

LEVIATHANS

THE GREAT WAR

HE WHO MERITS IT

AS TOLD BY
STEVE MOHAN, JR.

HE WHO MERITS IT

A THRILLING TALE RELATED BY THE MASTER OF PEN AND PAGE

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HE WHO MERITS IT

The place where the Western Desert met the harsh blue of the cloudless Egyptian sky was a bare line, straight and empty. Somewhere over that horizon the French waited to write with their deaths their names into the grand book of English history.

Gunnery Officer Lieutenant Daniel Chandler hoped his eight twelve-inchers would oblige them.

Chandler stepped onto the gun deck and clipped his safety tether to the railing that ringed HML *Leviathan's* A turret. He peered down. A thousand feet below a golden sea rushed away beneath him.

It was the dunes that made him think of the sea. Rounded as they rose to a crest, then tumbling sharply into a trough only to rise again. Sculptures in sand made by the fierce chisel of the wind. Like the waves of the sea the dunes shifted, and like an angry ocean they could swallow a man whole.

Sand flowed more slowly than water, was all. The desert was nothing other than a slow ocean.

And *Leviathan* was a new kind of vessel made to sail upon it.

Chandler saw movement out of the corner of his eye and turned. His gaze speared a young sailor, he figured one of his gunnery ratings. The boy froze, his eyes wide, his right hand clutching a cigarette between the forefinger and thumb. He'd come round the turret, obviously expecting to find the gun platform abandoned.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Chandler, I didn't mean to—"

"No," said Chandler sternly, "I'm sure you didn't."

The boy wore summer whites: white trousers, a white blouse with a dark blue vee-collar over a blue cravat, and a white pork-pie hat, the blue cap tally proudly carrying the name of the ship in white letters.

Chandler nodded at him. "You had better take off your cap before you lose it." The officer had left his own combination cover on his desk in his stateroom.

The boy snatched the cap off his head with his left hand and stuffed it in his pocket, never releasing his hold on the cigarette.

Chandler sighed, giving up on the moment of solitude he'd hoped to find. He waved the boy over.

Slowly, *reluctantly*, the boy approached him, obviously expecting a dressing down.

Chandler pointed at the railing, and the boy clipped himself to a padeye welded to a crosspiece. For a moment they stood in silence, the dry wind of the desert tearing at their uniforms.

The boy was thin and rangy, his hair a shock of copper-red. His whites looked like they were a size too big. Chandler watched him rub a medallion in his left hand, polishing it with his worry. It was a St. Elmo's medal, Chandler saw. A small token many sailors carried to keep in mind their patron saint.

Chandler had seen this boy a thousand times. Sometimes he had black hair and sometimes blond, sometimes he was tall and lanky, sometimes he was short and stout. Sometimes he was Welsh and sometimes a Scot.

But he was always the same.

"What's your name son?" Chandler said softly.

"I'm K-Kendall, sir," replied the boy with an accent that marked him as English.

"First battle, Kendall?"

The boy nodded.

In a way it was Chandler's first battle, too. Many times had he faced death in the close gloom of a gun house, hemmed in by locking wheels and transfer trays and chain hoists and hydraulic rams, men fighting and dying by no more light than a pair of dim electric bulbs, ears ringing with the angry roar of good English guns, the smell of steel and burnt gunpowder all around, the air stifling, a sauna of boxed-in heat. Uncomfortable and dangerous.

But familiar.

This would be his first battle fought from the height of the sky.

"Are you all right?" Chandler asked.

"Sir, the reason I left my post is—"

"Why don't we have an agreement?" interrupted Chandler. "You don't tell the captain I was away from my post, and I won't tell the gunnery officer you were away from yours."

HE WHO MERITS IT

The boy laughed despite himself.

Chandler pulled a lighter from his pants pocket. It was sterling silver and there was a cross etched into its surface. The lighter had been a gift from his father. We all have our talismans, he thought dryly.

He flicked the lighter's wheel and a spark turned into a little golden flame. He offered it to Kendall. The boy pocketed his medal and held out his cigarette to Chandler.

The boy closed his eyes. Took a deep drag.

"Smoking's a filthy habit, Kendall. You really ought to give it up."

"Yes, sir," said the boy. "Right after this battle."

For a moment they stood together in companionable silence. On the horizon, Chandler saw a trio of pyramids rising: Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure. *Giza*. They had nearly reached Giza. They would cross the Nile south of Cairo and then turn north-northeast. It was a less direct route to the Suez Canal than they might've taken, but hopefully they would catch the French unaware.

"Where are you from, Kendall?"

"Bristol, sir."

"Well, we're practically neighbors then. I grew up in Bath."

The boy nodded, swallowed.

Silence hung heavily for a moment as Chandler sought the right words.

"Trust to your training, Airman Kendall," he said gently, "and trust to your captain. You'll come through."

"Pardon me, sir, but—" The boy stopped.

Chandler nodded. "Go ahead."

"Sir, I've heard the Frogs are devils in the sky."

Chandler flashed the boy a lopsided smile. "*Palmam Qui Meruit Ferat*."

The boy's brow furrowed. "Sir?"

"It's Latin. From Lord Admiral Nelson's coat of arms. It means 'He who merits it takes the palm.' For two hundred years the Royal Navy has ruled the sea. And now our leviathans rule the sky. No Englishman with a true heart has ever been found wanting." He squeezed the boy's shoulder. "You won't be the first."

"Thank you, sir," the boy whispered. "I—"

But whatever else he intended to say was lost in the mad shriek of an alarm.

"Action stations," Chandler shouted.

The boy unclipped and scurried toward Turret B. Chandler turned and dashed for the ladder that would take him up to the bridge. As he turned he caught a glimpse of the pyramids of Giza.

Rising above them like a dark moon was a battleship.

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Capitaine de Volée Jean-David Havret, captain of the battleship *Jean Bart*, stood on the flying bridge, the wind pushing against his lean, wiry body, trying to pull the binoculars pressed to his face out of his hands.

He didn't even notice.

When he found the dark speck cast against the burnished blue of the empty sky the rest of the world fell away.

A Tommi.

He watched the beast grow large in his binoculars. *Merde*. Two large gun turrets—the British vessel was a battleship. The diplomatic dustup over the Suez that had led to this confrontation had been both sudden and unexpected. *Jean Bart* had been diverted to Egypt from a Libyan port call. Most of the English fleet was supposed to be at tether in Scapa Flow. Havret had dared to hope the British would have nothing in the area, or at least, nothing *big*. Instead he was facing a capital ship at least the equal of his.

Leviathan's sudden appearance suggested that Whitehall practiced the same kind of diplomacy as the French government—the kind with heavy guns.

To Havret's eyes the British ship was grotesque. Her bow looked swollen next to *Jean Bart's* sleek, sloping nose and her four fat stacks lacked the pleasing taper of the French vessel. She would turn like a pig, too. The *Tommi* lacked *Jean Bart's* small forward wings that added lift and stability in the air. Small advantages, to be sure, when measured against the *Tommi's* twelve-inch guns.

HE WHO MERITS IT

But Havret wouldn't have traded places with the English captain for all the mirrors in Versailles.

"The men stand ready at their stations, *Capitaine*," said a voice behind him.

"Very well, M. Virenque," Havret said, turning to glance back at the man.

Lieutenant de Volée Damien Virenque looked completely unlike his captain. *Jean Bart's* executive officer was a stocky man with a ruddy complexion whose flesh threatened to overwhelm the buttons of his white uniform blouse. His unruly black hair was matched by a mustache that would have made a walrus proud.

Havret, on the other hand, was a reed-thin man of no more than average height (and then only if he was standing up on his toes.) The captain's hair was fading from brown to gray and was cut short, his mustache neatly trimmed. Havret labored to make everything within view of his ice blue eyes orderly and *precise*.

But whatever the excesses of Virenque's form, Havret had never found any reason to question the workings of the officer's mind.

He turned his attention back to the British warship.

"What is she?"

"Most likely one of *Leviathan's* sisters," said Havret, "maybe even the great ship herself."

"*Je renie Dieu*," the lieutenant whispered.

Havret put down his binoculars and turned to look at his executive officer. "Deny God if you will, Lieutenant Virenque," he snapped. "Just so long as you don't deny *me*."

Virenque's eyes widened and his broad cheeks reddened. "*Non, mon capitaine*."

Havret turned his back on Virenque, pushed open a hatch, and stalked into the bridge proper. He knew his senior lieutenant didn't deserve the slap, but Havret had given it to him anyway. He had heard the first stirrings of despair in his officer's voice.

And that could not be tolerated.

The bridge was a cramped space, filled with sailors in white trousers and blouses with three blue stripes outlining a square collar. Each wore a white cap with a red pom on top and a blue band

beneath. They clustered around the chart table, stood at the island that housed the vessel's wheel, waited against the aft bulkhead where the bells and alarms were stationed.

All was in order.

The low murmur of machinery was broken by the crackle of electrical discharge coming from the toy placed above *Jean Bart's* forward ports. Just two years before, the wireless had been a clattering mechanism hiding in a cramped "radio" room used to send coded missives through empty air. Now the fleet was experimenting with the transmission of actual speech.

A strong male voice speaking in English said: "French vessel off my port bow, this is Captain John Forsyth of His Majesty's *Leviathan* *Leviathan*. Over."

Leviathan *Leviathan*! The British were ridiculously literal. They had no ear for beauty.

Havret placed the hand-held microphone to his lips and pressed the send button. "This is *Capitaine de Volée* Jean-David Havret of the *Jean Bart*," he said in heavily accented English. "Over."

"*Jean Bart*, you are violating the territory of British Egypt and are hereby ordered to depart. Please change to new course two seven zero. Over."

Havret allowed himself a grim smile. "Perhaps, I shall instead proceed to the French canal, *oui*?"

Now the Englishman sounded irritated. "You know very well, Captain, that the Suez Canal is the property of His Majesty's government."

"I know no such thing," said Havret.

"We are quite prepared to settle this matter." There was ice in the British officer's voice.

"You think you are," said Havret softly. "But you may find you are mistaken. *Jean Bart* out." He replaced the microphone on the radio set with a sharp *click*.

Havret turned to look at his bridge crew. They were wide-eyed with fear, pale, one boy shaking. Shaking before the mighty British. They were already defeated.

HE WHO MERITS IT

Havret raised his voice. "Did you hear the Englishman?" he asked his men. "He ordered us to retreat. *Ordered us,*" he snarled. "Because Frenchmen are no good but to take English orders." He shook his head. "In 1805 the English admiral Horatio Nelson defeated a French and Spanish armada. Two centuries, *two centuries* ago. And the British speak of it as if it were *yesterday* and we were no more than dogs, lucky to take a few scraps from their master's hand."

Angry silence filled up the bridge.

"*Are we dogs?*" Havret shouted.

"*NON,*" his crew shouted back.

"M. Absalon, left standard rudder, come to new course two eight six. All gun ratings, stand by your guns."

Suddenly the bridge was filled with the crisp repeat-backs of a ship that was readying herself to fight. A precise little smile flashed across Havret's face. The Englishman Forsyth had miscalculated. The sight of his great vessel alone was enough to inspire fear. But there was one emotion that ruled over fear.

Anger.



The man who introduced himself as Abdullah al-Besharin to English and Cairenes leaned forward against the camel's hump, relishing the cool of the great pyramid's shade. He would be out in the brutal sun soon enough.

The name literally meant Abdullah the Besharin and since he *was* a member of the Besharin tribe it was true enough in a way. Bedouins rarely shared their family names with outsiders, but the English demanded to know the full names of their subjects. The small subterfuge of calling himself "al-Besharin" allowed him to hold true to his culture *and* satisfy the whims of foreigners.

He smiled to himself. Besides, the English never seemed to catch on.

He reached forward and patted the camel's hump. The beast grunted, no doubt enjoying the cool as much as he was. He called the camel Fatima in honor of his great aunt. Like his great aunt, the camel was a thick-headed, willful and smelly creature.

Abdullah appreciated the pyramids for their shade and little else. He knew they were supposed to be wonders, but he had lived for forty-three years in their shadow and saw nothing particularly wonderful about them. The kind assistance of the pole star, Al-Jadi, that guided his family's flocks in the night, the shrubs that told him where he could find water in the desert, the back of a strong camel; these were wonders, but a pile of ancient stones ... bah!

Fatima suddenly bellowed, long and deep. Abdullah heard in it the beginning of alarm.

The camel was looking up, her head stretched toward the blue sky. Abdullah followed its gaze.

A great mechanism hovered in the sky. When Abdullah had been a boy, his father had had some business with fisherman on the coast. During the trip, Abdullah had seen a gray warship in the blue waters of the Mediterranean. It had been a long time ago, and to be honest most of the memory had been scrubbed away by time's wicked hand, but when he looked up the shock of recognition brought forth a scrap of recollection.

It was ... It was—He shook his head. *It was a flying battleship.*



Tortured silence reigned on the bridge of *Leviathan*, all eyes focused on the French warship that was slowly growing to fill the sky. Chandler felt time laboring to give birth to each second, every terrible minute. His mouth tasted like copper, like burnt copper.

Waiting to see if the Frogs would bend to reason—or if they would need to taste hard English steel.

The Frog was moving, slowly, almost drifting, but definitely making way. The shadow of the French battleship passed over the pyramids, the silhouette of the vessel momentarily broken and twisted by the timeless monuments. Chandler licked his lips.

"So, Danny," said Captain Forsyth, clapping a massive hand on Chandler's shoulder, "we'll know soon enough, won't we?"

"Yes sir," said Chandler, wondering if his captain knew what the French would do before even they did. John Forsyth was a great

HE WHO MERITS IT

bear of a man, with curly black hair going to gray, merry brown eyes and the kind of laugh that would fill any dance hall to the walls. Find him at a pub and he'd slap a quid down on the bar and buy you and your mates a round before anyone could utter a single polite objection.

When it came to matters of the sky, there was no man who had a better sense of life and death.

Like every man on that bridge, Chandler was grateful to be serving under Forsyth. The lieutenant wondered if the French realized what kind of box his captain had placed them in.

Jean Bart looked to be steering a northwesterly course, while *Leviathan* was steering zero nine zero—due east. Forsyth had ordered the French vessel to turn to two seven zero and withdraw. If the overmatched *Jean Bart* retreated north and east with the thought of damaging the vital canal that connected British India to the mother country, *Leviathan* would run her down and destroy her.

If, on the other hand, she withdrew west as Forsyth had instructed, every moment would take her farther and farther away from the canal. And she'd have to withdraw under *Leviathan's* guns—should she decide to do something imprudent.

Which happened depended on a simple choice by the Frenchman standing on *Jean Bart's* bridge. Would he turn left?

Or right?

Chandler studied the French battleship in his binoculars, watching the brilliant sun illuminate the vessel's gray bow. *Jean Bart* was showing port aspect. He saw shadows *moving*. The battleship's bow was swinging—

"Coming left," he whispered.

"So she is, my boy, so she is," said Forsyth softly. He raised his voice. "What do you think, Chief? Maybe we'll make a proper airman out of our gunnery officer after all."

The quartermaster chief at the chart table chuckled and there were grins on the faces of the lads all around the bridge. No one was going to have to die to prove English superiority—not today anyway. The French were crying uncle.

Chandler glanced at the wireless set. But they weren't really, were they? The gunnery officer felt something hard and sharp in his gut.

We are quite prepared to settle this matter, Forsyth had said.

You think you are, the Frenchmen had answered. *But you may find you are mistaken.*

"Sir? If they intend to accept your terms of withdrawal, why haven't they signaled us?"

Forsyth shrugged. "It is bad enough to *know* your opponent is the better man. How could you possibly stand to admit it?"

In Chandler's binoculars, *Jean Bart* was now clearly turning. She had nearly reached two seven zero, which would put her on a reciprocal course with *Leviathan*.

Still ...

Chandler sensed Forsyth turn away. Heard him say something to the boatswain mate of the watch.

Chandler did not lower his binoculars. He had fought in many battles and he trusted the lump that had formed in his gut. Something was wrong. Every second drew the two warships closer together. They were separated by perhaps 20,000 yards. Ten nautical miles. Well within maximum range for the twelve-inch monsters carried by *Leviathan* or *Jean Bart's* 240 millimeter / 50 Modèles.

Chandler could see *Jean Bart's* bow, pointed straight at *Leviathan* like a dagger.

He dropped the binoculars and spun around, his heart suddenly racing. "Captain."

Forsyth turned, brow furrowed, the question written on his face.

The words tumbled out of Chandler. "She's still turning. Past two seven zero, Captain. *She's still turning.*"

Forsyth's eyes widened as he understood.

And heard the distant *boom* of *Jean Bart's* forward guns.



Havret's warship shuddered with the recoil of her great guns, shaking with the terrible energy required to fling nearly a ton of

HE WHO MERITS IT

ordnance at the British *Leviathan*. In addition to the explosive warhead, the shells each carried a chemical that released a small feather of smoke in flight. As Havret watched, twin arcs of gray passed over the British warship.

Already his gunners were lowering their elevation, adjusting for speed and wind and angle. But they would have to eject the spent powder and then haul up another shell, load it in the breach, and ram home three new bags of powder.

All that took time.

Leviathan's guns spoke.

Havret watched whisper-thin lines of smoke rise from the Tommi's forward turret and curl toward his vessel before plunging through the sky to the earth below. Incredibly, *Leviathan* had found the correct range—but had missed wide left.

Now it would be the British that would have to wait—as *Jean Bart* made the next move in this deadly game of chess.

The French guns roared into the blue sky, shaking the great ship. Havret watched their trails arc through the sky and suddenly he knew, *he knew*.

A streak of smoke intersected *Leviathan's* hull, starboard side forward. The British ship jerked and trembled with the power of the blow, her bow suddenly lost in molten flame. Havret watched the flame rip away railings and hull plating and even a small gun turret, like scraps of paper carried before a great storm.

A cheer arose on his bridge.

He watched the British ship careen drunkenly left. She moved like a man who'd been shot and suddenly couldn't find his feet. The British gunners wouldn't be able to find their range now, not after such a grievous blow. *Jean Bart* would get in another blow ... and perhaps another.

Havret smiled to himself, already seeing the possible end of it.

He hadn't taken out any of the battleship's big guns, but perhaps with a little luck—

And then his blood froze.

Because he realized that *Leviathan* wasn't lurching across the sky. She was *turning*.



Abdullah stopped his camel and stared up into the sky. "There is no God, but God," he whispered fervently, "and Mohammad is his Prophet." What he saw now surely must've been undreamt of in the mind of man. One of the monsters erupted into great gouts of terrible orange flame, the brutal roar following a second or two after, like thunder following lightning.

Abdullah watched the unholy orange light and listened to the monstrous sound and at first he thought that the mighty battleship of the sky was on fire. Then he heard another roar and jerked his head around.

The two monsters warred on each other.

The *second* battleship of the sky fired *its* guns and Abdullah saw the first vessel shudder, a column of black smoke rising from it to mar the blue of the sky.

The guns spoke again and *again*, some big and some of them small, and he stared up at the spectacle, his jaw loosely open, not even thinking how the desert stole the water of his mouth. Fatima bleated and fought his control, the creature frightened by the dull roar of destruction and the sharp, acrid smell of burning wood.

And then the desert exploded a quarter-mile from where his camel stood, raising great plumes of sand that raced across the earth in a straight line.

Abdullah felt an insect sting the leathery skin of his cheek. He touched it and his fingertips came away covered with blood.

The camel's nostrils flared at the iron tang of it in the air.

Abdullah looked at the dark blood covering his fingertips and for the first time realized this was not just a spectacle to be watched. This was something that might *kill him*.

He turned the camel around and raced back toward the safety of the pyramids, the common, uninspiring pyramids. The beast required little urging, bolting for safety, fleeing in mad fear, her bandy legs flying as if she were ten years younger, until at last the panicked camel threw him. Abdullah scrambled into a shallow ravine partially shielded by a low, rocky hill and hugged the ground.

HE WHO MERITS IT

And from that humble vantage, Abdulla al-Besharin watched the titanic battle above him, having learned that a true wonder was something that simultaneously could fill you with awe and terror, and in equal measure.



The hammer blow to her starboard bow conspired against *Leviathan*, making it harder for her gunners to find their target. The great ship listed a few degrees to port—that would have to be corrected for. And A turret still wasn't firing quite right. His lads in A were slow, painfully slow.

Chandler clutched his binoculars with white knuckles.

Eager to be down in the turrets with his lads. Down in the turrets, making the Frogs pay.

His twelve-inchers had yet to find their range, but his smaller guns had torn apart one of the French stacks. The French ship trailed smoke from the wounded chimney, a great plume of black that simultaneously made the *Jean Bart* easier to find and more difficult to see. *Leviathan's* first hit had provided the French vessel with a smoke screen; a problem Chandler had often encountered in his seafaring days.

Chandler put his hand on Forsyth's arm. "Captain, A turret's firing slow. If you would allow me—"

"Nice try, Danny," said Forsyth. "You've trained your gun crews, now it's our turn to make you into a deck officer. We have her now; how would you finish her?"

It took Chandler only a few seconds to answer his captain's question. "Come right to—" Chandler lined up the vectors in his head. "—zero two zero. Bring Z turret into the fight."

Leviathan's massive forward guns spoke and the ship trembled with the recoil.

"You heard the man," shouted Forsyth. "Right full rudder. Train all gun turrets left."

Chandler admired the man's superior grasp of tactics. He had waited on the turn until firing one more salvo. The turn made

targeting nearly impossible. It was bad luck, but then Forsyth was smart enough to spend his bad luck where it could do him the least harm. The effect of the recoil combined with the time needed to reload the guns meant they would be out of action for a minute or more anyway. And if he had to lose time in the turn, he might as well get in a shot first.

The only thing that worried Chandler was the wily French commander.

Now the *Leviathan* was turning her broadside to *Jean Bart*. In essence, it would be the equivalent of crossing the enemy's tee—four twelve-inch guns to *Jean Bart*'s two nine-point-four inchers. And that did not even take into account superior English gunnery. It should be enough to finish the French vessel.

If her commander would only cooperate.

Chandler watched English rounds punch through the curtain of smoke, but how much damage they did, it was impossible to tell. Was, was that—

Jean Bart was turning.

And picking up speed. Chandler shook his head. What could they possibly hope to accomplish? The French ship couldn't hope to outrun *Leviathan*. She *could* turn broadside; it would bring *Jean Bart*'s rear turret into play, but she'd still be outgunned. Maneuvering wasn't going to save the French vessel.

What is he doing?

Chandler didn't like it, he didn't like it all. Because there seemed to be no reason for it.

And he could not convince himself that the French captain was a fool.

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"We are done," whispered Virenque. "*Finis.*"

"You are a fine officer, M. Virenque," said Havret watching the compass wheel turn with his ship, "but we must really speak about your lack of self-confidence."

HE WHO MERITS IT

The lieutenant shook his head. "We cannot run and we cannot stand, *oui?*"

"*Oui.*"

"So what shall we do?" asked Virenque.

"Something else," said Havret.

He had placed *Jean Bart* in a right turn. He realized the smoke screened much of what he did from the enemy and the turn would make it harder still for them to target him. They did not know where he was or where he was going.

The deck plates vibrated with the power of the mains coming up in speed, his vessel accelerating to flank. He waited until his bow pointed at *Leviathan's* starboard beam like a knife pointed at a man's heart.

Then he turned to the helmsman and said, "Meet her."

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"She's coming around," said Chandler peering through the terrible haze, the horrible roar of *Leviathan's* guns ringing in his ears.

"You mean she's coming *about*," said Forsyth. "She's turning to a reciprocal course. She's running." He touched the lee helm's shoulder. "Tell the engine room, make turns for flank speed. We're not going to let her get away."

The man repeated the order, then passed it on to the engine room.

Chandler felt *Leviathan* gain speed, heard the hatches rattling in their combings, bulkheads clicking as they flexed in and out against transverse supports, the buzz of vibration working up from the deck and settling in his legs. It felt like the skyship was shaking herself apart.

Leviathan shot forward.

Chandler ignored it all, and studied the *Jean Bart*. She was like a fan dancer: he could still see the general shape of her, but all the good bits were hidden by the slender cover of her trailing smoke. How distant was she? Chandler wondered. The French and English

vessels had drifted closer during the engagement. Seven nautical miles? Six?

Jean Bart was definitely turning, as the captain said, but ... she wasn't steady up on a reciprocal course. She held her turn ... and was she coming up in speed.

Chandler took a breath. "Sir, I think she's turning through a circle."

"That doesn't make any sense," barked Forsyth. "In the future, Mr. Chandler, I think you'd better—" The captain's words cut off sharply as he lifted a pair of binoculars to his face. "She *is* turning," Forsyth roared. "It appears Mr. Chandler is determined to put the rest of us to shame. All turrets swing right. Look for her from the north-northeast."

"Begging your pardon, Captain?" said Chandler softly as the bridge crew finished their repeat-backs.

"Go ahead, Mr. Chandler," said Forsyth. "God knows you've earned the right to ask your question."

"You're not going to turn away, sir? Or slow?"

If both ships had a flank bell on, that would make for a closing speed of something like sixty knots. One nautical mile per minute.

It wasn't hard to do the math.

"Turn away? No. If *Jean Bart* wants to end this now, then that is quite fine with me. As for reducing speed—" Forsyth shook his head. "You still have much to learn, my boy. We will not surrender the initiative to our adversary."

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Across the broken and battered sky, the two ships raced toward each other.

But not so fast that their gunners couldn't keep up. Havret's ship shuddered under the impact of a hard rain. It sounded like hail pummeling a tin roof. A shell *spanged* off the armored turret directly in front of the tower; shrapnel starred the glass in the forward port three inches from where he stood.

HE WHO MERITS IT

Havret's gunners were giving as good as they got. The union jack flying from the Tommi's jack staff was shredded, her forward railings mangled and twisted, a fifteen-foot section draped off the port side like a lazy man's fishing pole. As Havret watched, a pair of 240-millimeter shells tore away *Leviathan's* topgallant forecastle.

Still the British vessel continued gamely one, not swerving, not stopping, too proud to acknowledge her injuries.

Havret had to admit that she was magnificent.

Leviathan's captain probably expected Havret to execute a high-speed pass, to come in close where his fewer and smaller guns could do more damage and where his disadvantage in gunnery skill would be less telling. Forsyth probably believed that *Jean Bart* would engage in a high-speed pass and then flee.

In that belief he could not have been more wrong.



Chandler watched the French battle ship draw closer and closer, her guns blazing, shuddering with the force of *Leviathan's* anger, yes, but not backing down, not for one minute. Not for one second.

At first, Chandler had thought the two ships would pass each other at high speed, each mauling the other with their guns, but clearing beam-to-beam at a distance of five, six hundred yards.

But *Jean Bart* wasn't on an exact reciprocal course to *Leviathan*. She was coming in at an angle, a shallow angle to be sure, but still—

"She means to ram us," said Chandler out loud.

Captain Forsyth gave him a queer look, glanced out the forward port at *Jean Bart*, than shook his head. "Left full rudder."

"Left full rudder, aye, aye, Captain," answered the helmsman, turning his wheel hand over hand until it reached the painted line marked "Left 30°."

Forsyth turned to Chandler and placed his hand on his shoulder. "I'm through arguing with you, Danny. You've been right all along."

Leviathan lurched left.

But not fast enough.

Because the nimble *Jean Bart* was turning, too.

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"That's it, that's it," said Havret, talking to himself and barely aware he was speaking aloud. "Remember your water days. Like an approach to a pier."

Leviathan loomed ahead of her, crowding out the sky as *Jean Bart* stole up on her. He was sliding up to her the way a man approaches a woman at a party. Their velocities now almost matched; *Jean Bart* was just a little faster, just a little behind.

"Come on now," whispered Havret. "Just like docking at a pier."

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"*Brace for impact,*" shouted Forsyth, and men all over the bridge (all over the ship) grabbed bolted-down tables and consoles or tethered themselves to supports. Chandler threw his arms around a stanchion and glanced out the starboard ports, looking aft as the French ship threw itself at *Leviathan*.

Chandler just had time to wonder: What is she doing *now*? The warship was coming in obliquely. If *Jean Bart* meant to ram them, it would make much more sense to come in at full speed and strike amidships. Had the Frog misjudged the angle? Or had—

Sudden force threw Chandler left, wrenching his arms free of the stanchion and then he was flying. For a second the world was filled with a terrible shriek, the agonized cry of rent metal. Just a second, and then his left shoulder smashed against a bulkhead, and then his head—

Darkne—

• • •

Havret turned to Virenque. "Now, my friend. *Now.*"

HE WHO MERITS IT

• • •

Chandler clawed his way back to consciousness. The light stung his eyes. Liquid agony curled around his chest (a broken rib?) and his head pulsed with pain. His left arm might be broken, too. His fingers tingled, his shoulder was on fire. He tasted salty, metallic blood.

The terrible sound was gone. That was...good? Was that good? He wasn't sure. But it *was* important. A little voice insisted it was important.

He staggered to his feet, saw Forsyth sprawled on the deck face down, his head haloed by dark red blood. The captain had hit the compass stand.

Chandler lurched over and touched his back.

Forsyth moaned. *Alive.*

(Sound. *No sound.*)

"Captain," Chandler croaked. "All right?"

Forsyth blinked, drew a deep breath. He rolled up onto his side. Chandler saw there was a nasty gash across his captain's forehead. Blood seeped from the wound, but it didn't look terribly deep.

"Fine," said Forsyth roughly. "I'm fine. You know head wounds. Bleed like the bloody devil."

(*NO sound.*)

"Sir—" said Chandler and then he didn't know how to finish that sentence. He looked up. *The French ship was still there, still pushed up against Leviathan.*

No sound.

He looked down at Forsyth, suddenly alarmed. "Sir—"

This time Forsyth was ahead of him. "Repel boarders, Danny. *Repel boarders.*"

• • •

Havret stepped out onto the flying bridge. For a moment, only a moment, the two ships were tangled together, like two automobiles that crashed into each other with sufficient speed to *stick*.

But that wouldn't last.

Two of his men, deck airmen, unclipped their tethers and sprinted to a spot where a mere several feet separated the two ships. The first man leapt, catching the railing and clambering over. The second man followed, lost his grip, grabbed wildly.

And caught the bottom of the railing's stanchion.

Havret found that his heart was in his throat.

They hovered a thousand feet above Egypt's unforgiving Western Desert. There would be no second chance, no forgiveness for a careless evaluation of distance or a sweaty palm on slick steel.

The first airmen bent down to pull the second up.

Once he hauled his companion to the deck, they worked quickly, taking a manila line thrown to them from *Jean Bart* and tying it off one of the Tommi's cleats. One line. And then a second, forward. And another, aft.

Leviathan was now married to *Jean Bart*.

And Havret's men stormed across the divide.

• • •

Chandler flew down the ladder, ignoring the safety padeyes, concerned only with speed.

Frenchman had boarded *Leviathan*.

Chandler had run past his stateroom, pausing only long enough to recover his sidearm and one of his undershirts. Lads, *his* lads, were boiling out of the now-useless twelve-inch turrets like ants. There was no time to outfit them from the armory. Oh, *Leviathan's* squad of marines would be arming themselves, but Chandler very much doubted they would arrive in time.

The defense of the great ship would depend on brave men armed only with two-foot spanner wrenches and their courage.

He saw Kendall, young Kendall, from A turret swing a massive wrench like a cricket bat and lay out a Frog. A second Frenchman raised a rifle.

HE WHO MERITS IT

Chandler jerked his Webley revolver up and squeezed the trigger. The weapon jumped in his hand and a small fountain of crimson gore erupted from the man's chest. The Frog fell backward, flinging his arms out, his rifle clattering against the deck.

Chandler stiffened his arm against the recoil and his broken rib screamed in protest. He felt nausea twist in his gut. Chandler had hunted all his life, but shooting a man was altogether different from shooting fox or pheasant.

He discovered that he hated it.

But he turned and found another target.



Abdullah looked up into a sky suddenly filled with fire and smoke. The two great creatures had drawn together as if their battle was nothing more than an unnatural mating ritual. Now they clung to each other in an unholy embrace.

He stared up into the sky, trying to see Allah's will in this strange thing.

Until men began raining from the sky, their arms and legs working furiously as they plummeted to earth.

Then he turned and ran, as panicked as his camel.



Havret watched the terrible battle for *Leviathan* through his binoculars. Men in whites battled with wrenches and lead pipes and whatever was close to hand. It was brutality like Havret had never before seen in his twenty-three years in service to France. The battleship's wood decks were slick with blood.

For a moment it looked like Virenque's boarding party would get the better of the Englishmen.

Then Havret saw an English officer creep forward with a pistol in his right hand and something else clutched in his left. Was it— Was it a white flag? Havret took a step forward. *Were the English surrendering?*

He watched the man work his way to *Leviathan's* starboard railing, watched him tie his flag to one of the lines joining the two great vessels. Watched him pull something from his pocket.

Something that glittered silver.

Suddenly Havret saw it all, understood it all. He opened his mouth to order his men to fall back, to return to their vessel.

But just as he drew breath the English officer flicked the wheel of his lighter. A small yellow flame flared. Quickly he touched it to the white rag tied around the manila line. The rag must've been doused in kerosene, because it went up with a terrible *whoosh* that Havret heard all the way from the flying bridge.

The English officer ran away, calling hoarsely to his own men to fall back.

The manila line was dry, all moisture squeezed out of it by tension.

It caught fire.

Every moment that it burned it lost strength and strands parted, leaving fewer and fewer to bear the load of the two great ships until—

There was a sound like a whip crack and the line parted, taking out a safety railing on *Jean Bart*, smashing everything in its path as it sprang back, like a blade cutting through soft butter.

The two ships lurched apart.

Men lost their balance and tumbled into the sky.

Right then, *Capitaine de Volée* Jean-David Havret knew it was over.

• • •

Daniel Chandler watched the French warship *Jean Bart* limp through the sky. Gone was the sleek French skyship with pleasing lines. Now she was a mangled hulk, her port side caved in where she had collided with *Leviathan*, one of her stacks torn free, gun turrets ripped off or their guns bent backwards.

Jean Bart could no longer contest control of the Suez Canal.

But neither could *Leviathan*.

HE WHO MERITS IT

The French vessel had given as good as she got. *Leviathan* wouldn't be running her down. At best this encounter could be called a draw. The word tasted like ashes in Chandler's mouth. A *draw*. *Leviathan* had been the mightier ship, with the better captain. And more than that, they were *English*.

How could it be that the best they managed was a draw?

Surely Lord Nelson was rolling over in his grave, even now.

Chandler could not shake a vision from his head, the sight of the boy he'd talked to before the battle, Kendall, his coppery hair shining in the sun, his eyes wide, hand still clutching the St. Elmo's medal.

As he fell to earth.

There had been that sudden jerk, the moment when the ships had separated, and the boy had slipped overboard, his wide eyes locked on Chandler as he fell, his body limned by the golden sea below that would swallow him whole.

And Chandler had been able to do nothing to save him.

"*Palmarum Qui Meruit Ferat*," Chandler whispered.

He who merits it takes the palm.

For the first time in his life, he didn't know who that was.

THE END