

Star Pirates



*Chris
Berman*



Leo Publishing, LLC

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STAR PIRATES

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To my beautiful, blonde, blue-eyed daughter
Sabrina, who is the inspiration for little
Samantha in this novel and of course Sabrina's
grandfather Anatoliy Polyakov, who served as
the model for Jack Bellingham's cover images.



Just look upward and maybe you will see him.
Star Pirate standing tall and trim,
a face that Blackbeard wouldn't want to be near.
In his time he infected quite a few with fear.
As student that Sir Isaac loved to teach,
he once dreamed soon to stars he'd reach.
It seemed to happen overnight,
he went away on a mysterious flight.
Mysteriously, also, he appeared,
but to a foreign place he cleared.
He didn't know then where he belonged.
But, his soul throbbed for what he longed...

—Marina Sergeyeva, 2010

Foreword

Leo Publishing is pleased to have Chris Berman as its newest author. His latest novel, *Star Pirates*, will take you, the reader, on an incredible adventure that stretches from the late 1600s to the twenty-first century and across the blue-green seas of the Caribbean toward the black depths of space. Once again, Chris Berman has woven true facts with exciting fiction and accurate predictions of the future. In his first novel, *The Hive*, Berman envisioned the use the NERVA nuclear rocket. A year after the release of this book, the Russian Space Agency announced renewed development of this vehicle. In the same novel, Chris Berman chose the star 61 Virginis as the origin of the Hive fleet, and two years later, a planetary system was confirmed to orbit this star.

In *Red Moon*, Berman accurately predicted the presence of water ice on the Moon's south pole months before NASA discovered the huge buried ice fields and chose the date of 2017 for the landing of the Chinese expeditionary mission. Two months after the book's release, the same date was quoted by the Chinese Space Agency for their moon mission. *Red Moon* has received high acclaim from both former and current NASA astronauts and engineers.

When author Chris Berman penned *Star Pirates* and created the character of Captain Jack Bellingham, the gentleman pirate, he did not realize that real life pirate Sam Bellamy—known as the “prince of pirates”—actually existed. Renowned for his education, generosity to victims, and lack of violence, Sam Bellamy was a rarity in his era. Like the historical Sam Bellamy, Jack Bellingham was born in Devonshire, England and shares many attributes with the real pirate, including his handsome looks, blue-gray eyes, and jet black hair. The real Sam Bellamy's ship, the *Whydah*, was lost in a storm off of Cape Cod. Some say that Sam Bellamy was braving the storm to return to the arms of his true love, Maria. Bellamy's ship was wrecked close to shore with only a few survivors making it to land, but Sam Bellamy's body was never recovered. Perhaps fate intervened in the form of an alien expedition on the hunt for human specimens, and just perhaps, in this day and age, the real Captain Sam Bellamy is sailing the void between the stars...

~ Leo Publishing, LLC.

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Prologue: East of the Bahamas, 1688

The slanting rays of an orange setting sun cast a lurid glow over the wreckage of what had once been the proud rigging and white sails of the merchantman's mainmast. The twelve guns of the sloop that was drawing ever closer had made short work of them, firing chain and bar shot. Captain Danforth thanked the Lord that the outlaws aboard her chose not to rake his ship with grape shot or the decks would have run red with his men's blood. Danforth extended his spyglass, trying to get a better feel for who it was that was about to take his ship. He had already struck his colors and ordered his men to stand fast and pile what weapons they had in plain sight.

The magnified image told him all he had wanted to know. The crew of the sloop was on deck with ropes, boarding axes, and grapples—many sporting pistols or muskets and waving cutlasses in the air. On the forecastle amidst his men stood her captain; he wore a deep blue velvet waistcoat and matching tri-cornered hat with a long red plumed feather. Scanning up the vessels mainmast, he saw it: the black flag with the image of man holding his drink in a dance with the skeletal figure of death. There was no question as to the identity of the man who was about to take his ship: Bartholomew Roberts. In a way, Danforth felt relief. If his ship had to be taken, better it was taken by Roberts, who had earned a reputation for dealing fairly with his captives and not resorting to gratuitous torture and violence. Roberts simply wanted his ship and his cargo of Virginia tobacco and silver—and not the kinds of grisly carnage practiced by many outlaws of the sea.

The Captain collapsed his spyglass and searched the faces of his men for his navigator, Jack Bellingham, and called out to him.

“Aye lad, ye best be getting below decks and change out-o-your fancy clothes, lest ye be taken for ransom. ‘Tis best for ye to be seen as an ordinary seaman and not the son of a rich man. You’ll not be wanting to be taken captive.” Danforth continued, “Roberts will be giving ye and the crew a choice: swear to the pirate oath and join him or ye be marooned on some God-forsaken island, if not worse. And if ye do lad, never, never say ye be the son of a lord, do yah hear me?”

Bellingham nodded, quickly going below to strip off his tellingly expensive velvet waistcoat and white silk tunic.

Lord Bellingham had quite enough of his son's sporting life. Born to wealth and educated by some of the most brilliant tutors in all of England, Jack

Bellingham had a sharp and logical mind. However, his father thought Jack's fondness for drink and the company of young women would be his undoing, so he arranged to have his son go to sea as a navigator on one of his merchant ships. Lord Bellingham truly believed that would take the wild edge off of his boy. Now Jack Bellingham was about to make a choice that would eventually take him far beyond anything he could have imagined in heaven or on Earth...

The sun had set nearly an hour ago and Jack stood before Bartholomew Roberts reading the articles of the oath before him by touch light: a flintlock pistol on a silver plate had been set there to ask "what fate do you choose?" Jack Bellingham, the son of nobility and student of Isaac Newton, held up his right hand and swore his allegiance under a sky strewn with stars that he would obey the laws of the pirate code. As he stepped back from the pirate captain, Bellingham looked up at those stars, so incomprehensibly distant, never guessing for a moment just where the oath he had just taken would eventually lead him.

Chapter one—Jamaica, 1693

Commander Holath stared at the display screen in disbelief, his black, saucer-sized eyes drinking in the details of the blue and white speck growing ever larger by the minute. His body began to flush with rage to a deep violet from his normal mottled pink color as he faced the Senior Researcher. The commander fought back the urge to wrap his tentacles around the pompous fool and instead vented his anger in verbiage. He fixed his eyes upon his nemesis, this egotistical thorn in his skin and erupted.

“Senior Researcher! How *dare* you countermand my orders and drop my ship back into space-normal in this system? Are you *not aware* of the laws? The treaties signed with the Kaath?! This sort of behavior is all the excuse they need to blast us to subatomic dust!”

Senior Researcher, Huleeah, regarded the blustering ship’s captain with an imperious look. “Your threat displays do not intimidate me, *Captain*, nor does the gnashing of your beak and...you had best restrain your tentacles from physical contact with my body if you value your career. Do not forget who *I am*...first born of Hatu, governor of the four planets and Senior Researcher, charged with the task of cataloging the worlds and life forms beyond sector three. You may command this ship, but *my orders* from the Imperial Council permit me to command you and *never forget* that fact...*Captain*.”

Holath tried to hold his emotions in check. He had climbed a very long road from cadet to his present level of prestige. His inner voice kept telling him that physically attacking this self-important pile of excrement in front of him would be the end of that career; still, in his inner thoughts, he could see his twelve arms wrapped about the object of his rage, squeezing the life out of him. Finally as his flesh began to lose its purple tinge, returning to shades of pink, he spoke to the senior researcher in a more subdued tone.

“You ordered my ship out of null space without consulting me. You know as well as anyone, that Type -One, -Two, or -Three species are off limits to us. They are not to be disturbed, and if we are spotted by a Kaath ship, they have every right under the terms of the treaty to blow us to bits.”

Huleeah made a motion with two of his arms as if brushing away an annoying insect. “There was simply no time to consult with you, Commander, as you were *enjoying* your rest period while I was about the business of the Empire. As a

Senior Researcher, it was my decision to land on this world and investigate its dominant intelligent species. Their progress in development is remarkably rapid, and it is well worth the risk to collect and study a few examples of these beings. The last probe that passed through this system showed them living with little more advancement than quick witted animals. The second orbital probe that I dispatched show them now living in complex dwellings, cities if you like, organized global commerce of a sort, vessels upon their seas and projectile weapons that can kill at a distance. All this happened in just two hundred sectons?¹ This is unheard of; we must investigate! This species may in fact be unique!”

Commander Holath paced about the deck, checking the detection sensors for any sign of a Kaath warship. “You realize of course, Senior Researcher, the treaty strictly forbids any contact or exploitation of any Type-One through Three species? That was one of the reasons the war was fought in the first place, both sides recruiting and arming, or should I say forcing and enslaving, developing civilizations into becoming proxy warriors: particle beam fodder for our interstellar battles? The terms of the treaty strictly forbid your actions and under those terms, if we are spotted by a Kaath warship, we’ll be vaporized without so much as a warning shot. This is a lightly armed research vessel, not a battle cruiser, and we have no right of protest. We would be clearly in the wrong. Did you not consider how you have placed my ship and my crew in jeopardy?”

“Commander Holath, sometimes science and research must take precedence over your military considerations. I’ve been careful. Our shift out of null-space has been accomplished close to this system’s ringed gas giant. I am certain that our action has been hidden. In fact, I’d stake my life on it.”

Holath had no choice but to acquiesce to the whims of the Senior Researcher. *Senior indeed!* Holath thought, *Huleeah is at least five sectens² younger than myself and a child of privilege: the son of a high ranking governor and raised in the Imperial Court. To him this is a game, a lark; his so-called research amounts to little more than a boost for his prestige at court. He knows nothing of the life of a military officer.* Holath reflected that he had been deeply involved in the war with the Kaath. He had seen whole fleets of ships destroyed, had lost many under his command, and seen entire planets reduced to orbiting piles of rubble. The closest this boy researcher had ever come to a real war was playing with toy war craft in

¹ secton (fictional) equals 85 Earth years

² secten (fictional) equals 1.85 Earth years

mock battles. The war was fought to a draw, both sides were sick of the fighting. The terms of the treaty were fair and this provision, no co-opting developing intelligent beings into surrogate soldiers, was a good thing. Huleeah was putting them all at risk. Holath wondered how the Senior Researcher along with his enormous ego could even fit through an airlock together. Finally, frustrated and with no other option, Commander Holath gave the order.

“Descend into the atmosphere of the planet and prepare to land on the second largest island near this world’s equator. There appears to be a sizable collection of dwellings on the far tip of the island and dense foliage to conceal our presence. Senior Researcher, you may collect your specimens but not more than two or three mating pairs, and, by the Eye of Hota, we will only stay one-half rotation of this world. You say you stake your life on your decision to land here? You have staked all of our lives to your whims. You had better be right, or I swear, if we are discovered, before a Kaath plasma bolt can blast this ship to atoms, I will personally choke the life out of you!”

The *Nighthawk*, Captain Jack Bellingham’s ship, rested at anchor, her hold filled with gold, Spanish pieces of eight and jewels that had been destined for the Spanish Governor of Florida in Saint Augustine. Jack Bellingham was just getting his land legs under him that afternoon, but tonight, the rum he was consuming quickly eroded this rediscovered skill. By any standard, Jack Bellingham was a handsome man: not yet thirty years of age, tall, slim but well muscled; he had a way about him, a bearing that spoke of his aristocratic upbringing. Dressed in a crimson velvet waistcoat, with his neatly trimmed mustache and long dark hair tied with a black velvet bow, this darkly attractive man claimed nearly every woman’s eyes in Port Royal as he walked by.

The air inside the tavern was thick with tallow smoke from the hundreds of candles for illumination as well as the blue haze of tobacco hanging in the air. Mixed in with the scent of burning tobacco was the smell of beer, wine, rum, roasting meat, and the sweat of men, still tinged with salt from the ocean. The tavern was packed full as the crews of three ships celebrated a victorious and profitable eight months at sea. Laughing, cursing, and boasting, the voices of men and the high pitched laughter of whores filled the cramped tavern in the city of Port Royal, the infamous pirate capital of Jamaica.

Jack Bellingham stretched back in the hard wooden chair, only to feel the weight of a powerful hand clamp down upon his shoulder.

“Aye, well if it isn’t Captain Jack Bellingham, the...ah...*gentleman pirate!* Will ye drink with me? Drink with me and tell me man, tell me yah secrets! Tell me how in the name of the seven seas did ye put a broadside into that Spanish ship at that range? Be it witchcraft man? I want to know how ye cannons could do such a feat? How man did ye take three Spanish ships? No captain in Port Royal has ever had such success. I swear your wee twelve gun slope could outfight a Spanish ship o’ the line!”

Jack Bellingham put his glass of rum back down on the rough, hewn wooden table and turned his head, looking straight into the blazing dark eyes of Captain Edward Trench, Redbeard himself!

“Join me, Trench, and I’ll drink with yah... but my secrets are mine and my crew’s. And, call it not witchcraft, call it science. ‘Tis the laws of motion I learned from my days as a student. I could tell yah man...but I fear you would not understand.”

Redbeard, already half drunk, leaned closer to Jack Bellingham.

“Aye, they tell me you be an educated man, ‘tis true! I can barely read, but I know my sums for navigation. My men heard talk that when ye put into port in Charleston, ye had your guns refitted with iron sleeves. I heard tell these sleeves had grooves cut into them. Is that the secret ye be holding on to? Tell me man! Your guns outranged the devil Spaniard’s by more than twice their distance!”

“Your men have good ears Trench. ‘Tis called a rifled bore, but that’s all I will tell ye. Yah must figure the rest for ye self. I intend to hold to my advantage. Although there is more to it than just the barrel, I have more potent gun powder as well...my science again. But come man, let’s drink up!”

Redbeard drained his glass and slammed it down on the table, then called to the serving wench for more rum.

“Do ye be willing to teach me yah secrets, Bellingham? We sailed together four years ago as I reckon. Ye swore service to me. That makes us mates! I need to know how ye can stand off at that distance and still put a warship on the bottom!”

Jack Bellingham drained another glass of rum then spoke to Trench.

“ ‘Tis truth in that Trench. I was navigator on your ship when yah sent the *Dutchman* to the bottom. Her captain was a fool. He swore you were an English

merchantman looking though that garbage of a glass of his. He had no notion your ship sailed under the black flag.”

Edward Trench roared with laughter.

“Aye ‘tis true, Jack! Fool he was and now where he be but at the bottom of the sea as fish food. And you Jack Bellingham, you be a wise man to swear the pirate oath to Bartholomew Roberts...eh ha, especially with half a dozen muskets pointed at ye chest! Still, ye served me well aboard my ship with yah mathematics as me gunnery sergeant. Showed me men how to hit their target every time with that... *bastard art* of yours. And look at ye now; just five years hence and captain of your own ship, the richest pirate in all of the Caribbean. Ye must tell me Jack... Tell me the secret, for fellowship.”

“Aye Trench, ‘tis called a *ballistic arc* and once ye have the mathematical formula ye can put a ball right through the deck of any ship ye fire at, but as to me secrets? ... Can I trust yah man? This is a dangerous game we play upon the sea, and today’s allies can be tomorrow’s enemies. I’ll think about it Trench but how do I know one day I won’t face your guns, guns that I’ve given you the power to send me to the bottom with eh?”

Then with a laugh, Jack Bellingham slapped Redbeard on the shoulder.

“Trench, if ye don’t give me reason to mistrust ye, I’ll tell ye how to fire a ball three times further than any Man-O-War.”

“Aye, Bellingham, I’ll drink to that! So man, will ye be taking pleasure in the feminine delights this tavern has to offer?”

“Umm, I think not Trench. I’ll not be thrusting my cutlass into any of these diseased scabbards tonight. One more voyage and I’ll set sail for my home. I’ll take a wife and live the life of a gentleman farmer...a rich gentleman farmer. I bid ye leave. Goodnight to yah, Captain Trench. I’ve had enough rum to sink me, and I’ll be heading back to my ship to sleep it off.”

Redbeard watched the young captain rise and walk a serpentine course out of the tavern, the effect of too much rum.

“Aye sleep it is, Bellingham, but ‘twill be the last night ye be sleeping on this Earth,” Trench said under his breath as two of his crew joined him. One man with ginger colored hair, a beard, and mouth full of rotten teeth and the other, a blackamoor with thick dreadlock braids and twin gold hoops adorning his ears.

“Follow young Mister Bellingham there and make certain that something happens to him. And make it to be like an accident ye hear me. I want his crew’s loyalty, not their revenge.”

As the two men followed Jack Bellingham out into the night, Trench again spoke under his breath, “By morning’s light, *Captain* Bellingham, I’ll have yah secrets, yah ship, and yah treasure.”

Then raising his voice, he called out, “Wench! Bring me more rum!”

At the time, Redbeard had no idea that this really would be the last night that Captain Jack Bellingham would be sleeping on Earth, but not for the reason that occupied Trench’s evil mind.

The night air was warm and thick with moisture. The two crewmen followed by Senior Researcher Huleeah cautiously exited the ship and began making their way toward the population center of the island.

Hata, a first year cadet, turned to his companion and spoke quietly. “I see our *fearless leader* has sent us out ahead of him as potential bait for any aggressive indigenous species.”

His companion replied in a whisper, “Fortunately the only dangerous predators in this area of the planet are in the sea. It’s a pity we can’t convince the Senior Researcher to go for a swim.”

Hata again spoke in a low tone to avoid Huleeah’s hearing diaphragms, “That idiot so-called scientist is going to get us all killed. And the way he speaks to our captain? I’d love to shove him out an airlock without a vacuum suit.”

Huleeah’s voice seemed to break the smothering night air and silence with such force, it made both crewmen jump. “You two, stop that chatter and look alert. We’re looking for two-armed, two-legged bipeds that walk upright and wear coverings. Be silent! They have crude but effective weapons that can kill at a distance. I do not intend to be holed and killed by a primitive projectile. Do we understand each other?”

Hata again whispered to his crewmate, “The only wound that would do him harm would be hitting him in his anal vent. That would surely blow his brains out.”

Jack Bellingham, his head fogged from the effects of too much rum shared with Edward Trench, weaved his way down York Street and then up High Street on

his trek back to the North Docks. His ship, the *Nighthawk*, lay at anchor just down from Trench's ship and Bellingham could think of nothing else but the sheets of his bunk and sleeping off the night's strong drink. The gentle breezes of the warm June night were causing the effects of the alcohol to begin to ebb as Captain Bellingham paused to cast his gaze upward. Above him was the incredible spectacle of the night sky, black and deep as velvet, with brilliant stellar points of light, not the light polluted soup of our modern age. The southern sky stretched before him with constellations of stars unseen from his days in England, studying astronomy with his tutor, Isaac Newton. As Jack turned to walk up Queen Street, he became aware of the sound of boots; at least two men were following behind him. Jack Bellingham turned around, reaching for his cutlass, and by the light of the crescent moon, low on the horizon, he had just enough time to see two faces, one framed with light hair and a beard, the second with thick braids and the face of midnight, with a belying pin in his raised hand. His last impression was that the night sky had exploded before his eyes in a shower of stars.

"Aye, don't be leaving his body here in the street, drag him man to the horse-cart, and we take him to the beach by Gallows Point."

The blackamoor turned to his shipmate, "Then what? Captain say we don't let nobody find he be killed by a man's hand."

The ginger beard replied, "Don't have ta man. Put them there shackles on his feet and leave him at the low tide mark. In about three hours, he'll be nearly a fathom deep and the current be taking his body out to sea, and nobody the wiser. Now be about with ye, yah rope haired bastard, and help me get him into the cart and covered up."

The only description that fit would be walking squids, walking upright upon legs designed for some huge nightmarish four-legged frog but such is the roll of the dice in evolution, and this trio's ancestors had evolved upon a world far different than Earth. Their world was a moon of a gas giant three times the size of Jupiter, in a close orbit about a small, orange-red dwarf star. The eyes of these three were not only well adapted to the dark, but by virtue of the dim sun and thick atmosphere of their birth world, they could see into the infrared as well. In the world of the 17th century, this ability was invaluable.

As the three aliens slowly made their way though the dense vegetation to the water's edge, they did so without the pain and annoyance those Earth-born would

have felt from the insect denizens of the night. Their green, copper-based blood was not to the liking of the thousands mosquitoes and biting flies that swarmed in the thick jungle of plants.

The Senior Researcher drew closer to the two crewmen. “We are approaching the shoreline, and I can see light from these beings’ dwellings. Keep your eyes sharp for any of them between us and the water. Their bodies’ heat signature should stand out clearly against the cooler water and by the Eye of Hota, keep silent. We cannot risk being seen ourselves. More than likely they’d kill us all.”

Hata thought to himself, *if I could live just long enough to see you die first, Senior Researcher, it might be worth it.*

The second crewman spoke in a pointed whisper, “I see something. Look, look, near the bend in the land, where it begins to connect to their city, some sort of large four-legged animal pulling a cart...and look! Two of the bipeds...no...three. The third one is being taken from that cart and dragged by the other two toward the water.”

“Well, go get them you two. Use your neural disruptors. That should render them harmless for a few setons.³”

Hata turned to Researcher Huleeah, “Are you serious? Don’t you see those long tubes they carry? If I’m not mistaken those are projectile firing weapons that use explosive powder. By the time we got close enough to paralyze them, we’d most likely be dead.”

The second crewman spoke up. “Wait, two of them appear to be leaving. They’ve left the third one they had been carrying by the edge of the water. It appears to be incapacitated. Just be patient until they leave, then we can investigate.”

The setons seemed to pass with agonizing slowness as three pairs of alien eyes watched the horse-drawn cart carrying the two men recede into the darkness.

“Is it dead, Senior Researcher?” Hata stood over the body of Jack Bellingham.

Huleeah eyed the prostrate being carefully. “No, its heat signature is that of a living being, although it is unconscious and...curious, its lower appendages have been fitted with heavy metal devices secured together with a chain. Interesting, it would appear that this thing’s two companions left it here deliberately to die when the water rises.”

³ seton (fictional) equals 3.2 Earth minutes

Hata spoke in a bare whisper to his companion but kept his gaze on Hulleah, "Hmm, maybe we can learn a few things from these beings. I'd like to chain that egomaniac to this beach myself."

Hulleah turned toward the two crewmen. "You two, stop that mumbling. One of you, take your blaster and cut the chain that's holding this being's appendages together. *Quickly*, the tide is already rising, and it's half in the water! I want it alive, not drowned."

Hata selected mid-range power on his weapon, took aim at the heavy chain and discharged a plasma bolt that cut through the iron links in a green-white burst of light. Between the flash and heat caused by the weapon and the water that was beginning to soak his body, Jack Bellingham came awake, only to once again see the stars explode in his eyes as one of the aliens fired a neural disrupter into his body. The last impression Bellingham had was that he was being entwined by the tentacles of two giant Humboldt Squids.

Chapter two—Captured!

Hata, struggling with the limp burden, called out, “Senior Researcher, could you please lend us the strength of your tentacles? This being is far heavier than it looks.”

“I don’t think that would be prudent, crewman. After all, I have *no idea* what sorts of parasites or pathogens might be lurking in this thing’s hair and cloth covered hide. Besides, we are no more than a few dozen *taks*⁴ from the ship. Now, stop complaining and keep moving. This world’s sun will be visible above the horizon soon, and we need a few more of these beings. I desire a mating pair. I have no idea what the sex of this one is, or if it even has a gender. There are plenty of worlds on which creatures can switch back and forth between male and female.”

Commander Holath stood at the bottom of his ship’s ramp peering into the darkness, looking for a sign that his crewmen were returning and hoping in the back of his mind that the Senior Researcher may have stumbled upon some large undiscovered carnivorous plant or animal on this world. Finally his discus-like eyes saw the heat signatures of his crewmen and the researcher approaching the ship. As the commander looked closer, he could also see the shape of a fourth heat source being dragged between his two men. That had to be one of the native species. *Good*, Holath thought to himself, *Hueelah can collect one or two more, and we can get off this planet. By the Eye of Hota, I have a bad feeling that Huleeah’s exit from null-space was not as stealthy as he believes.*

The two crewmen, breathing hard, pulled the unconscious Jack Bellingham up the final length of the ship’s ramp, the tips of his leather boots rasping and resonating on its metal surface. Finally, they deposited their prize on the deck in front of the captain.

“Was there any difficulty in capturing this one?”

“No, sir, it was not conscious when we found it. It was deliberately left to die by two others that placed it at the edge of the water.”

Holath considered this then asked, “Were the other two of the same species?”

“Yes, sir.”

“It seems they may have a few traits in common with us.” *I can think of one individual aboard this ship I’d like to kill*, he thought.

⁴ 1 Tak equals 3.75 meters

He looked curiously at the being before him. His first impression was the thing's unpleasant smell. Trying to ignore the odor that was permeating his twin olfactory bulbs, the commander reached down with four of his arms and turned the thing over on what had to be its back. Holath stared at the curiously formed face, his interest in seeing this creature outweighed his animosity for Huleeah, and he asked him to come closer and tell him his thoughts about the unconscious entity lying on the deck. "Senior Researcher, what is your opinion of this thing? Can this truly be a member of the species you say is advancing so rapidly? I mean look at the head...if that's what it is. The brain capacity seems on the small side, and if those are eyes, I can't tell as they have skin flaps covering them. This creature must have very limited vision."

Huleeah reached down and with the tip of a tentacle pushed back one of Jack Bellingham's eyelids, revealing the blue-gray iris. "Yes, I agree, Captain. I'm certain it is product of this planet's environment. The sun of this system is far hotter and brighter than our own, and this world possesses quite transparent skies. With the amount of light reaching this planet's surface, they'd be no need for large optical receptors. I would have to say this being's vision would be limited to a very narrow spectral band, but...perhaps if we obtain a few more, I can have this one dissected for examination, then we should have a better idea of this species' capabilities."

Holath picked at the man's clothing. "What do you make of these coverings? From what I have seen of your scans, it appears all of these beings are covered in one degree or another in these rags."

"Yes, odd, since the climate on this island should not even require coverings at all. Perhaps this is a cultural trait of this species. And... look at this long and lethal looking blade on its side. It's designed so the user can wrap those five branching appendages around the weapon's handle." Picking up Bellingham's limp arm and examining his fingers Huleeah added, "They're formed by internal articulating joints and a bony skeleton with musculature attached; the arms are the same as well. It would make for a very powerful swing with this long blade. I wouldn't like to be on the receiving end of that thing. Anyway, have your men remove its coverings as well as the weapon and secure it in a holding chamber. The neural disruption will be wearing off soon. I'd like to know if it is male or female. That way when I send your men out for a mate, they'll at least know what not to bring back."

Huleeah's arrogance again permeated the conversation between himself and the Captain, and Holath felt his annoyance again rise to the surface.

"You mean you won't be going with my men to secure another one of these?"

"Certainly not, Captain. I must attend to this one and... besides, we are nearing the time of sunrise on this world. It would not look good for you, Captain, if I were captured or killed."

"But it's all right if it happens to be my men who are captured or die?"

"Of course, Captain, such is the life and the risks of being a crewman, you know."

Captain Holath turned away from the Senior Researcher lest he see pink skin again start to flush purple with anger.

Several of the crew, supervised by the Senior Researcher, began to undress Jack Bellingham. They were momentarily puzzling over the brass buttons of his waistcoat before figuring out their purpose. Captain Holath had just begun to speak with crewman Hatta about organizing another foray into the surrounding vegetation to capture more of the local inhabitants, when a blast that nearly deafened the hearing diaphragms of those standing near Bellingham occurred. It filled the research section with thick pungent blue smoke, followed an instant later by the main sensor screen shattering into a thousand pieces with a secondary spark filled explosion. Once they regained their wits, all in the room turned to see Hulof, a second grade cadet, flushing blue with fear, his chromatophore cells pumping the indigo hue through his skin.

Finally he spoke, "I'm... I'm sorry! I had not idea what this thing was! I found it and one more like it in two pouches underneath the specimen's coverings."

Captain Holath drew closer to the panicked crewman, taking the still-smoking weapon from him. Although not a passionate student of history, he could see the resemblance to weapons used by his own ancestors a thousand sections ago in the past. It was one of two flintlock pistols Jack Bellingham had been carrying. A wave of undulations shot through the captain's tentacles as he surveyed the damage to his ship and the fact that the crewman had come terribly close to shooting one of his fellow crewmen while he was examining the unknown device. "Men, do not touch any alien device you might find while on this world. You all know this is true of any Type-Three or above species we might encounter; well, here you can see that even the artifacts of a Type-Two civilization can be just as deadly if you do not know what you are examining. Is that understood?"

With nearly everyone's attention focused on the captain, no one had noticed that Jack Bellingham, half naked, had just opened his eyes. The sound of a flintlock pistol being fired at close range cut through the all powerful desire to remain unconscious. As he came fully awake, he was aware of the cold, hard feel of the metal deck against his skin, the orange-red illumination that seemed to come from everywhere and the sounds of what could only be described as bubbling, hissing, and rudely escaping air. As Jack Bellingham, lying absolutely still cast his gaze about, he saw the sounds were emanating from a group of creatures he could describe only as walking squids. From his position on the floor, he could see the pommel of his cutlass hanging over the edge of a sort of table.

Bellingham tried to keep his body absolutely still but the thought of, *where in God's name am I*, kept pounding on his senses. Most men of his time might have cried out, believing they were in the clutches of demons or the Devil himself but Jack Bellingham was not an ordinary man of his time. He was as well educated as any member of the Royal Society of scientists were in the late seventeenth century, for as a young man, he had Isaac Newton himself as his personal tutor. One of the recurring discussions they often had together when viewing the night sky through a telescope or discussing the laws of planetary motion was that the principals of physics were universal and the planets were worlds like the very one they stood upon. He had even read the texts of Spinoza, Giordano Bruno, and Francis Godwin, which hinted at the plurality of worlds and their possible inhabitants. If this were so, than it was likely those other worlds in space too contained plants and animals and perhaps even thinking beings. Bellingham knew for certain that was exactly what he was looking at. Thinking beings from some other world, the Moon perhaps, that had somehow managed to capture him like a naturalist's specimen. Bellingham also recalled his experiences with another teacher of the science of living things, remembering that the majority of captured specimens were usually dissected to better understand their physical make up.

He could see an open exit to safety from the fantastic room he was laying in, and it appeared that the beings that had captured him were in considerable agitation over the accidental firing of his pistol. Jack Bellingham tensed his muscles and sprang like a panther for his cutlass, making a mad dash for the open access hatchway. He was halfway to the exit before one of the squids saw him.

"Quickly! The Specimen is escaping!" It was the voice of the Senor Researcher. In a near instant, two crewmen, who to Bellingham moved with an extraordinary

fluid swiftness, were spreading their twelve arms wide and blocking his path to freedom. He raised his weapon, slicing it through the air and hitting one of the rubbery, thick muscled arms of the squid things blocking his way. The thing howled with an ear piercing shriek as its blood, a brilliant green, pumped from the sword wound. Jack hauled his arm back, this time to try and split the apparition before him in two, when he staggered under the effect of a powerful electric shock. Still, he held his cutlass high, aiming for what had to be the head of the creature in front of him. And then, the stars again seemed to explode before his vision, and a cloak of blackness enveloped his senses as he dropped his weapon and crumpled to the floor.

"By the Eye of Hota! That was fortunate that you had a neural disruptor, or I might have been killed!"

The Captain turned to his man who was holding the bleeding appendage. "Get to the infirmary immediately and have that wound tended to. Hata, you go with him. Senior Researcher! These are extremely strong and dangerous beings. We had to hit this one twice with neural charges before we brought it down. It nearly took an arm off my crewman!"

Huleeah, looking almost bored replied, "There is nothing to be concerned about now. I'll have it placed securely in a containment tube for further examination. Pity we could not have stumbled upon this planet during the war with the Kaath. This species is quite strong and very aggressive. They would have made excellent soldiers for the Empire. Now, since this incident is over, send your men out and get me a few more examples of this species before it grows light."

Captain Holath was about to vent his anger on the Senior Researcher for his cold indifference to his crewman's injuries as well as the havoc aboard his ship caused by this creature, when the communications officer came bounding down from the command deck, arms flailing with news that chilled the blood of everyone who heard him speak.

"Captain! There's a Kaath warship that just dropped out of null-space near the fifth planet of this system. They can be only looking for us!"