***Jacob’s Ladder***

He had never seen such heat shimmer, steaming gyrations weighed down with a humidity thick enough to constrict the throat. The dancing haze formed helix upon helix of distorted reflections, as if he was in a hall of mirrors. The luxuriant vegetation -- exotic species of flora thickly entwined, radiating azure blues and vermillion reds on a billowy bed of waxy green – swayed seductively in the sultry tropical breeze. And on the waters before him, like an enormous swarm of bees, jostled hundreds of junks overflowing with natives. They scurried to-and-fro with enormous energy, hauling in fishing nets, transporting goods, and coming alongside each other to swap gossip or to truck and barter. After two days traveling in a military transport, Ordinary Seaman Smith had fetched up in Singapore, thousands of miles from home, in body and in spirit.

It was Smith’s first morning on board HMS *Scylla*; he was standing on the quarterdeck, waiting for the call to muster. He had just finished his basic training in England and had been flown half-way around the world to join his first ship. The flight out, the very first flight he had ever taken in his life, had already been a great adventure for him. At first, he had watched a drizzle-soaked England disappear below him with some trepidation. The *Scylla* would not return to England for nine months, and he knew no-one in the ship’s crew. And, he had very little conception of what life at sea would actually be like. His three months of basic training had taken place almost entirely on shore bases, apart from a four-day cruise on the Firth of Forth during which the ship he was on never left the estuary, and the occasional afternoon excursion in a cutter on the river Tamar when they practiced man-overboard drills and took turns at being the coxswain.

Then, a couple of hours into the first leg of the flight, the skies had cleared and right there below him, just a few hundred feet, lay the Alps bathed in glorious winter sunshine. His spirits immediately lifted. The thrill of adventure swept over him. For the rest of the flight, Smith’s face remained glued to the window of the plane, as marvel after marvel glided slowly by below him. After the Alps, they flew right over Mount Vesuvius, and he stared right into the heart of its smoldering crater. Then came Crete, and Smith imagined the fabled labyrinth at Knossos. Beyond Crete, the southern Cyclades lay strung out sparkling against the deep blue sea, tinseled by the westering sun. Then, darkness came, and the lights of the great cities of the Arabian peninsula twinkled around the edges of the great, black desert. And now this! Tropical Singapore, full of exotic sights, sounds, and smells. What other wonders had the navy in store for him? He couldn’t wait to get started.

“Ordinary Seaman Smith! Come here, laddie, and be quick about it!” The command struck the back of Smith’s neck like a sledgehammer, and he wheeled around. It was Petty Officer O’Bryan. O’Bryan’s eyes sparkled with devilment, and his neck did a double twitch, the precursor, as everyone knew, of the coming storm of his notorious vindictiveness. Bullying new fucking guys – green, gormless, and ripe for the picking -- was his favorite sport, and he knew he was good at it.

Smith fell in in front of O’Bryan, drenched in nervous perspiration. He desperately tried not to make eye contact with the Petty Officer, whose pock-marked face came within an inch or two of his own. Smith was blasted by O’Bryan’s hot breath, a pungent brew of stale tobacco and halitosis. He tried to constrict his nasal passages, but the effort only made his nose twitch. Fearing that the slightest movement would only incite O’Bryan’s wrath, Smith reluctantly relaxed his nasal muscles and resigned himself to the inevitable nausea that soon followed, as thick and sickening as a London smog in mid-winter.

“Nervous, are we?” O’Bryan sneered.

“No, P.O.,” Smith replied. His Adam’s apple moved up and down in his taut throat. For a worrying moment, he felt his bowels constrict. It felt as if every nerve in his body had broken loose and gone crazy. The more nervous he got, the more O’Bryan toyed with him.

“Being at attention means standing still, Smith!” O’Bryan screamed in Smith’s left ear. “You’re jiggling about like a little girl needing to go pee!” O’Bryan slowly circled Smith. Each circumnavigation seemed to bring him ever closer. It was as if O’Bryan was wrapping Smith up in a cocoon so that he could preserve him and bring him out later for another bout of torment, whenever the fancy took him.

“Listen ‘ere, Smith. It’s my job to make a fucking sailor out of you. By the time I’m done with you, you sniveling worm, you’ll feel as if you’ve been to hell and back. Your poor old mum’s about to lose her baby boy. I’m your mummy now, Smith, and I’m as mean a bitch as you’ll ever meet. So, don’t fuck with me. Play by my rules, Smith, and you might survive this man’s navy. Fuck up -- just once -- and I’ll crucify you. Got it? Now, get this deck scrubbed!” As Smith turned away, O’Bryan kicked him in the rear end to send him on his way.

“Trial by fire!” O’Bryan enthused when queried about his treatment of new recruits. “Trial by fire! Look at how Sykes and Foster turned out after I had run them through the O’Bryan gauntlet. A couple of mummies’ boys still shitting their nappies, they were, ‘til I whipped ‘em into shape. You’ll not find tougher tars than them two lads today anywhere in the fleet.”

O’Bryan tilted his head back so that his chin stuck out and his eyes peered out menacingly from under the brim of his cap, which almost touched the tip of his beaky nose. He bounced up and down on the balls of his feet, synchronizing each upward thrust with the words as they spat forth from his mouth. O’Bryan rarely said anything calmly; it was as if he always had a point to prove, a challenge to win, or a position of status or a point of honor to defend. Something nagging, gnawing, kept him on edge, ill-at-ease with the world.

And Smith – *the little shit* – stuck in his craw like no other fucking new guy had before. *Was it the fact that he had to look up to the taller Smith when he talked to him? Was it that sissy intellectual air that Smith had that got his goat? The curly-girly hair that stuck out from under Smith’s cap and his pouty, womanly lips made him puke.* “I’ll skewer that little fucker Smith, you just see if I don’t,” O’Bryan drunkenly boasted to his fellow NCO’s in the mess that night.

HMS *Scylla* swung at anchor, drifting east and then west, like a giant maritime metronome. A boat’s boom stuck out from the ship’s starboard side, horizontal to the water some thirty feet below. The two wire stays that secured the boom to the ship’s side rattled in the breeze funneling up the narrow estuary, and they made that metallic clinking sound that flag lanyards make against their masts when they are whipped by the wind. A Jacob’s ladder swung beneath the boom, and a cutter was tethered to it, bobbing up and down, left and right, on the choppy water.

Petty Officer O’Bryan spied Smith on the quarterdeck. “Smith!” he yelled. Everyone within earshot froze. “Smith, come with me!” Smith followed O’Bryan with unsteady steps. They came to the boat’s boom.

“Over you go! Go down to the cutter and check the fuel tanks, pronto!” Smith’s bloodshot eyes, deathly green-white complexion, and hangdog expression told O’Bryan that Smith had a terrible hangover.

Smith was barely able to keep his knees from buckling. He struggled to prevent himself from vomiting. A jackhammer of a headache pounded away inside his head. The boom stretched out before him, its flat surface a good four inches wide to afford a footing, but in the boozy fog that blurred Smith’s vision those four inches seemed more like four, distressingly narrow, centimeters. The boom shook from side to side in the wind, and the clanking of the stays seemed to sound his death knell. His nausea kicked up a notch, and a wad of vomit surged up from his constricting stomach and lodged sourly in his throat. He couldn’t move.

“Come on, Smith, I said over you go and get down into that fucking boat!”

All around the crew were stealing glances at the emerging spectacle. But the silence remained unbroken as Smith moved forward like some arthritic zombie. He clumsily climbed over the guardrail and paused at the boom’s edge. Smith could feel O’Bryan’s fierce eyes penetrating the back of his skull, prodding him forward. He took a faltering step, felt his legs give way, and found himself slumped over the boom, hanging on for grim death and shaking. Somehow he inched his way along the boom, sliding painfully along on his crotch. The humiliation seared him, but soon he was wrestling with the Jacob’s ladder as he descended to the cutter. He was almost there. He tried to concentrate his eyes on the cutter’s narrow gunnel, on which he would have to step in order to enter the boat, but it drifted in-and-out of focus, rocked by the waves and blurred by his alcohol-impaired vision. The wind-whipped waves seemed to taunt him as they reached upwards like grasping ghouls. Stretching his right foot from the bottom rung of the Jacob’s ladder to the boat’s gunnel, he felt the cutter slide away. He shuddered at the shock of the cold water as it enveloped him. For a moment or two he struggled to stay afloat, but to no avail. He went under.

O’Bryan sniggered and the ship’s crew let out a loud, derisory cheer. A hundred pairs of eyes focused on the water where Smith had disappeared, the ripples arcing outward in concentric circles around the air bubbles that marked the spot of Smith’s submergence. Then the ripples melted away and the bubbles burst. Thirty seconds went by, but still no sign of Smith. The crew stopped laughing and cheering as a mood of concern, then panic, set in. But O’Bryan continued to stare impassively ahead of him.

“Alright, you lot!” he yelled at the crew. “Get back to work! Playtime’s over! Sykes and Foster, get that fucking jackass Smith out of the water!” O’Bryan strutted across the quarterdeck and disappeared below.

In his cabin O’Bryan slumped onto his bunk and took a slug from the Captain Morgan rum bottle that he kept in his locker. As the alcohol burned his dry throat and made his stomach heave, the sweat on his brow began to evaporate and his hands stopped shaking. He stepped across to the porthole and looked out, making sure no one could see him. On deck he could see Sykes and Foster carrying Smith’s sodden body. They laid him out on deck, and the medic, McCarthy, knelt over him and began mouth-to-mouth. O’Bryan caught his breath and his muscles tensed. He took another draw from the bottle of rum and gritted his teeth. McCarthy raised his head from Smith’s mouth and pressed down on his chest. Nothing.

*Was the bastard dead? Was he fucking dead?* In shock, O’Bryan sprang forward and hit his head on the bulkhead. He let out a yell, and losing his balance he knocked the rum bottle to the floor. It made a loud crash. O’Bryan ducked below the level of the porthole fearing that someone might see him.

He had gone too far this time. *If the little fucker is dead, there will be an investigation, maybe leading to a trial. And, after that, who knows? A lengthy prison sentence and dishonorable discharge?* *Without the navy, I’m nothing!* Then, just as his growing panic was about to engulf him, O’Bryan looked through the porthole once more.

McCarthy was still kneading Smith’s chest like it was a piece of sticky dough, his pumping having becoming more frantic as the minutes passed. Worn out with fatigue from his exertions, McCarthy suddenly stopped and sat back on his heels and shook his head in apparent resignation. O’Bryan started to pray desperately to a god he did not believe in. *Oh God, no! Let the motherfucker live, please God!* Out on deck, Smith’s body convulsed. *Yes! Yes! Come on, you fucker!* Bile ejected from Smith’s closed mouth and spewed out onto the deck, at first just a cup or two, but then the entire contents of his stomach gushed out with the intensity of a tide at full flood. *Oh, thank you, God, fucking thank you!* Smith’s eyes opened, he coughed, and slowly raised himself onto one elbow. *He’s alive! I’m fucking saved!* A tear formed in O’Bryan’s left eye, grew big and then splashed onto his nose. He brushed it away in annoyance at such weakness, but then deep in his gut the convulsions started. He tried to stifle them, but couldn’t. He sobbed, slumped to the floor, keeled over, and curled into a fetal position.

Downtown Changi was a quarter-mile of straight dirt road that appeared to have been ripped out of the surrounding jungle like a primitive landing strip. Everything about it reeked with artificiality, thrown together in haste in order to seize the commercial opportunities that the sailors had brought with them. The Strip, as it was known, was bordered on either side by monstrous monsoon ditches, imposing concrete structures built to channel the drenching downpours of late summer that flooded up from the Indian Ocean. Free of water for most of the year, the ditches took on a variety of other uses: rubbish dumps, playgrounds for skinny-brown urchins scurrying about in ragged shorts and flip-flops, and homes and foraging grounds for snakes, lizards, and roaches the size of footballs. For inebriated sailors, the ditches became obstacle courses from which they rarely escaped without injury.

Alongside the monsoon ditches stood two rows of shacks, jerry-built with sun-bleached, mildewed wood, glass-less windows, and corrugated iron roofs. They looked as if they could collapse at any moment. They housed dozens of local emporia, jammed together, selling identical pirated cassette tapes, fake Nikon cameras and Rolex watches, and over-priced, tinny-looking, “eighteen-carat gold” jewelry that threatened to turn your skin green if you wore it for more than a few days. These phony Aladdin’s caves spilled their wares out onto the street, like pans of milk boiling over; inside they were piled high with merchandise, dirt floor to crumbling ceiling. Half-hidden, surrounded by their wares, aged shopkeepers crouched, gaunt figures dressed in ill-fitting, threadbare T-shirts and shorts, feet shod with rubber-tire flip-flops. They slurped bowls of noodles as if their lives depended on it, yet they were always primed, ready to pounce on the next gullible sailor who might wander by with more money than sense. The trap would be sprung with military precision, like a Venus’ fly trap snagging its prey. First came the syrupy salutations of the shopkeeper -- *Hi, Johnny! I have very special price for you!* – that dulled the senses of the passerby, rendering him easy meat in the ensuing haggling contest. In a few rapid-fire minutes, the pathetic one-sided struggle would be over. The victim would drunkenly emerge from the shop wearing a new watch that would quit working before he was back on board ship.

At least eight or nine bars were nestled in amongst these stores with fanciful names like *Las Vegas, Moulin Rouge, and Shangri-La*, although their worn-out neon signs, blanketed with swarms of flying insects at night, usually read, *\*as Vega\*, Mouli\* Rou\*e, and S\*\*\*\*\* -La*. The bars competed with each other for the sailors’ custom, but it was impossible for the sailors to distinguish one establishment from another, especially after a few beers. They sold the same watery lagers; their jukeboxes played identical songs; and they were all sleepy by day and raucous by night. The main attraction was the bar girls, who offered fake flirtation followed by fumbling, paid-for sex. The girls plied their trade with the same coldly-calculating business model – bored indifference to their clients’ needs, robotic resignation to passionless coupling -- but such was the alcohol-fueled and lust-driven nature of the demand for their services that its relentless repetition worked like a charm. The Mama-sans grew happy and fat off the money that drained from the sailors’ pockets.

O’Bryan pushed aside the plastic-beaded curtain that covered the doorway into Shangri-La. He paused while his eyes adjusted to the darkness inside. Although his momentary blindness made him stumble, in the darkness his ears caught every sound, his nose every smell. There was the scraping of barstools and the grunts of the bar girls as they roused from their semi-sleep. There was the stench of stale beer, pungent tobacco, and body odor battling it out with the nauseating aroma of dozens of joss sticks trying to fumigate the foul air.

He heard the clink of a coin dropping into the slot of the jukebox, the whirring of a disc being selected, and then the thump, thump of a bass guitar. A treacly female voice said, “Hi, Johnny. You buy me drink?” He felt musky breath on his cheek, then two soft lips, followed by a hand that grabbed his crotch. He flinched.

“Hey, you buy me drink, you no good motherfuck,” the bar girl implored.

“Okay, okay,” O’Bryan sighed.

The bar girl vacated his lap with same brusqueness with which she had plumped herself down on it moments before. She sashayed to the bar, hips swaying to the rhythm of her flat-footed, flip-flop slouch. The slapping noise her feet made grated on O’Bryan’s ears. She skated back to his side, drink in hand. It looked like bourbon sure enough, but he knew that it was cold tea.

“Ten dolla,” she demanded, her outstretched hand looking more like a threat than a request. O’Bryan thought about challenging her brazen extortion, but decided there was no point. His naval rank meant nothing on The Strip. He meekly held out the money, and she ripped it out of his hand.

Realizing her heavy-handedness was jeopardizing the pay-off she was looking for, the bar girl tried to rescue the situation the only way she knew how. O’Bryan felt her rub her rear-end into his crotch as she remounted his lap, then her tongue as it teased his left ear lobe. She took his left hand and placed it on her breast; he squeezed. The business plan was back on track.

“Okay, John, you want fucky-fucky?” She might as well have been asking him if he wanted to take a shit, so matter-of-factly did she utter the words. O’Bryan managed a barely perceptible nod of assent. She grabbed his hand and pulled him through the curtains to a small, box-like room.

The bar girl quickly shed her few clothes and flopped back onto the tattered, dirty mattress, stained with a lifetime of such couplings. Her breasts sagged to each side of her torso, threatening to slide right off to the floor. She turned her head to stare at the bare wall, and with bored resignation opened her rippled thighs to him. The surge of desire that had brought O’Bryan to *Shangri-La* was now in full retreat. He could feel his hot blood lose its vigor, and a blast of chill wind blew through his groin.

“Come on, what you fuckin’ waiting for, John? Short time, short time – you only pay for short time!”

O’Bryan was frozen in place, standing at the foot of the mattress, his pants and underwear crumpled around his ankles. The bar girl turned to see what his delay was, and, catching sight of his limp penis, broke into a shrill, mocking laughter. O’Bryan was sure that the whole bar could hear her. He implored her to stop, but her mirth only grew louder. She gestured at him, forming a circle with the thumb and first finger on her left hand and waving her pinky finger on her right hand limply in its direction.

O’Bryan snapped. He pummeled the bar girl with unrelenting aggression. A right hook crashed into her mouth, sending broken teeth flying into the air; a left uppercut followed and smashed into her right eye, which immediately began to close and swell-up. Spittle and pieces of skin spattered the bed. She moaned, and blood poured from her thickening nose and ruptured mouth. As O’Bryan flailed away, his face puffed up and flushed a brilliant red; his panting became frantic. He thrust his hips wildly backwards and forwards, like a dog humping thin air. As the humping became manic, he tipped his head back and grunted great cries of mounting pleasure, climaxing in a fit of sadistic pleasure. He felt warm, sticky semen trickle down his thigh.

O’Bryan felt four hands grasp his shoulders, their fingers clawing into his flesh. His face was pushed down into the floor, a knee threatened to break his backbone, his arms were wrenched behind his back, and a set of handcuffs were slapped onto his wrists. Pain shot through his arms and legs; the cuffs razored into his flesh. A boot pushed against his hip and rolled him over. O’Bryan looked up. “Smith,” he gasped, and then passed out.

Ordinary Seaman Smith was on shore patrol duty that day, and it was he and Sykes who answered the frantic summons of Shangri-La’s Mama-san to deal with the disturbance there. He wasn’t aware it was O’Bryan who was the cause of the trouble until he rolled him over. It was unnerving to find himself standing over O’Bryan’s prostrated body, and he was shocked to see O’Bryan’s uncharacteristic state of dishevelment. Smith looked down at O’Bryan. He lay in a crumpled heap, his knees drawn up into his chest trying to hide his naked groin.

Expecting trouble from the irate crowd that was gathering around them, pushing and shoving and remonstrating in the confined spaces of the brothel, Sykes and Smith whisked O’Bryan back to the *Scylla*. O’Bryan was placed under arrest and incarcerated.

The next night, Smith stood on deck outside the door of the *Scylla*’s brig on guard duty. It was a pitch-black night, which only made the persistent humidity even more suffocating. He was alone.

*What a day*, he thought to himself. *Could this be the end of O’Bryan? The end of his endless taunting, his bullying?* He smiled at the prospect of being free of O’Bryan forever. Just a few days ago, the world had been full of promise for him, but O’Bryan had brutally shattered that prospect with his vindictiveness. *O’Bryan almost drowned me with his stupid fucking tricks, for God’s sake! Why does he dislike me so much? What have I done?* Smith took a few paces along the deck, and then peered through the observation hole in the brig door. O’Bryan was lying on the bunk, motionless, his back towards the door. *You miserable fuck*, Smith said to himself as he stared at O’Bryan through the peephole. He flipped a V-sign at O’Bryan with his fingers, and then spat on the glass. O’Bryan’s body suddenly moved. Smith jumped back from the peephole in alarm. *Easy*, Smith said to himself. *He can’t do anything. Calm down.* His breathing became steadier and his muscles relaxed. *Yeah, he’s done for alright. Just sit back and enjoy the ride. All I have to is let naval justice take its course and I’m rid of the son-of-a-bitch forever.* But, the more Smith tried to console himself with this thought, the more dissatisfied he became. *Even if he’s court-martialed and dishonorably discharged, the bastard’s still not being done for what he did to me. The Mama-san at Shangri-La will get her compensation alright, but where’s mine? Where’s fucking mine?* He shook his fist and gritted his teeth, and his face flushed with rage.

“Here you go, Smudge. Shithead’s tea.” It was Sykes bringing O’Bryan’s evening meal. “Is he OK in there?”

“Haven’t heard a peep,” Smith replied calmly, trying to hide his anger. “What do you think will happen to him?”

“Court-martial, for sure, I should think. He was pretty much caught with his trousers down!”

Smith managed a laugh, but already his thoughts were back to more serious matters.

“Well, film’s just about to start, so I’ll see you later.” Sykes disappeared down below. Smith stared at O’Bryan’s meal, sitting on the table where Sykes had left it. After a moment or two, he picked up the telephone outside the brig door.

“Sykes? Can you relieve me? I have to go to the heads.”

“The fuckin’ film’s just about to start!”

“Sorry, mate. I won’t be long.”

Sykes appeared back on deck. “Go on, then. Get on with it!” Smith went below while Sykes paced up and down, irritated.

Ten minutes went by and Sykes’s agitation reached fever pitch. “What you took you so fucking long?” he remonstrated with Smith when he eventually reappeared.

“Oh, bit of bother with the internal plumbing, know what I mean?”

Sykes angrily mumbled under his breath in reply, and shot below, almost knocking Smith down in his haste.

Smith picked up O’Bryan’s meal and unlocked the door to the brig. He entered O’Bryan’s cell.

“Still the stupid fucking new guy, eh, Smith!” Before Smith had time to put the tray down, O’Bryan pinned him against the bulkhead, his right forearm crushing his throat. “Rookie mistake, you little tosser. Never turn your back on a prisoner.” O’Bryan and Smith were nose-to-nose; Smith flinched as O’Bryan’s spittle wet his face. “And never leave keys hanging from your belt.”

O’Bryan was surprised at how easy it had been to overwhelm Smith. He had also expected Smith to cry out, but the kid remained silent and strangely relaxed. Releasing Smith from his grasp, O’Bryan took the keys. Then he took a pillow case and gagged Smith’s mouth. Smith remained curiously calm. “Have to leave you, pretty boy. It’s the only choice I’ve got now.” O’Bryan’s voice had turned despondent and tears welled up in his bloodshot eyes. He had a faraway, empty look as if his life had become a meaningless void. Then he was gone.

Smith neither moved nor made a sound, even after he had managed to dislodge O’Bryan’s poorly tied gag. He remained in the brig for several minutes, expressionless and at ease. He heard a yell and then a splash. A commotion broke out on deck as the crew rushed to see what was up. Smith waited a moment or two, and then joined them.

Everyone was congregated by the boat’s boom. Hands gestured towards the place on the boom where the Jacob’s ladder was supposed to be attached. A torch beam picked out the spot. The rope connecting the ladder to the boom was broken, its frayed ends signaling mishap semaphore-like as they flapped in the wind. Smith looked down at the water below. Nothing, except ink-black water gently carrying the loosened cutter downstream, the Jacob’s ladder trailing in its wake.

“Hey, Smith, know what happened?”

Smith made no response. He stared after the cutter getting smaller and darker as it headed into the distance. He wondered if a part of him were drifting away with it and whether he ought to mourn the loss.

For the first time in a week, the wind has stopped blowing, and the air has become less humid. The sun is still a brilliant yellow, lighting the crystal-blue, cloudless sky. Ordinary Seaman Smith takes a deep breath, drinking in the unexpected freshness and reveling in the natural abundance around him. He climbs over the guard rail, traverses the boat’s boom, and climbs onto the Jacob’s ladder, all with the ease of someone who has done so a thousand times before. He looks at where the top of the ladder is tied to the boom. It’s firmly secured with new sisal, but for just a second he sees the image of the frayed rope again, and he pauses, staring blankly. *Justice*, he thinks to himself.

“Hey, Smith, come on. We haven’t got all day, yer know,” Sykes calls out from the cutter below. Foster is with him. Smith joins them and takes his seat. Sykes, tiller in hand, nods to Foster, who engages the boat’s engine. The cutter heads for the jetty at the end of the Strip.

“Looking forward to getting back to good old Blighty, eh, Smith?” Sykes chuckles and exchanges a knowing glance with Foster.

“Yea, I hear they’ve got a nice set-up ready for you back ‘ome. I wonder if your mum will be taking care of her little boy? Nuffink like home-cooked meals, is there Smiffy?” Foster offers in his Cockney brogue. He breaks out in a belly-laugh, and in his glee he almost stalls the cutter’s engine.

Smith offers no response. He sits slumped in his seat, staring down at his feet.

“Almost got away with it, eh?” Sykes offers. “Trust the bloody Chinks to find O’Bryan’s body tangled up in their fishing nets. Bummer, eh, Smiffy? And then that eagle-eyed fucker Jones realizes that the ladder’s rope was cut, not worn. And to top it all, the little shit even finds your knife in the cutter where you’d dropped it. Didn’t take long after that for the Master-at-Arms to put two and two together, and, hey presto, you’re on your way to the clink back in Plymouth. Tough luck, my old son, tough fucking luck.”

Sykes guides the cutter through the water, glassy and still, like a mill pond. The boat cuts a smooth, almost wake-less, path. Smith looks over the cutter’s side, and his reflection in the water is crystal clear. He sees a face tattooed with the scars of premature experience. His curly, girlish hair has lost its vibrancy, showing the first signs of grey. A fish pops its head above the water. In an instant, the disturbed waters wash his image away.

*What a homecoming this is going to be*, Smith thinks to himself. *A week ago I was on cloud nine, and now look at me? Charged with manslaughter. I got my pound of flesh, but O’Bryan has still gotten me in the end. He’ll be with me, taunting me, for the rest of my life. Justice? In this man’s navy?*

Foster cuts the engine and Sykes brings the cutter alongside. On the jetty is a sailor with his kitbag. He looks green, gormless, and ripe for the picking, it occurs to Smith, and he smiles weakly to himself. Smith looks up at the sailor and their eyes meet. *The kid looks so innocent. Another fucking new guy for the slaughter.* Smith steps onto the jetty and the sailor takes his seat in the boat.

“Good luck, Smith. You’re gonna need it,” Sykes says.

“Good luck, kid. You’re going to need it, too,” Smith quietly says to the fucking new guy.

Foster restarts the engine, and Sykes heads the boat back towards the ship. Smith stands on the jetty and silently watches the cutter glide across the water. The wind picks up again, and he hears the clanking of the boom stays slapping against the *Scylla*’s side as it swings at anchor, drifting east and then west, like a giant maritime metronome measuring the gravitational pull of the lunar cycle as the tides ebb and flow.