheard the voice of Lieutenant Xerxes O. Flynn joking with Ursis. Flynn was *Defiant*’s medical officer—the position he had previously filled aboard I.F.S. *Truculent*. He was short, fair, and balding, with a reddish face and a quick smile. “I say, Nikolai Yanuarievich,” he said, “do you suppose yonder Principal

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Helmsman has become impatient to fly already? He shows up this time every day to watch them build our ship."

"Well, Doctor," observed the Bear, "either impatience guides his actions—or well-known compulsion to single-handedly confound League of Dark Stars. As we say on Mother Planets, 'when mountain dances with ice maidens, cold wind comes quietly at hearth.'" He grinned suddenly. "One imagines anything is possible of persons who spend most waking hours flying simulator—even Helmsmen."

Brim turned to grin at his old shipmates, fellow survivors of Regula Collingswood's battle-shattered destroyer I.F.S. *Truculent*. "You're both right," he asserted, "I *do* spend most of my time flying The Box. But I am clearly not the only one impatient to get back into space—or the war. In fact, I personally know a certain Great Sodeskayan Bear who spends most of *his* time checking starship plans, and I'm sure he has the same thing in mind. Besides, it's rarely lonesome here on the balcony." He chuckled. "I understand people are starting to call it Point Defiant."

"Actually," Flynn admitted, "I might just prefer a battle zone if I had my choice—some place where I could occasionally contribute to the war effort by treating disorders more serious than meem hangovers." He shook his head. "That one task seems to occupy most of my duty time while we wait for those bloody civilians to build our ship."

Ursis chuckled as he charged the bowl of his Zempa pipe with Hogge'Poa. "You must never underestimate your contribution here, my dear Doctor," he asserted, tamping the weed with a professional countenance. "Hangovers are important on shipyard worlds like Eleandor-Bestienne. Especially since meem—and drinking thereof—remains principal diversion." He nodded sagely while he puffed a glow into the bowl of his pipe. "You will soon enough be up to elbows in battle blood again."

Flynn nodded. "That's why I drink meem," he said wrinkling his nose as a cloud of pungent smoke momentarily enveloped his face. "And they're my own hangovers, by the way."

While the two continued their salty banter in the lengthening shadows, Brim returned his attention to the stocks. For the

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thousandth time, he traced *Defiant's* convexed upper deck as it gently arced from a pointed bow and peaked a regulation thirty irals from four Drive outlets in her ponderously rounded stem. Her 328 irals overall were dramatically larger than old *Truculent's* 210 and seemed to symbolize—almost dauntingly—the new responsibility Brim was about to shoulder as her Principal Helmsman. Aft the forward mooring cupola, work gangs were energetically fishing heavy-gauge cable of some sort between two circular access hatches. Farther back, a pair of surveyors appeared to be checking the hull's loft lines against a fat book of holographic blueprints. The bright blue of welding everywhere marred the ship's ebony hullmetal, and her upper decks were littered with cuttings, fastener cartridges, cables, and general sweepings. Apparently a great deal of the morning's construction effort had been expended preparing for installation of the two ventral turret assemblies. With the acrid smell of Hogge'Poa burning his nostrils, Brim watched a heavy mounting ring glide slowly beneath the starboard beam, towed by one of the ubiquitous yellow shipyard locomotives. The two dorsal twin-mounts had been in place aft the bridge for a week now; they required only installation of their long-barreled 152-mmi disruptors. The final turret, however, a single-mount 152 that would complete the ship's primary armament, was still marked by little more than a circular opening in the hullmetal directly forward of the skeletal bridge.

Presently, a fourth voice joined the others on the balcony. Elegant and polished, it belonged unmistakably to Commander Regula Collingswood, *Defiant's* Captain and commanding officer. She was a statuesque woman, tall and well shaped with a long, patrician nose, piercing hazel eyes, and soft chestnut hair that she wore in natural curls beneath her peaked uniform hat. An extraordinary commander of military warships, her appearance never for a moment let anyone forget she was also a woman, every milli-iral of her. She was known throughout Kabul Anak's fleets as a very dangerous adversary, and had lived with a price on her head for years. She seemed to enjoy the distinction. Brim saluted with the others.

"I rather expected I might find the three of you here," she pronounced with a fatigued smile. "I, too, need tangible evidence that

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someday we shall find ourselves back in space. Especially since I presently spend most of my life staring at desiccated verbiage in a display.” She grimaced at the portfolio under her arm. “*And* making peace with angry shipyard bosses,” she added hotly, scowling first at Brim and then at Ursis. “What in the name of the Universe did you do to that poor engineer? His manager found him reduced to tears at a drafting display and mumbling nonsense about lightning strikes and Bears—as *well as Carescrians*, Wilf Anzor Brim.”

Brim and Ursis began to speak at the same time, but Collingswood held up a perfectly manicured hand. “Don’t bother, either of you. There was also the matter of the reversed waveguide that *they* installed—everybody in the yard was overjoyed that I declined to fuss to the Admiralty about *that* little blunder—a damned serious problem as I am given to understand.”

“Ah...serious enough to bring it to the engineer’s attention,” Brim stammered.

“Indeed,” Ursis seconded, “one of senior types initially found it difficult to separate diagrams from reality of hullmetal.”

Collingswood closed one eye and wrinkled her nose. Then she nodded, pointing an accusing finger at the Bear. “Of course!” she exclaimed. “You helped him understand how to do it, didn’t you? That probably explains the uprooted drafting table. We all sort of wondered about that bit of mayhem.” She shook her head again, then chuckled. “At any rate, now that the two of you have finished dealing with recalcitrant civilians on your *own* side of the war, I trust you have saved a little violence to counter the promises of our opposites from the League as well.”

Her voice trailed off. Everyone in the Fleet knew Emperor Nergol Triannic’s boast of slavery and death—at best—for every Imperial Blue Cape who stood in the path of his plans to sack and subjugate the galaxy for his League of Dark Stars. And for twelve years, the badly outnumbered Fleets of Emperor Greyffin IV had spoiled those plans out of all proportion to the meager resources at their disposal. Now, thanks to efforts like the one in the shipyard below, those fleets were growing larger—and more powerful...

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Sudden thunder boomed and crackled overhead as two pairs of starships plunged in formation from among the clouds.

Brim identified them even before they entered the shipyard's landing pattern: Sinister-class light cruisers. At 315 irals overall, they were only a little smaller than *Defiant* and carried 150-mmi disruptors. Although they were known as handy ships with excellent habitability, experts considered that placement of blast deflectors near the aft deckhouse provided an ungainly appearance.

Ungainly looking or not, these certainly could maintain formation. Perfectly synchronized, they banked into an abbreviated base leg, then rolled out on final, antigravity generators bellowing as they drew into line abreast and descended toward the bay. Cycles later, they were skimming the whitecaps, cooling fins whistling in the slipstream. Brim watched with professional judgment while their speed dropped and the ships gently unloaded mass onto the verticals buried 'midships in their hulls. Each of the cruisers came to a hovering stop twenty irals or so above the thrashing footprint it pushed into the surface of the water, then turned smartly to taxi toward the wharves beyond the shipyard. Still in line abreast, they crossed between Brim and Eleandor-Bestienne's close-set trio of suns, now setting on the horizon. For an instant, every hull plate stood highlighted in the rippled path of blazing colors; then the starships continued on their way and disappeared into the forest of gantry cranes.

"Did *that* landfall meet with professional approval, friend Wilf?" Ursis asked quietly, bringing Brim once more to reality.

Brim felt his cheeks burn. "They *all* look good to me, Nik," he admitted with a grin. "I won't be able to judge until I've had a bit of real experience landing a light cruiser." Then he laughed. "But from what I've been able to simulate in The Box, I'd allow we were watching some pretty competent Helmsmanship."

"I suspect you'll find yourself at real controls sooner than you think, Wilf," Collingswood interrupted with a knowing smile. "Something big seems to be in the wind." She paused significantly to look each of them in the eye. "I have been informed that management here has specially stepped up *Defiant's* completion

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schedule on direct orders of the Admiralty—even though the yard is already far beyond its rated capacity. That, and a few other hints I cannot share at this time, leads me to believe that we can expect a most difficult—and critical—assignment.” She paused for a moment in thought, watching a destroyer stand out into the bay for takeoff. As its running lights pierced the early-evening darkness, she turned again to the three senior officers. “And,” she continued, “before next year is over, we may well help decide the outcome of the entire war...”

* * * *

Weary metacycles later, Brim’s strenuous workday finally came to an end when he climbed gratefully from a simulator and signed out of the Training Operations Complex for the night. Under a mighty canopy of mid-galactic star swarms, he waved off a hovering tram and made his way inland on foot, following a maze of streets winding circuitously through the shipyard complex. A damp bay breeze plastered the Fleet Cape to his side as he picked his way over glowing, multicolored tracks that crisscrossed the cracked and potholed pavements on the way toward his temporary quarters. To either side, the shipyard’s ear-splitting cacophony continued unabated from the daylight hours while shadowed forms of half-finished starships hovered under Karlsson lamps. Here and there, hullmetal welding torches filled the sky with fountains of sparkling color, and high above it all the monstrous cranes swung and bowed to a rhythm all their own.

Brim smiled as the officers’ quarters came into view from the top of a slight rise. His step quickened in spite of his deepening fatigue. Down there in his Spartan room, a message would be waiting from halfway across the galaxy. Today was the day she customarily posted.

Casually returning salutes from sentries at either side of the doors, he strode across the lobby to the bank of lifts on the far wall. Cycles later, he entered the tiny cubicle that was his temporary home on Eleandor-Bestienne. As he hoped, the message indicator was flashing

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over his bunk: YOU-HAVE-NEW-MAIL. YOU-HAVE-NEW-MAIL...

He closed the door and settled himself before the tiny desk that—along with its totally inadequate chair and a very basic bed—constituted the only furniture in his tiny room. Instantly, a globular display materialized above the surface of the desk, then filled with a list of correspondence received since he last accessed his message queue. He smiled with pleasure, then selected the entry sourced “Margot Effer’wyck, Lt., I. F. @ Admiralty/Avalon 19-993.A67.”

A swirl of damp, golden curls and a flashing smile filled the display. Margot Effer’wyck was a princess in every respect. Tall and proud looking, she was an ample young woman with oval face, full moist lips, sensually heavy eyelids, and the most endearing habit of frowning when she smiled. Her complexion was almost painfully fair and brushed with pink high in her cheeks. She had smallish breasts, a tiny waist for her size, and long, shapely legs. To Wilf Brim, she was the most beautiful woman who ever drew breath.

Discontent with nonproductive court life, she served on and off as an inordinately brave—and successful—young “operative” who risked her life on a number of clandestine assignments to Leaguer planets for Emperor Greyffin’s Empire. Now an unwilling subject of that same emperor’s protection, she still commanded a highly secret intelligence-gathering section at the Central Admiralty. But her days of life-threatening danger were at an end. She was too politically valuable to risk.

In the background, Avalon’s trees wore their brilliant autumn colors under a gray and lowering sky. When she spoke, her voice was soft and modulated:

“I have toiled sufficiently for the Empire today, dearest,” she began. “Now I’m free to walk home instead of taking the limousine, so I can steal a few moments alone to compose.” She smiled and looked into the sky, eyes slitted against a misting drizzle. “Avalon has not yet quite accommodated itself to the coming of winter. On the sidewalks, leaves are sodden and slippery, and the rain has just let up a little.”

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She closed her eyes and smiled wistfully. “‘Red o’er the city peeks the setting star’,” she recited, “‘The line of yellow light dies fast away / That crowned the eastern roofs; and chill and dun / Falls on the streets this brief autumnal day...’”

Presently she brightened. “That’s not really my autumn, Wilf,” she said. “Not when I dream of you. Anshelm’s ‘Ode to Autumn’ I think is much more like it: ‘Season of gold and misted grace, / Close bosom-friend of the life-granting sky; / Enveloping all with thy warming embrace, / Fruiting the vines that ‘round my gardens lie...’” She shook her head slowly. “Oh, but how I miss the harvest of love you bring to my life. ‘What gleaning half so sweet is / As still to reap thy kisses / Grown ripe in sowing? / And straight to be receiver / Of that which thou art giver, / Rich in bestowing?’”

Brim frowned. Who wrote that last poem? Compton? Calpon? *Campion!* That was who. Thomas Campion—a little-known ancient from a long-forgotten star system. Only the playful lyrics survived him and his whole civilization. He shook his head. “All passes. Art alone endures,” as Margot often put it. Smiling wistfully, he recalled the archaic love of verse they shared—a nearly forgotten art form that brought them together for the first time in old *Truculent’s* wardroom. It seemed like a million years ago. Not many of *Truculent’s* crew survived her last battle off Hagath-37/Lixor in the 91st Province.

“Oh Wilf, I miss you so today,” Margot continued. “Not a sad missing anymore, mind you—not like just after we’ve been together when there’s real pain.” A sudden swirl of wind rushed leaves past her face; she absently pushed a curl back in place. “But, after six months or so, you are the warmest spot in my heart. You are the part of me that petty politics can never reach and the sanctuary to which I can always escape.”

The rain began again, and she pulled her Fleet Cloak tighter about her neck. “I use many routes to walk home from the Agency,” she continued, “short and not so short. Usually I take the one that crosses the old Broix River Bridge. You’ve seen the district: narrow streets and tall, beautiful houses. Tonight, though, I’ve chosen the longer one that passes the Lordglen House. It always reminds me of you

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somehow—and the ball they gave for...” Her laugh sparkled like sudden starlight. “I forget now. That’s how important *he* was. But you were there, and you never did have a chance to stay the night in that great house of state, did you, poor Wilf? I shall always hope sharing my bed for the first time was adequate recompense...”

She blushed suddenly. “It’s almost as if Gol’ridge wrote ‘Ristobel’ about *me* that night—our night. Remember? ‘Before my lover’s gaze I bowed, / And slowly teased myself around; / Then drawing in my breath aloud, / With loving pleasure, I unbound / The coverings that concealed my breasts: / My silken gown and inner vests, / Dropt to my feet and full in view, / Behold! my bosom to pleasure you— / And legs and hips and secret place! / Oh come and fill me with thy grace!...’”

While the long message played, Brim marveled, as he did so often, that this young noblewoman—and quietly genuine war heroine—was actually in love with *him*. Of course, she was not entirely his in any sense, merely in love with him. Being a princess came with certain requirements, and Princess Margot Effer’wyck would soon enough pay her dues in a political marriage to (The Hon.) Rogan LaKarn, Baron of the Torond. Their wedding date, mandated by no less a personage than Emperor Greyffin IV himself, was to be set shortly.

And while Brim knew he could probably tolerate the marriage itself, he had long ago given up trying to make himself accept the fact that LaKarn would also share Margot’s bed—even though he knew full well that no real love existed there. She was always careful that he understood where she stood on that point. In the privacy of her suite at the Embassy, she had concluded the message so erotically she left him sweating and short of breath. He fell asleep after his fifth replay...

* * * *

Next morning, as Chief Steward Grimsby, Collingswood’s ancient family retainer, chauffeured the foursome to the stocks, Flynn sat bolt upright in his seat the moment *Defiant* came into view. “Who is *that*?” he exclaimed, pointing through the skimmer’s windscreen, “and what in the Universe is he doing?” At the entrance, a huge,

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familiar figure was intently raising a great blue-and-gold banner onto a flagstaff newly attached to one of the gate uprights.

Brim recognized *whom* in an instant, even though the man's broad back was turned from the road. "That's *Barbousse!*" he exclaimed, hopping through the hatch before Grimsby could fully bring the vehicle to a stop.

"Lieutenant Brim," the huge rating bellowed, turning to salute with his free hand. He stood half an iral taller than Brim, was completely bald under his garrison cap, and might have weighed a quarter milston—yet there was clearly not a measure of fat on his powerful body. He had gentle brown eyes that shone with intelligence and compassion, the nose of an eagle, and a jaw that must have stopped a thousand fists—clearly to the detriment of the fists. He had large hands and feet, yet he was perfectly proportioned in every respect. And he wore a huge, ear-to-ear grin. "*Defiant's* a beauty, Sir," he exclaimed, "every iral of 'er."

Collingswood followed Brim from the skimmer with Ursis and Flynn close on her heels. "Utrillo *Barbousse,*" she whispered, shaking her head in helpless wonderment, "you weren't supposed to report for at least a week. I thought you were on leave..."

"Aye, Captain," *Barbousse* admitted, saluting again, "that I was. But... Well... I sort of figured the four of you would have your hands full gettin' the new ship finished and all." He shrugged and blushed momentarily. "An' to tell the truth, I was gettin' tired of nothin' important to do, so..." He saluted Ursis and Flynn, then nodded toward the ship while he secured the flag halyards to a cleat on the flagpole. "I thought it wouldn't hurt if I pitched in signin' on the new crew."

Collingswood suddenly seemed to have something in her eye. She looked up at the great flowing pennant with its colorful depiction of a deady Rhondell falcon—*Defiant's* hallmark—then bit her lip for a moment before she spoke. "It's a most elegant banner, *Barbousse,*" she said, "and we can certainly use your help with the crew."

Ursis kissed his fingertips and shook his great, furry head. "Utrillo, my friend," he interjected with a baleful eye, "new banner will make

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such fine impression on entire shipyard that we shall have our hands full merely preventing other crews from signing on without orders."

Flynn frowned and stared at the great pennant flying lazily in the early-evening breeze. "How in the world did you manage to get your hands on..." His voice trailed off and he winced. "Ah, belay that, my friend," he said hurriedly.

"Aye, Sir," Barbousse mumbled, busying himself with the flag halyards again.

Brim stifled a laugh as Collingswood suddenly scanned the empty sky as if expecting the arrival of an extremely important starship. No one who had ever shipped with Barbousse really wanted to know *how* the big rating acquired war-vanished luxury items like cases of fine old Logish Meem, and flagstaffs with custom pennants far in advance of launch ceremonies, only that he *could* and *did*—with satisfying regularity.

"Barbousse," Brim choked presently, "your banner is perfect, as is your timing."

"True," Ursis agreed, nodding his head gravely. "'Winter songbirds trill lustily from autumn treetops', as we say—and with your arrival, Utrillo, comes personal feeling that war may yet be won by our tired old Empire..."

* * * *

During the next few days, specialists among *Defiant's* crew began to report aboard. For the most part, they were engineering technicians assigned to the six big Admiralty antigravity generators that lifted and propelled the ship at speeds below Sheldon's Great LightSpeed Constant. They went to work immediately on the two CL-Standard-84 Verticals that would soon be needed when she was towed from the stocks for finishing; the four Standard NLV-884 Laterals wouldn't be needed until the ship actually moved under her own power.

One new lieutenant who was *not* assigned to the Engineering spaces appeared one morning at the simulators and reported directly to Brim. He was tall, redheaded, and barrel-chested—and he was *not* dressed in the blue cape of Emperor Greyffin's Galactic Fleet.

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Instead, he wore a light-gray tunic decorated by twelve golden frogs and a stiff crimson collar, dark knee breeches with crimson side stripes, and lightweight, knee-high boots.

He could also fly—with no help from machines. Midway between his shoulders, his tunic opened to accommodate a pillow-sized swelling common to his species; this was known as a tensil. This protrusion covered an outgrowth of his reflexive nervous system that automatically coordinated the complex motions of an enormous pair of auburn wings—really a second, specialized, set of arms—that arched upward like sandy cowls trailing long flight feathers in cascades that reached all the way to the floor.

He was an A'zurnian, dressed in the wonderfully old-fashioned regimentals of his home planet, the mild, lushly vegetated world on the edge of Galactic Sector 944-E. Entirely populated by flighted—determinedly peaceful—beings, A'zurn had been easily seized by League invaders early in the war. Less than a year previously, Brim distinguished himself in a daring raid to assist the very active A'zurnian resistance movement—and was subsequently decorated for his efforts by Crown Prince Leopold, leader of the Free A'zurnian government-in-exile at Avalon. There was something about the cut of *this* lieutenant's uniform that said unusual. Especially his shiny, new Helmsman's insignia that fairly shouted of recent graduation from the Academy near Avalon. He had a wide forehead and narrow chin with a sharply chiseled nose. His huge eyes were those of a born hunter, and they sparkled with intelligence and compassion, as well as humor.

"Leading Torpedoman Barbousse suggested I report directly to you after I signed in," the young A'zurnian said in a strong, steady voice, saluting formally. "I am known as Aram of Nahshon, and I have wished to meet you since I learned that you personally freed my father on A'zurn."

"Your father?" Brim asked in astonishment.

"Yessir," the lieutenant said. "A man in a tricornered hat. You gave him your captured field piece, just before you boarded the launch for home. Do you remember?" he asked anxiously.

"Torpedoman Barbousse did."

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“Universe,” Brim whispered. “Of course I remember—the nobleman.”

Aram smiled. “Yes,” he said. “First Earl of Xeres, and cousin to Crown Prince Leopold who later decorated you in Avalon. The other A’zurnian in the field piece was Tharshish of Josias, our Prime Minister at one time. You and your men freed them both from the prison at the Research Center. It was by their personal petitions that you were awarded our Order of Cloudless Flight.”

Brim ground his teeth as gruesome memories of the raid flooded back. The prisoners had all been horribly mangled—wings cruelly snapped in half to prevent their escape. To the Leaguers, such treatment was quite normal; there was no conscious desire to inflict punishment. Pragmatism ruled their entire military establishment, especially the black-uniformed Controllers. Wingless prisoners simply required fewer guards than ones who could fly.

“Never for a moment pity them,” Aram said gently, breaking the Carescrian’s awful reverie. “Even though they are now flightless, they are still proud—and quite capable of considerable fight, as the Tyrant discovers each new day they are free.”

Brim smiled and nodded his head. “Yes,” he said quietly. “I understood that by looking into their eyes.”

The A’zurnian lieutenant returned Brim’s smile. “Thank you,” he said simply. “Perhaps aboard *Defiant* I can somehow begin to repay my personal debt to you and Mister Barbousse.”

It took Brim a few moments to understand just what the young A’zurnian was talking about. Then he shut his eyes and shook his head. “No one owes anything to anybody,” he stated firmly. “Barbousse and I were only doing our jobs as Imperial soldiers.” He laughed. “Besides, if you have even half the guts of the other A’zurnians I met during that raid, then we’ll all feel xaxtdamned lucky to have you aboard. We’ve got one hell of a war on our hands—all of us.” With that, he motioned *Defiant*’s new Helmsman Second Class into the simulator room. “Now, let’s introduce you to this new ship of ours...”

* * * *

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On the stocks, *Defiant* herself gained a somewhat more finished appearance amid the coils of wire, hullmetal plates, cables, ducting, hoses, rumbling generators, and other detritus that littered the construction site. Within two weeks, the officers' quarters were more or less completed, and Brim moved aboard, marveling that his fortunes had so improved that he now required two traveling cases instead of the one that had bobbed at his heels when he first passed through the gates of the Eorean Complex on Gimmas Haefdon, fresh from the Academy.

While more systems were being completed within the hull, each succeeding day saw larger groups of crew members muster through Barbousse's makeshift office near the main hatch, and the ship began to take on some aspects of an operational Fleet unit.

* * * *

In due course, *Defiant's* hull and superstructure exteriors were finished, and the day arrived when the starship could be moved to an ordinary gravity pool for completion. According to hoary tradition, a small launching ceremony marked the occasion, sadly rushed by a mysterious construction speedup that had suddenly affected the entire shipyard.

Brim and Ursis witnessed the late-afternoon proceedings from *Defiant's* rain-soaked, half-finished bridge with the ship's two CL-Standard-84 Vertical Gravity Generators rumbling steadily in the background. Barbousse's great banner snapped and fluttered in the strong wind from a temporary flagstaff at the bow. Overhead, a dreary sky was pregnant with lowering, scudding clouds: sure precursors of another in a constant parade of violent summer thunderstorms that had darkened most of the day and wrinkled the lead-toned bay with whitecaps.

"*Defiant* is certainly much larger ship than our little *Truculent*," the Bear observed, standing at the forward starboard corner of the bridge beside the only control console yet installed. He was holding on to his hat and motioning toward a pair of large, humpbacked tugs that had turned from the main waterway and were battling into the teeth of the wind toward the stocks. The powerful vessels rode atop

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streaming clouds of spray and foam as they ploughed contemptuously over the deep troughs. “I have often seen T-class destroyers moved with single tug,” Ursis observed with a grin, “but even incomplete, our *Defiant* requires at least two.” He bent over the shoulder of Sublieutenant Alexi Radosni Provodnik to check the Vertical readouts personally. Provodnik, a new engineering officer fresh from Sodeskaya, was a much smaller Bear who had been assigned to *Defiant* only a short while. He had sharper, more pointed ears than most of his colleagues and smaller fangs, inlaid with two positively immense StarBlazes. The young Bear was clearly the scion of an extraordinarily wealthy Sodeskayan family. He was also enthusiastic about anything that provided an opportunity to learn about starships, and had quickly become the darling of the whole crew.

Brim smiled as he leaned his elbows on a control ledge beneath empty frames for the ship’s Hyperscreens—glasslike crystals that provided normal views of the outside at faster-than-light velocities. “From the feel of things in The Box, *Defiant* will be a lot bigger to fly, too,” he observed with a chuckle. “Probably a lot like one of those tugs.”

“If that is case, friend Wilf,” Ursis growled with a sparkle of humor in his eyes, “we shall *tow* Nergol Triannic to his doom. One fights with weapons one finds at hand.” A lengthy rumble of approaching thunder punctuated his wink.

Aft, at the beam ends of *Defiant*’s stem, teams of shipyard workers dressed in reflective clothing were already balancing themselves on the slippery hullmetal while they retracted protective covers from stout optical cleats set in the afterdeck end of the sheer strakes. By this time, the tugs had lumbered into position some two hundred irals out from the stocks and were hovering just clear of the tossing waves. Presently, thick hawser beams flashed from their huge optical bollards, contacted the cleats, and brightened as the tugs smoothly shifted into reverse, laying on the tension against *Defiant*, which was still fastened securely to the stocks.

To landward, a small crowd had gathered at a temporary platform near the bow—automatic umbrellas bobbed and hovered nervously in

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the gusty wind. Someone read a short speech that was totally unintelligible on the bridge. Then a brass band energetically yerked out a few off-key bars of Heroic Music from the Grat'mooz Sector—*that* came through all too well, at least to Brim's way of thinking.

"CL-921," a voice rasped suddenly from a temporary COMM module fastened to a stringer by two oversized C-clamps, "contact Launch Operations on GTD zero five one. Good afternoon, Sir."

"CL-921 on GTD zero five one, and thank you," Brim answered, switching frequencies on the battered little box. "CL-921 checking in from the stocks."

"Hull number 921, good day," a female voice answered promptly. "Verify readiness to melt the trennels, please."

"CL-921, one moment," Brim answered. He looked at Ursis and raised his eyebrows. "OPS wants to know if we're ready to melt the fastenings to the stocks," he said.

The Bear bent to peer at the readouts again, frowned, then shook his head thoughtfully and spoke to Provodnik at the console. "Before launch crew frees us from stocks, Alexi Radosni," he said gently, "you may wish to balance gain on portside Hartzel feedbacks. We want *Defiant* to ride on even keel from very beginning, eh?"

"I think ve mayeh have problem, here, Nikolai Yanuarievich," the younger Bear said, passing delicate hands over an array of power controls. Immediately, a bank of indicators turned from yellow to steady green. "Is *third* time port generators have lost balance in last couple cycles," he asserted; "I vas about to bring this to your attention." As he spoke, the indicators suddenly changed color again. "Ah, like that, Sir," he added. "One feedback circuit seems to drop control data. Ten'stadt Fields there in X-Damper quadrant dump all way to minus sixtyeh-seven just before it happens."

Ursis bent and glowered at the readouts. "Hmm," he muttered. "I see what you mean." He frowned as he studied the flowing colors on the console readouts, carefully tapped on a gauge with a claw, then turned to Brim. "As you have probably gathered, Wilf," he said with a serious look on his face, "we have lost automatic balance of port Verticals." He thought for a moment, staring out over the tossing

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gray water of the wind-swept sound. "Perhaps it would be wise to request brief systems delay."

Brim nodded. "CL-921," he announced after another, much louder, crack of thunder rattled to a conclusion in the distance. "Request five-cycle systems check, please."

There was a measurable pause before answer came. "CL-921: cleared for one five-cycle systems check," the woman's voice acknowledged with a slight edge. Brim understood that launch operations were meticulously timed, and delays of any kind could result in horribly tangled schedules. "Check in immediately when you complete, please," the controller added.

"CL-921. Many thanks," Brim answered, then nodded to Ursis. "You've got five cycles, Nik," he said.

Ursis and Provodnik huddled for perhaps two cycles, conversing rapidly in Sodeskayan and exercising the controls. Presently the older Bear straightened and nodded to Brim. "It seems we have serious problems indeed, my friend," he said, nodding his head gravely. "Probably Alexi and I can jury-rig fix around trouble in perhaps one metacycle. Would you inquire as to what that might do to launch schedule?"

Brim nodded. "CL-921. Requesting one-metacycle systems workaround," he said, but he was pretty sure of the answer before he started.

The controller's voice returned almost immediately. "CL-921: Sorry, that is a negative. Do you need to scrub your launching?"

"CL-921. How long before you could schedule us again, please?"

"CL-921," the controller answered after a slight pause, "estimate ten Standard Days before we have openings."

Brim looked at the Bear, who had been listening to the conversation. "What now, Nik?"

Ursis turned to Provodnik. "We could take the starboard generator off Automatic and run it ourselves, Alexi Radosni," he suggested. "Otherwise, we cause immediate cancellation of launch—and put *Defiant* at least one week behind schedule." He stared the young Bear directly in his eye. "Do you think you can use manual controls here to balance generator with mate to port? If you feel any

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uncertainty at all, I should count it privilege to take your place at console—immediately."

Provodnik considered for only a moment. "I am sorelyeh tempted to claim that I can, Nikolai Yanuarievich," he said, sliding from his seat, "but that would be irresponsible. My sole experience with CL-Standard-84 generators is aboard this ship—and I arrived on Eleandor-Bestienne only ten days ago from Mother Planets."

"Your honesty is appreciated, Alexi Radosni," Ursis replied pointedly, frowning up through a network of bare frames and stringers at the fast-approaching storm. "This is definitely no time for heroics of any kind." Then he pursed his lips and slid into the seat as the first drops of rain began to spatter the console. "Wilf," he said, "you will please to inform Operations that we shall be ready to proceed momentarily."

Brim nodded and touched the COMM. "This is CL-921," he said, raising his voice to make it heard over the hiss of the rain. "Stand by for affirmative on launch decision."

"CL-921: Much appreciated!" the woman's voice crackled from the COMM module. "Standing by..."

"*Defiant* requires approximately one hundred ten on Verticals," Ursis explained to the younger Sodeskayan as new color sequences began to cascade over the readouts. "So..." His hand hardly moved over the controls, but the generators changed pitch slightly and a number of indicators winked on the console. "Only the slightest lift while they melt retaining trennels," he said, his voice now hardly audible over the drumming rain. He was all business now: a complete professional—totally consumed by his work. "Call out vectors, Alexi Radosni—as they appear."

"One hundred ten in vertical," Provodnik repeated, staring at the readouts in rapt concentration. The rumble from 'midships increased noticeably as Ursis shifted a section of the control from green to a reddish orange. "And steady..."

The elder Bear looked up momentarily and nodded to Brim.

"We are now ready when Operations is, Wilf," he said.

"CL-921. Prepared to detach immediately," Brim reported.

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The woman's matter-of-fact reply came within a moment: "CL-921: Stand by." Her words were almost coincident with the actual firings of the trennels that held the ship to the stocks.

Bright flashes strobed in the stormy grayness from beneath the hull, accompanied by an ear-splitting volley of sharp reports that cascaded from the bow to the stem and rocked the ship like low-altitude turbulence. Clouds of acrid smoke swept the deck and burned Brim's nostrils while Ursis's hands moved surely over the gravity controls and lightning flashed from the lowering storm.

"One hundred fifteen in vertical..." Provodnik intoned. "One hundred twenty and steady..."

The sound of the ship's Vertical generators rose almost negligibly and the deck swayed beneath Brim's feet. He looked out the Hyperscreen frame in surprise. *Defiant* was already halfway off the stocks and moving swiftly over the darkening shoreline in the wake of the two tugs. A sudden cacophony of air horns and sirens crashed through the teeming storm: *Defiant's* welcome to the world. A small knot of dockyard technicians lining the quayside broke out in cheering—all ragged and spontaneous. Shipwrights from other stocks paused to wave their helmets as she passed. These men had built countless starships, both in war and in peace, and—the Universe willing—they would build countless more. Their cheers reflected fierce professional pride and sent a gesture of goodwill to the star sailors who would man this, the latest result of their craft. Brim felt his eyes fill for a moment—it was not the rain...

Then all noise was abruptly swallowed in a stunning—deafening—strike of lightning on the high KA'PPA tower directly aft of the bridge. For a moment, the entire structure and its empty KA'PPA stubs blazed out like some skeletal beacon.

Brim was knocked gasping to the deck by the concussion—and a tremendous thunderclap that instantly proceeded from it.

Nearly deafened by the violent discharge, he climbed shakily to his feet only to catch the rasping shriek of a runaway gravity generator. He'd heard that ugly sound a number of times before on failing Carescrian ore barges. They all sounded pretty much the same. It was the port Vertical this time—clearly its automatic damper

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had been blown out by the lightning strike, and the big generator was now spooling up to full power!

More blinding flashes of nearby lightning burned images of Ursis's grim visage in Brim's eyes as the Bear desperately fought *Defiant's* controls. "Cap that machine, Alexi Radosni!" he roared to Provodnik as the deck canted up crazily to starboard, "NOW!" His words were nearly drowned by another cascade of crackling thunder. Eerie green light continued to flash from the empty KA'PPA masts and flickered along the network of open stringers above the bridge.

With no directional controls yet installed on the bridge, Brim could only hang on and watch helplessly while both deck crews aft slid across the streaming hullmetal in their protective suits, scrambling desperately for nonexistent handholds. One by one, the screaming men dropped over the metal precipice into the thrashing water beneath the ship. On the bridge, loose gear and small tools cascaded into heaps along the starboard bulkhead. Grabbing an open Hyperscreen housing, Brim hung on while the big starship tilted toward vertical, blanking the stormy sky with the darker mass of her own deck. *She was going over on her back!*

Suddenly through the driving downpour, he saw Provodnik scramble across the crazily canted deck of the bridge using empty console supports for footholds. In mere clicks, the young Bear grabbed a handle on the emergency power panel, twisted the door open, and—incredibly without losing his grip—pulled a main fuse block to the automatic controls. Instantly, the ear-splitting shriek died to an even rumble as the runaway generator spooled down to default power settings and *Defiant* slowly returned to an even keel. Aft, the ungainly tugs had been caught off guard and were completely unable to react at all, except for knots of crewmen that poured from the hatches, pointing with astonishment as the big ship settled back on an even keel.

Heart thumping wildly in his chest, Brim glanced forward toward the receding stocks just as a number of broken bodies appeared in *Defiant's* frothing wake: remains of the hapless work crews who were caught in the maelstrom of raging gravitons beneath the ship. His skin crawled. Such absolute destructive potential was only one

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reason why powerful vessels like starships were rarely permitted to fly across land masses—at least at low altitudes. He shuddered in the chill air—had he grabbed at the Hyperscreen housing even a click later than he did, he might have fallen from the bridge and joined them himself..

A few irals away, Ursis and the younger Sodeskayan were again totally engrossed in the control console, each running one of the generators by hand. Apparently Provodnik had suddenly received a great dose of confidence in his ability at a console. Sudden necessity had a way of making that happen—Brim understood the process well. The very best of Carescrian ore barges he had once flown could supply three lifetimes' worth of sudden necessity—in a single trip!

Shaking his head, he realized for the first time that it was no longer raining.

* * * *

The resulting inquest extended over nearly twenty-five interminable days, depriving Brim and Ursis of valuable metacycles they should have spent helping prepare *Defiant* for space. It was time that had to be made up from their own lives—but manpower was too short in those wartime years to permit substitutes at any job.

When the tribunal ended, however, all three officers present on the bridge were pronounced to be “without fault,” and references to the incident were deleted immediately from their Admiralty records. Surprisingly, the official “culprit” in the shipyard report was not the lightning strike. Instead, sole blame was fixed on a defective signal mixer whose improperly synchronized feedback logic had slowly destroyed both automatic control mechanisms during the preceding weeks of intense system testing. But Brim and Ursis both noted a great deal of coincident work being done on the KA'PPA-tower insulation—and complete re-isolation of the Vertical's waveguide system.

Neither the Carescrian nor his Sodeskayan friend mentioned anything about the waveguide work outside *Defiant's* immediate flight crew, but Commander Collingswood subsequently messaged a number of highly classified reports to Vice Admiral Plutron—a close

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friend in the Admiralty—in case the trouble should surface at some later time. “It never hurts to have one’s political homework promptly done,” as she stated one morning in the wardroom. “You never know when a folder of well-placed reports might come in very handy.”

Perhaps the only positive result of the tragedy was a totally revamped Vertical specification for the remainder of the *Defiant*-class ships. But the changes were far too late for *Defiant* herself—whose major systems were already on board and could only be retrofitted, not wholly replaced. Unfortunately, as Ursis often put it, “A whole year’s worth of patches is often inferior to a five-minute design modification.” In addition, *Defiant* herself was now widely known as a troubled ship, a reputation Brim suspected she would never fully escape.

And, of course, there was not much that could be done for the men who were killed. *Defiant*’s crew joined the shipyard workers in a generous collection for their families, but a few things in that day and age were still beyond the capabilities of technology...

* * * *

With each new morning, the starship became more and more complete—inside and out—and crew members began to arrive in a steady stream. A new lieutenant commander reported aboard early one morning some two weeks following *Defiant*’s near disaster. He was middle-aged, handsome in a weather-beaten way, and looked as if he were clearly accustomed to command—although he had only a reserve commission. There was certain agelessness to his face, framed by a gray beard and moustache, and even from a distance his gray eyes sparkled with the keen wisdom and humor of a longtime Starsailor. One ring with an enormous StarBlaze graced his long fingers, and his new uniform, though casually worn, had clearly been fashioned for a prince—at a princely sum.

Brim was taking a fresh-air break when the man strode across the brow and stopped just short of the main entrance hatch. He leaned back to gaze up at the bridge for a moment, then shrugged in a sort of pained resignation. This ritual completed, he stopped to critically inspect Brim as if the latter had purposely presented himself there for

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just such an occasion. “They ca’ me Baxter Oglethorp Calhoun,” he said abruptly in a rich baritone. “I’m to be *Defiant’s* Executive Officer—an’, Mister Wilf Brim, with myself on board, ye are no mair the only Carescrian in the crew.”

Brim felt his heart skip a beat—he’d spent years losing the same sort of thick Carescrian burr he’d just heard. “A *Carescrian?*” he stammered.

“Ay, chield, ‘tis indeed a thing you’d better believe,” Calhoun said with a grin, “even if ye *ha’* decided to forsake the old tongue. But don’t get your hopes up for any ‘down-home’ commizzeratin’. ‘Tis been so long since I ha’ luiked upon that awful place, I hardly remember onything o’t—except ‘tis a good place to be *from*. Forever!”

“You’ll get no arguments from me on that score, Number One,” Brim vowed. “But how is it you happen to know *me?*”

“A better question is how might I ha’ avoided it, mon,” Calhoun declared. “Right noo, ye are the most famous Carescrian in the Empire—for which I am eternally grateful. The likes o’ ye keeps the public eye off the likes o’ me.” He smiled with obvious satisfaction, then abruptly pushed his way past and continued on into the ship.

“I think I’m honored,” Brim replied to the man’s receding back. “What is it you normally do in peacetime?”

“I am no stranger to space, young mon,” Calhoun muttered, without even bothering to turn his head, “an’ I may yet find my grave in’t.” He laughed. “For the nonce, we’ll say that I’m in what you’d call the salvage business—an’ the less ye ask o’t, the better. Understand?”

Brim started to reply, but by that time, Calhoun was busy at the sign-in desk, and Ursis was paging from the bridge. The young Carescrian chuckled as he made his way up a companionway two treads at a time. It looked as if *Defiant* was attracting a typical Collingswood gathering of miscellany. Somehow, he wasn’t surprised—or disappointed—in the slightest.

* * * *

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Defiant's crew ranged all the way from seasoned space veterans to raw new recruits—officers and ratings alike. And all voiced happy surprise at conditions aboard their new ship. The wardroom and spaceman's mess were constantly supplied with all sorts of normally unavailable food and potables—courtesy of the mysterious Barbousse. Already the ship was developing her own personality. Perhaps it was somewhat more club like in paradigm than might be generally considered desirable throughout the Fleet. But then a very similar atmosphere had been—at least in Brim's opinion—largely responsible for old *Truculent's* success before its near destruction while battling three Leaguer Zagrail-class destroyers off Hagath-37/Lixor with Brim at the controls.

"If anything," Ursis rumbled to Brim one afternoon as they relaxed in comfortable wardroom chairs, "friend Barbousse is now even more discerning since leaving old *Truculent*." He lifted a ruby goblet to the light. "Look at color, Wilf. Such meem can only be described as 'glorious'."

In the background, a number of his countrymen were toasting each other heartily: "To ice, to snow, to Sodeskaya we go!"

Brim's tastes were in no way so sophisticated as Ursis's. Before joining the Helmsman's Academy, he had experienced the pleasures of meem only twice in his life. "It certainly tastes 'glorious', Nik," he said with a grin. "I guess I'll have to take your word on the color—I'm still kind of low on experience."

"Then you vouch for taste," the Bear said, "and I shall vouch for color."

"We have a bargain, Nik," Brim laughed. "Now, all we need is to find somebody who is interested in what we think."

"That," the Bear said with a thundering laugh, "may be more difficult than vouching itself."

"Not so," grumped a deep female voice from a couch behind them. "I only signed on this afternoon. And I don't know anything about this wardroom or anybody in it—except *you*, Wilf Brim."

Surprised, Brim whirled around to confront a woman of average height with wide shoulders, narrow hips, long thin legs, narrow feet—and a perfectly awesome bust. Her face was almost totally

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round, with a button nose, intelligent eyes, short fuzzy hair, and a toothy smile. He felt his jaw drop. Nobody else in the Universe looked like *that*. “Professor—*Commander*—Wellington!” he exclaimed, scrambling to his feet. “I never missed a single one of your lectures at the Helmsman’s Academy!” With a look of awe on his face, he placed a hand on Ursis’s shoulder. “Commander Wellington, may I present Nikolai Yanuarievich Ursis, the finest Systems Officer in the Universe?”

“I am indeed honored, Commander Wellington,” Ursis said, rising to his feet, then bowing deeply in the Sodeskayan manner. “And what place do you hold in *Defiant*’s crew?” he asked.

“My orders read ‘Weapons Officer,’” Wellington declared, scratching her head. “But it all happened so quickly. A week ago, I didn’t even own a battle suit; I am really a historian, you know. Then—zap!—I got the assignment by message, and here I am. My head’s still spinning.”

“Commander Wellington is probably *the* Universe’s expert on antique weapons systems, Nik,” Brim added.

Wellington laughed. “Just between you, me, and the bedpost,” she said, placing her hand conspiratorially beside her mouth, “I think they’re getting a little desperate for crews.”

“Say not so, good lady,” Ursis said, eyes sparkling with good humor. “It would surprise no one if *Defiant* were to receive a battery or two of antique weapons.”

“I thought of the possibility myself,” Wellington quipped, “so I brought a few barrels of gunpowder with me in my kit. We may have a small problem with recoil in deep space, but...” She shrugged phlegmatically.

Ursis looked at Brim and grinned. “Nergol Triannic is in deep trouble now, my Carescrian friend,” he said. “He might be able to fight radiation fires with N-rays, but how can he hope to counter cannonballs and grapeshot? You are clearly our secret weapon, Commander Wellington!”

“That’s Dora, please! I won’t know who anybody’s talking to.”

“Dora it is, then,” Ursis agreed. “Together, we three will blast League of Dark Stars into spinning atoms.”

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“With a few deep-space recoil problems,” Wellington piped in.

“Which it appears we shall soon toast with Logish Meem,” Brim interjected as Grimsby magically appeared with a third filled goblet. “Probably not a half-bad idea, come to think of it,” Brim mused as the ancient domestic set the goblet before Wellington and shuffled silently from the room. “All problems dissolve eventually in this magic solvent.”

“To ice, to snow, to Sodeskaya we go!” Ursis exclaimed. The three drained their meem in the fashion of Bears, then touched the goblets together upside down.

“Hear, hear!” Wellington replied, her eyes opened in surprise. She looked at the goblet. “By the Great Feathered Spirits of Higgins!” she exclaimed. “Where in the Universe did you find *this*? I haven’t tasted anything like it since before the war started.”

“We depend on a great deal of magic aboard this ship, Dora,” Collingswood interrupted from the doorway. “When I discovered Glendora T. Wellington had volunteered for combat, I knew I’d found someone who could help sustain it. So I personally asked for you.”

“Regula Collingswood!” Wellington squealed. “Well, I should have known.”

The reunion lasted long into the hours of darkness...

* * * *

During the next weeks, Brim and Aram were joined in the simulators by Angeline Waldo, a Reserve Helmsman from the merchant service who decided she wanted a ship that could fight back; Galen Fritz, a veteran trooper-turned-Helmsman from the Bax cluster; and Ardelle Jennings, a junior Helmsman fresh from the Imperial Academy. Each, Brim found quickly, had a unique style at the helm.

Jennings, for example, flew absolutely by the book. She was so perfect it was almost annoying, and she left absolutely nothing to chance. Brim imagined that when she was at the controls, *Defiant* would leave a neat red pen tracing across space—exactly corresponding to the course she had laid out well in advance of their

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passage. He hoped she would be able to perform as efficiently in the heat of battle, where the best-laid plans could—and often did—change with each click.

On the other hand, Fritz and Waldo—both experienced Helmsmen—flew easily, almost casually. They were comfortable at the controls. Even during the most trying of circumstances the Master Simulators could throw at them, they remained calm and never “lost” the ship. Brim knew that Triannic’s minions would quickly come up with more taxing challenges than any the civilian operators might conjure, but he expected that both would rise to the occasion. So long as the ship was capable of flight, they’d make sure her gunners accomplished their mission. And that was what the war—and *Defiant*—was all about.

Aside from that, Waldo had magnificent legs...

It was Aram, however, that Brim found truly astonishing.

Beneath his formal A’zurnian veneer, he was both technically astute and relaxed at the controls. And he could learn anything at any time, even after the many Sodeskayan meem bashes, when everybody—including himself—had toasted far more than was even remotely sensible. Not only that, he was absolutely unflappable in The Box. Even after sessions that left Brim himself on the edge of taking a blast pike to the whole complex, Aram came through sweating but still firmly in control of every situation. The young Helmsman modestly explained that being naturally flighted made the act of piloting far easier for him, but Brim knew better. Aram was simply xaxtdamned good.

* * * *

Gradually over the ensuing weeks, sounds of construction subsided inside the ship, and her passages and companionways became less cluttered with loose wires, construction gear, and just plain dirt. Closed access hatches for the most part stayed closed as stores were packed away and secured for deep space. The smell of the ship changed, too: from dust, bonding chemicals, and drying paint to new carpeting, new electronics, hot food, and the

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unmistakable smell of polish—the universal element of every military starship that had ever been built.

During this time, the number of dockyard workers between decks and on the gangways also changed, thinning to a trickle as civilian contractors were replaced by ever-increasing numbers of the Blue Capes who would actually man the commissioned ship. And—much to the amazement of nearly everyone—the shipyard declared I.F.S. *Defiant* to be “officially” complete two days ahead of schedule.

One J. Leeland Blake, a tall, serious-looking builder’s representative wearing the traditional stovepipe hat worn by all shipyard managers, delivered the matter-of-fact announcement. He appeared during Collingswood’s regular morning status meeting in *Defiant*’s shiny new wardroom.

“Following the successful resolution of Action Reports 11235 through 11781,” Blake reported pretentiously, “Starship I.F.S. *Defiant* is hereby declared to be an operational vehicle and cleared for immediate flight trials...” He frowned and cleared his throat while he peered into his display and adjusted a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles. “That, of course, specifically excludes Action Reports 791, 832, 5476, 9078, 9079, and 10517 through 11000,” he added. “However, those have to do with interface modifications, and we agreed—I believe—to deal with them after *Defiant*’s trial. Am I correct, Captain Collingswood?”

Collingswood smiled noncommittally and checked her own display carefully. “That is correct, Mister Blake,” she said after a moment, then looked around the table at her senior officers. “You’ve heard the gentleman’s words,” she declared with a smile. “If any of you have disagreements, now is certainly an appropriate time to voice them. Nik, what of the systems? They’ve been troublesome since *Defiant* was on the stocks. Are you satisfied?”

Ursis scowled for a moment, then nodded thoughtfully. “*Defiant*’s systems are as thoroughly tested as we can make them, Captain,” he said evenly. “In fact, Power and Propulsion appear to be virtually perfect.” Then he held up a warning finger. “Admittedly, some electronic problems do persist,” he added, “but nothing that appears serious—or schedule-threatening.”

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“Wad ye gi’ her a full bill o’ health noo, Nikolai?” Calhoun questioned, peering over his glasses.

Ursis nodded. “Yes,” he said after some consideration. “Except perhaps for starboard Vertical. That still functions somewhat on rough side, though it *has* been operating in a steady state for more than a week now.” He shrugged philosophically. “I suppose I must admit that it is at least operational—although I do not fully trust it.”

“There are no unresolved Action Reports on the Verticals, Lieutenant Ursis,” the civilian replied defensively. “Both generators operate completely to specification, you know.”

“Agreed,” Ursis said dryly. “It is when I finally got to read the specifications themselves that I determined further complaints were useless.” He crossed his legs and relaxed in the chair amid half-stifled guffaws and choked-back snickers. The builders had been less than gracious when asked for systems specifications. Most other crews were satisfied with user-operations and maintenance manuals.

“And you, Mister Brim?” Collingswood interjected. “What have you to add on the subject?”

Brim grinned. “You’ve heard me grumble about our troublesome steering engines, Mister Blake. But they’ve done well enough for a week now—and the new Chairman you downloaded is the best anywhere. The mods for parallel quantum/vector analysis seem to make a lot of difference in the way she keeps a course. At least that’s the way she feels in The Box.”

“I trust she’ll come through at least as well during actual flight,” Blake said proudly, regaining some of his good humor. “We’ve built some fine ships here over the past few hundred years—*Defiant* is one of the best, I am certain...”

The meeting went on for more than an hour afterward, but in the end the pact was made. Collingswood signed the shipyard’s Red Book, and *Defiant* was ready for commissioning.

The following morning just after dawn, everyone assembled outside the starship’s main hatch while a polished brass nameplate was noisily fixed to a bulkhead with four old fashioned rivets:

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IFS DEFIANT
HULL NUMBER CL-921
ELEANDOR-BESTIENNE YARD
19 Unad, 51999.

In a simple ceremony, both Blake and Collingswood gave short speeches containing a number of necessary platitudes concerning the Emperor, home, hearth, and duty. Then a local beauty doused the bows with a bottle of Logish Meem, and—while Barbousse hoisted the Rhondell-falcon banner to the top of the KA’PPA tower—*Defiant* entered the Fleet lists as a “commissioned” vessel. Afterward, as the crew trooped back aboard to their stations (many first joining Collingswood when she stopped to polish the new plaque with her sleeve), a dockyard painting crew applied a Fleet Designator on both sides of her bow: “CL-921.” I.F.S. *Defiant* was—at least officially—declared ready for flight.

Soon afterward taxi tests began, and the ship came through with a few minor snags, but surprisingly well considering her past record. Two weeks later, she slid for the first time into her own element: Space. In spite of her size, she appeared to be handy and maneuverable, surprisingly light on her feet and astonishing in the way she could accelerate. Only the most powerful destroyers could outspeed her into HyperSpace, and in nearby taverns and meem halls, her crew was quick to crow her talents. She was still known as a “troublesome” ship, nothing would ever change that. But she was early on known as a happy ship, too. Probably that made much of the difference...

Through the following days of space trials, *Defiant’s* crew took their first real steps toward becoming a team, capable—at least—of flying the big starship into deep space to run-in her four Admiralty CL-Standard 489.3G Drive crystals. At HyperSpeeds, she once more proved to be an extremely swift and nimble ship. Designed for a top velocity of no more than 32.5 LightSpeed, on her final set of speed trials she actually sustained 35.1. Afterward, it was widely rumored among the crew that Ursis and a number of other Bears—including old Borodov from I.F.S. *Truculent*, now stationed at the Admiralty in

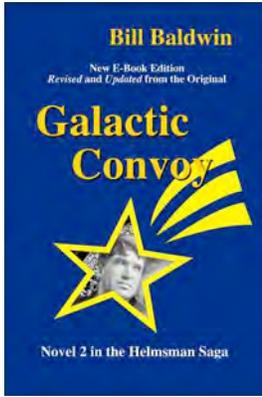
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Avalon—had contrived to alter her eight N(112-B) Power Chambers at the time the waveguides were being reoriented, but Ursis vociferously denied any such Sodeskayan conspiracy.

Of course, nobody believed him.

After the last of the speed runs were recorded, Brim reversed course for Eleandor-Bestienne. There were last-minute modifications to be made following her first major excursion—and a number of discrepancies still required correction. Nevertheless, the ship appeared to be as ready as men could make her for actual service. It *almost* seemed as if she had outgrown her original propensity for trouble.

Almost...



Galactic Convoy: this second novel in Bill Baldwin's Helmsman Saga is a Military-Science-Fiction novel about intra-galactic competition and conflict. First published in 1987, 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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