

Scenes from the Cutting Room Floor

August/September 2003

Interview

Introduction

Warring States is the next Koscuisko novel, one that takes place almost immediately after the action of The Devil and Deep Space as that latter novel followed almost immediately upon the action of Hour of Judgment (His Excellency Regrets).

I have taken apart my outline and put it back together again, and a great deal of the 250 pp. of manuscript that I had in draft at this time last year will simply not do; either because the plot has changed, or because the plot has changed, or in some instances because the plot has changed. This is not to speak of the fact that a woman does not feel that her beautiful prose is quite so beautiful twelve months after the fact, in many instances.

A lot of that text, however, is still in limbo, because it either might still be called into play somehow or because it's a perfectly good piece of the plot that is simply being re—written for aforementioned “death of supposedly deathless prose” reasons. At this moment I can't say for sure whether some plot elements must be completely pushed back prior to the formal beginning of Warring States.

This scene, however, is safe. It will tell you nothing about the plot that will do you much of any good, and it emphatically will not take place in the current draft of Warring States. At the same time, the dynamic between Andrej Koscuisko and Fleet Captain Irshah Parmin will be an important part of the novel when you read it, and this was fun to write. You may be able to pick up several solid indications of where the plot is actually going from this Scene from the Cutting Room Floor . . . or maybe not (hee hee).

I hope that you enjoy it! I will be attempting to identify further Scenes for posting as I go along, so that I can whet your appetite for the publication of the completed novel in January, 2005.

Cheers,
Susan

The Text

Andrej Koscuisko was not in the least comfortable sitting at the Ship's Engineer's station on the engineering bridge of the Jurisdiction Fleet Ship Ragnarok. He had never even been on the engineering bridge, above a handful of occasions; the closest he had usually come was the observation deck above, and even that was almost too close for comfort.

He could understand First Officer's approach: the Ragnarok had only two Command Branch officers assigned, instead of the several it should have been carrying; the engineering bridge was traditionally staffed by Command Branch during times of particular tension; in the absence of any Ship's Third Lieutenants to pull the duty Ship's Primes should supplement.

To understand it was not to feel at all happy. No, the duty was not particularly difficult; it was interesting to watch what went on on the engineering bridge—at first—and it demanded no decisions on his part.

No, Infirmary staff did not particularly require his presence in order to run efficiently, Infirmary staff had had to run on its own for years during Captain Lowden's tenure for reasons that Andrej was determined to avoid thinking about.

Yes, he knew where the call—button was so that he could summon Wheatfields or First Officer or the Captain herself at a moment's notice. The command station had been customized for Wheatfields, however, tailored to the height of the man who had held it since the days even before the Ragnarok's first flight as a test bed. Wheatfields had been on this ship for longer than any other of its officers: eight years.

It was on too large a scale for Andrej to feel comfortable there. Sitting in Wheatfields' command station made him feel as though he occupied his father's great chair at Rogubarachno; Wheatfields was taller than Andrej's father, though built on a different physical model—slimmer, with less shoulders.

Since his presence was a mere administrative requirement—nobody expected to him to say anything about the conduct of business on the engineering bridge, or would have listened to him had he tried—there was nothing to keep him from his own administrative tasks. More pity, that. The worse of both worlds: an alien environment without the home comforts of his own office—his rhyti—brewer, furniture with which he was familiar, in which he could be comfortable—and documentation.

And no way of telling how long First Officer would want this on—watch sort of life to continue, because the Fleet ships knew perfectly well that the Ragnarok was standing off the exit vector at Emandis Station but had made no move to acknowledge its presence.

There was no telling whether the Fleet ships would, or what they would do when it happened, but sooner or later some contact was bound to come because they'd want to negotiate with the Ragnarok when they were ready to leave. To find out whether there was to be shooting, among other things.

Andrej could only hope it happened sooner, and also not on his watch, because he hated sitting here all alone in the heart of Wheatfields territory without any Security to protect him in case the Ship's Engineer should decide to show some temper.

Something made a sound, on some screen, somewhere, and the entire engineering bridge fell silent with startling suddenness. Andrej froze in mid—annotation, the stylus in his hand hovering in mid—scan over his

recorder. An all-ship announcement, perhaps. He hoped. He hoped fervently. First Officer had said nothing about an all-ship announcement earlier today, but it could be, anything would be preferable to—

“Jurisdiction Fleet Ship Scylla, Fleet Captain Irshah Parmin commanding. For the Jurisdiction Fleet Ship Ragnarok.”

To this. Andrej swallowed, hard. Setting aside his documents-reader he straightened up as best he could, all too keenly aware of how ridiculous he had to look in Wheatfields’ chair. They’d had to hide a footrest at the base of the installation so that his feet would reach the ground. This was in all respects the worst way in which one would wish to greet a former commanding officer, an officer who had struggled so long to teach one military decorum, an officer to whom one owed a significant debt of gratitude never fully acknowledged or comprehended.

“Scylla, this is the Ragnarok,” he said. His voice came out sounding a good deal more self—assured than he felt, and surprised at least one of Wheatfields’ technicians into turning around to wink at him in an encouraging manner. “Andrej Ulexeievitch Koscuisko, officer of the watch. In what way may we assist you?”

He was not to stand up, First Officer had told him. So long as he was the officer of the watch he represented the Captain and would yield rank to no one while on board this ship. It was hard. Irshah Parmin had never believed that Andrej even noticed the trouble he’d taken to try and socialize a young and militarily inept officer who held senior rank only by virtue of his Bench function. And in point of fact it hadn’t been until Andrej had gotten to the Ragnarok—and understood how much different it could have been for him on Scylla—that Andrej had fully appreciated Irshah Parmin’s forbearance.

The view-screen cleared, and there he was. Much larger than life; the Captain. Irshah Parmin. Staring out at Andrej with an expression of affronted incredulity mildly tempered with something almost like pleasure, on his face. “Koscuisko, I’ll be damned. You’re the last person I would have expected to see. What are you doing on the engineering bridge?”

There was no soft way to put this. “I am performing my assignment as I have been charged by my Captain, your Excellency. Who will be with us shortly, I hope and trust.” To rescue him. But he hadn’t called for her yet, because he hadn’t heard what Scylla wanted. Andrej thought fast: if it was Irshah Parmin the Captain would want to speak to him, whatever it was. Captain to Captain. Yes. That would work. He keyed his call—alerts with a clear conscience, and relaxed a little.

“I’m highly gratified to see that you’ve learned, over the years, to attend to your Captain’s orders, Koscuisko,” Irshah Parmin said. Leaning back in his chair; propping his chin up in the palm of his hand with his elbow braced on the arm of his station. “It seems to me that I can remember some conflicts we had on related issues.”

Which was stating it mildly. So long ago; Andrej had wallowed in horror, in those days, and thought that he was in Hell. Before. Then he had gone to the Domitt Prison, and to Lowden after. Irshah Parmin had refused to allow any of the bond—involuntaries assigned to Scylla to follow him to the Ragnarok, and after Andrej had discovered how Lowden used bond—involuntaries Andrej had understood.

“I hope his Excellency would consider me to be an eventual credit to him. But I do not lay any wagers on it, with respect, sir.”

Surely the Captain would be here soon. Memory threatened to overwhelm Andrej; and Irshah Parmin either failed to realize the impact that thought of earlier days was having on Andrej or misinterpreted it, because he frowned a bit and said “Say, that one troop of yours, Koscuisko. The Nurail, lady’s favorite, is it safe to ask after him?”

Was he still alive, Irshah Parmin meant. It would have been an unkind question to ask if Robert had been dead; perhaps Irshah Parmin had checked up on him. Perhaps Irshah Parmin had a plot in mind. Andrej frowned slightly. “Yes, thank you, your Excellency. What of the others, is Miss Samons still assigned?”

And what sort of a man is your Ship’s Surgeon, and does he treat them decently, and I could have them back now that Lowden is dead. But Fleet would never transfer valuable bond—involuntary troops to the Ragnarok, not now. And he was leaving again once the issues that threatened the safety of the ship and its crew were resolved: a situation which Captain ap Rhiannon had just complicated, true, but Andrej could see her view in the matter.

“Come over and visit, Koscuisko,” Irshah Parmin suggested. “We’ll send a courier. You can catch up. Yes, Chief Samons is still here. Some of the others you remember. Say the word, and I’ll ask your captain to grant leave.”

Yes, Andrej realized, with a sudden surge of gratitude mixed with amusement. Irshah Parmin was up to something, perhaps not premeditated but nefarious none the less. Five years after Andrej’s departure from his Command, Irshah Parmin was still trying to protect his once-junior officer from the repercussions of ap Rhiannon’s

actions. Irshah Parmin did not understand that ap Rhiannon's actions were those of the whole ship: or if he did he meant to shield Andrej yet, if he could, whatever it took.

“My profound and sincere thanks, your Excellency,” Andrej said, rising to his feet, carefully stepping down off the foot—rest that was there to bow very formally. “Respectfully decline. I cannot afford the appearance of compromise, Captain, and will remain with my ship.”

Irshah Parmin nodded, gravely, but smiling somewhat around the eyes and the corners of his mouth. They did understand each other. And Andrej's gratitude was sincere. He had not earned Irshah Parmin's protection; he had only happened under it by accident of assignment. That protection was no less valuable for the arbitrary nature of its extension—and Andrej's obligation in return was no less profound.

It was only how ap Rhiannon felt about the Ragnarok, Andrej realized, though her expression of her dutiful care was rather different. He owed her a similar obligation: and as he attempted to grasp this concept in fullness—Jennet ap Rhiannon, a junior Command Branch officer and one he had not thought he particularly liked whenever he had been unable to avoid noticing her existence, and he was in her debt, he, Andrej Ulexevitch Koscuisko—the door at the back of the engineering bridge slid open and his Captain came through into the room.

Andrej stepped away from the chair of the Ship's Engineer gratefully; ap Rhiannon mounted the footrest to seat herself without any trace of awkwardness whatever. She was not a tall woman; perhaps she didn't notice such expedients, Andrej guessed, because—unlike a man who had been raised the heir to the Koscuisko familial corporation, and had all manner of accommodations made for him accordingly—she had lived with them all her life.

“Captain Irshah Parmin,” ap Rhiannon acknowledged, with a crisp nod. Two had come in with her, Andrej noted—explaining how she had known the identity of the officer on-screen. “Jennet ap Rhiannon, Jurisdiction Fleet Ship Ragnarok. At your service. What's the occasion?”

“You've cleared out the depot, ap Rhiannon, that's the occasion,” Irshah Parmin said. Very mildly, Andrej thought, but then he'd known Irshah Parmin and didn't know whether ap Rhiannon had met the man before. “The unusual status of your approach against Taisheki aside, and your actions there notwithstanding, no one would grudge you stores and replenishments. But I need the munitions. I have thirty cities in this vector two steps away from armed insurrection, and only seven ships to keep it all under control. I can't afford to lose control of so significant a portion of my already strained resources.”

Andrej backed up slowly and carefully to where he could stand at Two's side. The First Officer would be on link in quarters or in his own office, Andrej supposed, and Wheatfields as well. Did this mean that they would not need him any longer to pull duty as the officer of the watch? Because he had plenty to do in his own Section if that was so.

"We are very willing to assist you in maintaining the public order, Fleet Captain, though we have received no orders to do so. When we left Taisheki we were keenly aware of how little we could hope to contribute to the Fleet's mission in these unsettled times as an experimental hull. It is for the good of the Judicial order that we have drawn stores, which we will deploy at your direction until further orders are received, at your discretion."

But she wasn't giving anything back. That was her point. They'd arrived at Emandis Station an essentially unarmed warship: the Wolnadis had their guns, but most of the rounds that the Ragnarok had carried had been training rounds of one sort or another even then. Arrived at Emandis a test bed with the façade of a cruiserkiller-class battlewagon; left Emandis packed from the maintenance atmosphere to the carapace hull with armament and munitions to sustain them for a long time before they would have to find the next load. Which was a good thing in light of the fact that it was going to be quite a while, in Andrej's estimation, before they would find any Fleet depot half as cooperative as Emandis Station.

"I have no orders to integrate any non-assigned resources, ap Rhiannon, and will therefore be unable to take advantage of your generous offer. Nor have you any business with my store. Return the munitions to depot, and leave the system. You are unsupported and unassigned. I will not insist you return your other replenishments, but I will have the armament."

Andrej could hear what would be coming next. He had been anticipating it since Smath had roused him from bed two days ago; the personal loss was poignant, the threat to the ship and crew much more terrible to face. But he could not convince himself that he had truly hoped for anything better.

ap Rhiannon stood up. "I decline to return any stores and munitions, your Excellency, having a real and pressing need for them. My requisition was honestly released and indisputably owed. I will leave the system, though I had hoped to grant leave on station. But I will not release my weapons-loads back to depot."

So close to Emandis that he could watch the great golden deserts of its massive central continent roll away and away and away from him on the view-port of the engineering bridge, and not to be permitted to see Joslire's people after all, to speak to Joslire's survivors, to tell them how much Joslire had meant to him. Oh, it had been a

fantasy from the first, perhaps, and they would only have wanted Joslire's knives from him; and still it was painful to know that he was not to be able to sit down with Joslire's family and share stories of a man that he had loved.

If they would have spoken to him, the man who had murdered their son—brother—perhaps even husband. Why had he not armored himself against the idea from the start? He had much larger issues to content with. The Captain had offered to leave the system. He remembered what came next, from Taisheki; and sure enough Captain Irshah Parmin sighed with a pressing together of his lips that Andrej recognized, remembered—and said it.

“Captain ap Rhiannon. You are in receipt of the only full base load of arms and accoutrements within twelve days' transit on vector, and three entire supplemental loads besides.

Three, Andrej thought to himself, impressed. She had been thorough. It only worsened the problem, of course. “Not only would it be imprudent of me to let my own stores decline without replenishment—for which I now must wait for a full month or more, if I am lucky—but in light of the ambiguity of your legal status and that of your Command I cannot, in duty and honor, permit you to leave with all of that firepower on board. It was not an options list, ap Rhiannon. Surrender the guns and leave. Not one or the other, both, or neither, and ‘neither’ is not a choice I am anxious to see you make.”

“While if I surrendered these arms—and my basic right, Fleet Captain, the ship's base load, outstanding since the launch of this ship—I could not risk the lives of my crew by leaving this system. We were undefended. I will not be undefended again.”

Not entirely undefended, they'd had the Wolnadi fighters, but Andrej could see her point. Unfortunately her reference had apparently reminded Irshah Parmin of something that annoyed him—“You can keep the damn battle cannon, ap Rhiannon, the one you used to shoot your way out of Taisheki. I don't want it. It's dirty. Give me back my stores and get out.”

Poor choice of words, Andrej knew. Ap Rhiannon had gone white to the lips; still, when she spoke, she kept her voice steady. “It's an honest cannon, your Excellency, not to blame for its history. It did us good service. And will again if you attempt to retrieve my stores. I will not surrender a single round. I will leave.”

“I have corvettes on standby on every vector debouchment you can find from Emandis, ap Rhiannon. Shoot your way past them and it will be much more difficult for you to pretend that you're just waiting for your Appeal. I'll give you four shifts to consider the situation, your Excellency. Captain Irshah Parmin, away, here.”

Silence, on the engineering bridge. Jennet ap Rhiannon bowed her head, putting her hands to the back of her waist, stretching. When she straightened up it was to cock an amused eye at Andrej, taking him by surprise.

“You know that officer, Doctor?” she asked. From experience Andrej had guessed that she had not yet decided what to call him; it was no longer appropriate for her to call him by his rank—because she outranked him—though that didn’t stop her from calling their guest artilleryman General, rather than Rukota. Andrej felt a blush prickle at the back of his neck: how much had she heard?

“He was my first Fleet commander.” And had confidently predicted, from time to time, that he would be the last as well, because Andrej would not survive the posting. It had been three parts ferocious frustration and one part humor, even affection. Captain Lowden had come much closer to being the literal death of him. “And suffered much for my youth and inexperience, not to say arrogance, your Excellency. He is a man of great determination, he will not let personal inclination stand between him and his duty.”

In other words, he might well be more sympathetic in principle than he could admit, but ap Rhiannon would not be able to appeal to his sense of justice. Not over his sense of duty. A man could not survive long in the Fleet if he could not learn to sacrifice his personal convictions to the rule of Law: Captain Irshah Parmin had referred prisoners to torture when he had felt called upon to do so, and if he’d never sent Andrej back to Secured Medical to savage an already broken soul he had never rebuked him for the excesses into which his appetite betrayed him, either.

Perhaps he’d realized, Andrej mused. Perhaps he’d known all along that Andrej could not do what was required of him without surrendering to excess: and perhaps it had been that those lapses in judgment, those shameful self-indulgences, had been nothing compared to the things Captain Lowden had required of him, innocuous enough to let pass once they were passed beyond hope of all recall. Perhaps.

Two rustled with her wings, a gesture oddly like shrugging the shoulders that she did not have. “Call goes out to Brisinje,” Two said. “For immediate attention, First Secretary Aril Tirom. Would you like to hear it? We could go into my section, if you will first declare yourselves deaf and blind to things you might not wish to notice.”

The Ragnarok had been an experimental test bed for multiple technologies and enhancements. There was a fine line, Andrej expected, between determining the operational limits of test hardware to intercept secured transmission, and outright illegal manipulation of Bench—sensitive information; on the other side of which line Two had in all likelihood danced merrily for years.

Surely the Captain would not cry foul, not at this point. The only thing that had saved them at Taisheki had been the cannon that Two had found hidden away as a case of deckwipes; it did not do to inquire too closely as to the precise ethnicity of the man who pulled out of the icy river for fear that he might be Sarvaw. Or something equally as questionable, whatever that might be. If there was such a thing.

“I think we’d better,” ap Rhiannon said. “Coming, Doctor?”

On the one hand there was no reason he should not. On the other hand—“I have not been relieved, your Excellency. First Officer would speak to me about it, I am convinced, should I quit my post without due authority.”

The First Officer’s authority, that was, since the Captain had just granted him leave to accompany her by implication. When it came down to it Andrej supposed he didn’t want to know what Irshah Parmin said to Brisinje. It would come to shooting or it wouldn’t. If it came to shooting people would be injured, maimed, and killed. If it did not, it could only be by a conjugation of circumstances too far from his imagining for comfort.

“Consider yourself not excused staff, then, Doctor. Good-greeting.” Ap Rhiannon and Two, Ship’s Intelligence, went away. Andrej climbed the footrest to sit down in Wheatfields’ chair once more, and brood about fatality.

End