

**Vardo At The Faire**  
***A Vulland Story by Jean Johnson***

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Vardo Mostrell fidgeted impatiently as the airship slowly drifted into position. He had already tossed overboard the baled sausages of straw the *Dread Naught* used as bumpers, meant to protect the hull of the ship from rubbing against the tower docks. With nothing else to do, he tried not to dance with eagerness as the riggers finished testing the clips of their harnesses. Confining his joy to a broad grin, he watched two of the riggers grab the painter lines at bow and stern, leaping outward as they hit the rails of the gunnels.

They swung with the breathtaking precision of experienced airship sailors, arcing out over the ground a good sixty feet below. He wanted to help them, but practicality demanded that the lightest of the crew be the ones to strap on the docking harnesses. It only took two men to control each rigger's harness line; for Vardo, taller and broader than the rest of the crew by two hands' worth, it would have taken five or more.

Brick walls did not climb the rigging either, though his gloved fingers clung to the web-work of rope netting leading to the beams and spars supporting the sails. One of the riggers up there came climbing down, her task of lashing the sails to the midmast spars complete. At the shout of his name, he looked up at her, then released the netting, catching her as she dropped the last eight or nine feet.

“Aw, mate, good catch! Maybe one day you'll get t' *keep* me.” Chuckling, Elesta smacked a kiss on his overgrown cheek, then scrambled free and scuttled off to help the half-dozen linesmen already starting to haul on the first of the ropes wrapped onto the tower cleats by the docking riggers.

Vardo smiled wistfully at her retreating wool-and-leather clad back. She was small and shapely. Part of him enjoyed her company, but it was just that, company. Small women scared him. He was afraid of breaking them. Instead, he ambled toward the stern, the opposite direction she had taken.

Bracing his boots on the deck, he picked up the end of one of the stern ropes and helped the two men in front of him haul the back end of the ship into place against the dock, easing and speeding their efforts. Hauling on the painters, he fell into the heave, shift, heave, shift rhythm of cinching the ship in close to the dock. With

everyone working hard, it didn't take long to secure the airship to the cantilevered platform.

It was also a good thing they were the only vessel at this particular tower. The *Dread Naught's* dual lofts took up a lot more space than the typical single pod most airships used. With the great triangular struts of the fore, amid, and aft masts holding the hull centered beneath the two lofts, the ship was both light and fast due to the greater span of sails they could hoist. She was also sturdy in the face of both swift maneuvers and high winds, and capable of supporting the heavy guns chained below her decks. Currently, those muzzles were concealed by stout, closed shutters, though there were always at least four teams of powder monkeys on watch at all times, below deck.

The shrill, sharp piping from the bo'sun pulled most of the crew into ragged formation. Descending from the poopdeck, Captain Brandwin surveyed his crew. There was nothing about them to suggest a uniform, save that every man and woman had a thigh-length leather coat and leather pants or chaps over their wool and linen clothes. The oiled leathers were necessary; this might have been the first day of spring, but a stiff, chilly wind blew across the deck.

Captain Brandwin grimaced a little as he looked at Vardo. Sighing, he tugged his hat a little lower on his grizzled brow, and spoke. His deep voice boomed across the deck from years of practice.

“Alright, you swine herders, I am going to *repeat* my orders. We are here as *guests*, and we will *behave* as guests. We will be polite! We will pay for our purchases with good coin! We will leave these people with a *pleasant* memory of our presence, and *not* give them any cause to call out the air guard or the magistrate...because *this* was Vardo Mostrell's choice for our next port of call. We are *attending* the Township Laestra's Spring Festival for the next three days as most people like to attend such things...and we will be doing *nothing else*.”

Some of the crew grumbled, sighed, or rolled their eyes. Vardo grinned and quietly patted his hands together, all but dancing in place. Once a month, Captain Brandwin rewarded his hardest-working crewmember with the right to pick their next activity. This month was Vardo's turn, and he was taking ruthless advantage of it.

Usually it was a plump township village, ripe for the plundering; the crew of the *Dread Naught* were professional air pirates, after all. But Vardo had won the right

to choose what they would do next, and he had chosen for them to attend the Flower Festival. Not as a bloodthirsty crew of brigands and buccaneers, but as an ordinary crew, pulling politely into dock, descending in a civilized manner, and yes, *paying* for the goods they wanted. Making people scream and run and give up all those nice shiny things was fun in its own way, but he wanted the other kind of fun.

“To that end!” Captain Brandwin barked, his mustached face twisting in a fierce grimace. “I am putting Vardo himself in charge of disciplining you! Step out of line, and *he* has the right to *thump* you for it.”

Several the crew turned to glance his way. Some blanched outright. Vardo’s thumps had been known to dislocate shoulders, fracture skulls, break collarbones...and even crush vertebrae, killing the recipients of said thumps. Vardo just beamed happily, thinking, *I get to go to the Faire! I get to go to the Faire...*

“With that said, I go now to *pay* the docking fee...even if it’s coming out of Vardo’s share of our last haul,” Brandwin grouched. Turning toward the gunnels—three crewmembers hastily hauled into place the boarding ramp when he moved—he barked one last order. “Keep half the crew on the ship at all times, and a weather eye out for anyone thinking to attack *us* for choosing to look like fat, ground-tied prey. Vardo, you’ll be first on the dock after me. The rest of you, report to the bo’sun for your watch assignments. Dismissed!”

The bo’sun quickly blew on her pipe again before snapping orders to divide the crew into who could go right away, and who had to stay. Vardo didn’t pay much attention, other than making a mental note of what time he had to be back by, which was one hour past dawn of the next day. They had drifted into port a few hours past dawn, so it was a slightly shortened stay, but they’d all get about two trips aground before the Festival was through.

Elesta was pretty, enough that he wouldn’t have minded dallying with her, but she was too small and fragile. He liked her, but he wouldn’t pick her out of respect for her size. But maybe, just maybe, they had a professional girl who was tall and sturdy with brown curls like her. If so, he should have plenty of time to look for one. Hopefully one who wasn’t scared of overly big men.

Peering over the railings of the gangplank, Vardo grinned again. He could see the decorative paper lanterns from all the way up here, strung from building to

building across the streets of the town, and all throughout the tents and wagons set up on the commons. At night, the candles hidden inside would be lit by youth with an affinity for Fire-based thon, snapping their fingers or shifting their heels, or doing whatever it took to invoke the most temperamental of the four elements. Right now, they were simply bubbles and columns and boxes in a dozen pastel hues.

His own thon was a bit contrary. Part of him had an affinity for Air, for whistling up a wind or calming it down. He could walk lighter than his bulk implied just by rubbing thumbs and fingers together, and move with enough grace that he never lacked partners at a dance past the first song that he joined, despite the looks of his intimidating size. But the other half came from Earth; when he set himself and tensed his muscles just so, he was as immobile as stone, and just as tough when struck. Not to mention he hit like a boulder whenever he had to thump someone.

Neither thon affinities were particularly strong, but they were well-balanced, giving him an edge in speed, strength, and durability in a fight. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to display any of it on this visit. He really wanted to have fun, instead. Waiting eagerly at the top of the railing-lined plank, he watched his captain negotiate with the tower guard.

Words and a few coins were exchanged, then the guard wrote something on a slip of paper, stamped it, and handed it to the captain. Brandwin in turn brought it back to the ship, handing it up to his first officer, Katlin Orrock. She took it with a flippant salute, and tucked it behind the little-used sheet of glass next to the gantry where all such docking rights receipts were supposed to go.

That slip of paper meant they were now free to disembark and descend the stairs spiraling down the interior of the tower. Gleefully, Vardo strode down the gangplank, ignoring the way it creaked under each footstep. The stairs creaked, too, all the way down to the ground floor, which had been laid with a foundation of solid stone. Just like the outer walls of the stoutly built tower, the paving stones were made from granite.

The flagstones were imported, of course, since most of the stone found on a hexisle was hexrock, black, coarse, porous, and capable of holding a great deal of thonite gas, the source which kept hexisles afloat for a full century or so. Chunks of the crystallized gas had been crammed into the holds of the *Dread Naught*. By dissolving the crystals in tanks of water, the engine compartment was able to pipe the lighter-than-air gas up into the lofts. Vardo didn't quite know how the pumps

worked, but he knew the thonite gas permitted them to travel safely and easily from hexisle to floating hexisle here in the Skylands above the Vull.

Of course, the granite under his feet had most likely been imported more than a hundred years ago, in the centuries before the one known hexisle in the kingdom of Coldthroat had decided to lift up into the air, piercing the Vull and taking its place in the sky. But that had happened a hundred years ago. Life in the sky was all Vardo had known for the whole of his thirty-seven years.

They'd docked once or twice at a Spire City, but he'd never actually gone down through the special towers which pierced the membrane, connecting the Skylands to the Earthlands far down below. He'd *seen* the mountains and valleys, deserts and plains of the massive continent down below the Vull, and its strange, water-bound islands—who hadn't seen it, if they ever stepped aboard an airship or peered over the edge of a hexisle's outermost guard wall? But always, it was seen from the upper side of that rippling, slightly silvery-gold surface separating the two zones.

He wondered briefly why granite didn't float when hexrock clearly could, then shrugged it off. The docking towers were located near the town commons, where booths and wagons and tents of all sizes had been set up to contain the festivities. The first booths didn't have colorful sheets of paper for sale, however; the first ones instead had good woolen coats, knitted hats, and lambswool lined gloves for sale.

There were still little patches of snow here and there in the shadows of the buildings ringing the commons, and the grass crunched underfoot. Fires crackled in braziers here and there, lending warmth to the air. He didn't really suffer from the cold, being used to the chill, damp winds of airship life. Vardo was warmly dressed and didn't really need anything new, but still gave the hats and gloves a look, curious to see what was available.

One pair of grey-dyed gloves did catch his eye, but a tentative try proved they were a bit too small for his meaty hands. The merchant eyed him up and down, lifted a finger, and dug around in the back of his wagon. Bringing up a basket, he placed it on the ledge that formed a counter for his wagon-window, and rooted through it. The gloves he fished out were a similar doeskin in a lighter shade of gray. They were also quite large.

“Good winter gloves, sir,” the merchant offered. “Perhaps they'll fit?”

Vardo gingerly tested one. It slid onto his hand with a tiny bit of room to spare. That might mean a threat of losing them if they didn't fit tightly...but they were very warm despite the thin leather and short-trimmed wool. They did have good cuffs, too, unfolding a full finger-length up his wrists. Enough for a decent overlap with his coat cuffs.

"Can you put drawstrings onna wrists?" he asked, reluctantly removing the nice gloves. "I wouldn't want 'em t' fall overboard."

"Of course, sir. I could have it done by shortly after this noon," the slender man offered. "If sir is an airman, I could even put the drawstring inside, since the cuff can be turned back for access. That way it wouldn't interfere with the many lines of the rigging."

That pleased Vardo. He smiled broadly. "I'd like that. Can't have too many gloves onna ship. How much?"

"Oh, with the cost of the leather, the drawstring...the fineness of it...fifteen sterlings?"

Vardo snorted. He wasn't as smart as an artificer, but he wasn't dumb, either. "Hard to find anyone wi' big hands. Y' had it ready-made, yes, but there be dust inna creases. Haven't found a buyer 'til now. Give you ten fer it."

"That would only cover the cost of sir's hands; these gloves come with fine cuffs, too," the smaller man countered.

"Mm, eleven. 'N fifty clippers fer drawstrings." He looked down at the merchant. Any other port, and he would've been smashing through the wagons and the stalls, taking whatever he wanted, whatever he thought might be good for the others. But this was his special trip to the Spring Festival, which he hadn't done in years. "Eleven anna half sterling. That'd be fair. More 'n that would not be fair... 'n we *are* at the Spring Faire."

The milliner chuckled briefly at the pun. Sighing, he considered Vardo's offer a long moment, then nodded. "Better a sale now, I suppose, than another season of holding on to them..." Lifting a finger, he waggled it. "Sir is smarter than he looks. Half up front, half when you pick them up after the noon meal."

“All up front.” Digging into his jacket, Vardo pawed a handful of coins out of his money belt. Sorting out one large silver coin, one small silver, and five large coppers, he counted them into the merchant’s hand, then shook it carefully, his fingers wrapping around the other man’s fist. “I’m a crewman onna airship *Dread Naught*. You don’t see me by midafternoon, y’ take these up th’ dockin’ tower. Give them t’ watchman, tell ‘em they’re fer Vardo. That’s me. We’re the airship with the double lofts,” he added with a proud smile. “Can’t miss it.”

Lifting his gaze, the merchant nodded. “It’s rather hard to miss a double-lofter, aye. Light and Life bless you with the warmth of the returning sun, sir.”

“World ‘n Weather be nice to you, too,” Vardo replied. He grinned and patted the other man’s shoulder gently, leaving the merchant’s booth with an eager grin. “I’mma go fold paper flowers, now!”

There were tables set up for just such an activity. Buying a thick packet of colorful squares in several sizes from the first merchant to display them, Vardo made his way to the tables set up under the public awning. Braziers crackled between stout, scarred tables that looked like they had been borrowed from one of the town’s taverns. In fact, the place turned out to be a portable tavern, for a curvy lass with several layers of colorful red to pink skirts bustled over to his side. She wore a stout, dark red woolen jacket with the lapels folded down, framing her pink-dyed blouse and the hint of a bright red corset.

“What’ll you ‘ave, big fellah?” she asked, giving him a smile. “Slightly mulled cider, rather mulled wine, or hot sweetened tea?”

Vardo thought. He liked to drink; what crewman on an airship didn’t? But it was early in the day. “Hot sweet tea. Strong. Any muffins?” he asked, hopeful the answer was yes. “Like some muffins, too. Um...ten clipper’s worth?”

“Heh, that’ll getcha three. We got carrot cake, nut-spice, an’ Jade Mountain style muffins. I’ll getcha one of each,” she added, grinning at Vardo’s hopeful look. “Tea’s only semi-strong, but that’s another two copper. Three, if you want refills. I’ll be right back with th’ first serving.”

Nodding, Vardo fetched out another large reddish coin and two small ones. He put them on the table next to him, and carefully unwrapped the waxed paper holding his packet of paper squares. For the next several minutes, he frowned, hummed, squinted, and even poked his tongue out of his mouth, carefully folding the sheets

this way and that, and sometimes even cutting them, using two of his slender little belt knives like tongs and prods

He almost didn't notice when the woman came back with a metal pot, a stout, green-glazed mug, and a plate with three different muffins on it, icing drizzled on their tops, but the hot liquid was fragrant, and when he took a sip, a lovely mix of stimulating bitter and soothing sweet on his tongue. Not to mention delightfully warm in his hands.

Blue paper became morning glory trumpets. Red and pink papers turned into roses and peonies. Strips of yellow emerged as daffodils. Other visitors came into the tavern, ordering something warm to drink. Children chattered with their parents; their happy faces and giggling voices made him smile as he worked.

He missed these sounds. Being a pirate was all about the smash-and-grab, with shrieks and scowls, banging weapons, clashing blades, unhappy noises. But these were happy ones. Peaceful ones. It felt good to be a normal person for a little bit. Normal, except he was so big, he was almost as tall when seated on the bench as the average man of this township stood.

His size and the work of his fingers drew the attention of a curious, wool-wrapped boy. The tavern tent was halfway full, now; families were having to share tables with strangers. Gaze glancing warily between his chatting relatives and the stranger at the far end, the boy cautiously slid along the bench, watching.

"You're really good," the boy finally said, watching in awe as Vardo used his blades to fold a pale paper mottled in greens and yellows into a little frog. "I didn't know you could do that with knives!"

"Took me years t' learn it," Vardo admitted. He paused long enough to wiggle three unused fingers at the boy, leaving the index and thumb to balance one knife. "Hands are too big for some of this fiddly folding."

The boy watched the frog being completed, then jumped on the bench when Vardo grinned and stroked one fat finger down its backside, making the paper animal leap. "Father, look—he's *really* good at flower folding! He made that frog jump!"

The boy's words made his father break off his conversation long enough to frown inquisitively at Vardo. In turn, Vardo offered him a smile, and started folding a pretty little paper printed with tiny feathers on it. Between his fingers and his

blades, it didn't take long to turn it into a crane. Arching the wings just a little, he held onto the base and pulled gently on the tail, testing the bird. When the wings flapped, he nodded, concentrated, and blew a breath, tugging repeatedly.

After a few moments, he let go...and the bird flapped up into the air and wobbled toward the boy, lofted by a touch of his Air-based thon. It wasn't much, and it didn't last long, but it was enough to make the boy gasp in delight and reach for the bird. His father reached for his shoulder.

Vardo winced inside, expecting the man to tell his boy to not touch the stranger's paper bird. Few people looked at his great size as anything other than the threat his muscles and his mass represented. To his surprise, the father merely leaned close and said, "Don't forget to thank him for the bird, Son."

"Thank you, sir!" the boy dutifully caroled, flapping crane carefully caged in his hands.

Ducking his head a little, feeling his cheeks warm with gratitude, Vardo nodded. "Y'welcome. It won't fly for long, but...pull the tail an' it'll still flap like it might."

"Thank you! When I grow up, I'm gonna have thon that'll let me fly!" the boy exclaimed proudly.

Vardo gave him a wry look and a shrug, but didn't contradict the child. Certain affinities did run in bloodlines, but not always...and not everyone had thon. Most people did, up here in the Skylands. He'd heard stories that many people down below the Vull had so little that it was barely registerable as a thon-rank, but there was no dearth of it up here in the Skylands.

Still, there was no guarantee the boy would have any Air affinities. Turning his attention back to his papers, muffins, and tea, Vardo tried the Jade Mountain one. It turned out to be a sweet yellow cake stuffed with a tart, fruit-flavored jelly. Lemon curd, that was it. He liked it a lot. The carrot and the nut-spice ones were good, too; he could see why this makeshift tavern was popular with families. But it was the curd-filled muffins that kept him at the table, ordering more tea and another plate of three, until the last squares of paper had been scored, curled, and folded, forming jonquils and orchids, and a stem of little bluebells, only in rainbow hues.

The serving wench came over—serving maid, that was the term for the ones who worked in family-friendly taverns. She smiled at the mounds of flowers and animals he had created, and patted his shoulder. “Would you like to borrow a basket, dearie?”

He blinked at up her. “A basket?”

“Y’know, to carry ‘em all to the flower displays, and th’ judging booths. Wi’ that talent, you’re bound t’ win, sweetie,” she praised him, giving him another pat.

Enter a flower folding contest? Vardo blinked. He hadn’t even considered a contest! He had forgotten that normal people did things like that. A smile slowly split his face. Nodding enthusiastically, he grinned at her. “Yes, please! I’ll bring it right back!”

“I’m sure you will, you big sweet thing,” she cooed, and bustled off. Only then did it occur to him that she was fairly tall for a woman, and not at all stick-thin. He wondered for a moment if she was interested in men-women things, then turned his attention back to his paper flowers.

A contest... He could enter a contest, and they’d still be here in a few days—as nice normal people, not pirates—when the judges picked out the best ones. Eyeing his efforts, Vardo frowned at them. Some were good, but some looked a bit haphazard. Deciding he would need more paper, Vardo started sorting out the good ones from the rejects.

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The serving maid’s name was Marlie, and she wasn’t “that sort” of serving girl...but she was willing to flirt with him. She kept him plied with hot tea, compliments, and a juicy roast beef sandwich with a side of gravy for dipping when he grew hungry at noon. She even dared to tease him a bit, ordering him to put the spring sprouts back on his sandwich so he’d “...grow up to be a big, strong man.”

Vardo had laughed heartily at that. Now, though, he was holding her hand as they approached the square where the evening dances were to be held. She had agreed to come with him when he’d found out her cousin would be taking her place

serving the afternoon and evening crowd. He not only had a chance to dance like a normal person, but he had a partner to dance with, and couldn't remember being happier.

Now the lanterns were lit, providing a soft, multi-colored glow, illuminating the aisles and awnings of the faire. More people were in sight, since the majority of the locals worked only during the daylight hours. Merchants were still doing a brisk trade and the tavern-tent was packed, but Miss Marlie had insisted Vardo take her to the dancing square, so that she couldn't be called back to help the harried staff.

When they arrived, the area was filled with the back-and-forth swaying figures of townsfolk dancing a simple bransle. They clapped and they whirled, they stepped, stomped, and kicked, children fumbling through the steps with squeals of laughter and elders grinning as they kicked up their heels with a gentle sort of grace.

Off to one side stood and sat the musicians, behind a table holding mugs of steaming cider and extra instruments. There were two fiddlers among the players, two more with guitars, a fellow with a hand-drum that looked like it came from the southern deserts somewhere, and a boy with no less than four sets of pan pipes, ranging from very low breathy notes to high, bird-like twitters. The youth swapped between them so swiftly, his hands seemed blurred as they picked them up and set them down with hardly a beat or a note skipped in his melody.

“Hey, Vardo!” The cheery greeting came with an elbow that bumped into his hand. Glancing down, he saw the owner, Stumpy Deat, grinning up at him. One of the powder monkeys from the cannon decks, the short-legged, curly-bearded man lifted his concertina. “Look!” Deit announced, wiggling the squeeze-box in his hands. It half-sighed through a chord, then fell silent again. “They said I could play with ‘em! I’mma go play with the band!”

“That’s good, Deit!” Vardo praised, pleased to see he wasn’t the only crewmember excited to be here as if they were fellow villagers. “You go do that. You play good fer us.”

“You have fun dancin’ with this big lugnut, Miss,” he added to the tallish lady next to Vardo, tugging on the curl poking out from under his leather cap. “He’s lighter’n a feather half his size, promise!”

Stumpy Deit scampered off, dodging around the edge of the dancing square. Vardo blushed at Miss Marlie. “That’s still a big feather, you know.”

She grinned and tugged him onto the packed earth and sand that would serve as their dance floor tonight. “Dance with me, Mister Vardo,” she ordered, as the music changed to a country set of two and four couples. “Show me how feathery a big sweetie like you can be.”

“Yes’ m,” he agreed, blushing this time from that “Mister” being attached to his name. Vardo wasn’t normally a Mister sort of man. He was just Vardo, common from birth, and had no more than four years of schooling to his name, just enough to read and write a little, and puzzle out the names hung on street and shop signs.

Misters were men who lived in houses on hexisles and ran businesses. They got respect when they walked into town, not screams. It felt a little weird...but Miss Marlie wanted to dance, so Vardo danced. He danced a grapevine to the left with her, and skipped back to the right. Spun her under his arm and twirled in place, clapping to the beat. As the piper puffed and the concertina wheezed, the fiddlers danced their bows over their strings and the drummer snapped his hands in syncopated beats.

They traded partners with an elderly couple, and Vardo obligingly dropped not just to one knee, but sunk his rump to his bootheel so that he could guide the white-haired woman around him with one hand, since it was the only way to make himself shorter than her. She reminded him of a vague memory of the woman who had once taken care of him like a sort of honorary grandmother. He treated the matriarch extra-gently, mindful of her frail bones, then rose back to his feet to dance with Marlie again, grapevine dancing and skipping together as the figures started to repeat.

A heavy *boom* in the distance startled him. Whirling away from his date, he scowled in the direction of the docking tower and the scattering of golden dots that marked the *Dread Naught’s* shipboard lights. Even as he glared, he heard another *bang*, followed by a distant *crunch*, audible thanks to the musicians, who had stopped playing in their startlement.

“NO!” he shouted, upset that his crew would dare spoil his special day. His anger roared out of him, startling his date and the other dancers. “NOOOOO!”

“Vardo! No, it wasn’t us!” Deit shouted, dodging his way through the ogling townfolk. “It wasn’t us! Look to your right! Look, Vardo!”

Following the line of Deit's short arm, Vardo squinted...and saw the powder-occluded flash of another cannon firing. It lit up the hull of a second airship, coasting down into deployment range. Into plundering range. More cannons started to fire as they came into range, sending the villagers into a screaming, chaotic scramble for cover and safety.

His rage shifted from his blameless crewmates to this new menace. "No! This is *Vardo's* town! We *protect* this town!"

"You are one *torqued* lugnut, y' dumb pirate...but it's yer choice this month," Stumpy Diet grouched. Shaking his head, he dashed back toward the table his fellow players had used. Snatching up the high-pitched pipes, he quickly found the right ones and blew a shrill set of notes that pierced the noises of the invasion. He played it again as Vardo cast around for anything he could use as a weapon, and piped it a third time.

Off in the distance, the *Dread Naught's* bo'sun picked up the order and piped them as well. Shutters would now be opened on the cannon ports and the crewmen on watch would arm themselves for a counterattack. Vardo found a chair hauled to the edge of the square from someone's house and snatched it up. Cracking the back from the seat, he gripped the chair legs like a shield and the rails like a mace, and charged toward the incoming ship, which was now low enough, it danged crewmen on droplines down either side.

Bellowing out his rage, Vardo charged that way, determined to skewer the invasive bastards. Chair backs didn't exactly work that way; his initial sweeping blows sent the grounded pirates tumbling and sprawling with broken ribs and concussed heads. Chair backs weren't meant to be used as makeshift clubs, either. Within half a dozen foes, he was left holding a splinter.

One of the figures still clinging to a dropline tried to draw his gun. Vardo dropped the fragmented wood, grabbed the dangling rope and snapped it hard. Unable to hold on, the pirate yelped and fell. Vardo started to charge him, to either pummel or trample the miscreant under his extra large boots. Someone else yelled and leaped onto his back, fists slamming into his skull. Dazed, he tried to reach for the brave idiot—and felt his attacker knocked off his back with a solid *thunk*.

Spinning around, he found Miss Marlie wielding a very stout broom. She whacked the would-be pirate with several blows until he scrambled free and sprinted for the ship's ground-trailing ropes. Vardo stared at her, heart thumping almost as strong

as his fist could thump. A corner of his mind wondered if this was love, but the rest of him forced his attention back to the battle at hand.

First they'd fight off the attackers. Then he'd see if Miss Marlie wanted to leave the tavern and join him and the others for the wild ride of living life on the high winds. She'd probably say no, since not many women liked all that travel—women like the bo'sun and Elesta were very nice exceptions to the rule—but a man could dream. First, though, they had to get rid of these rival pirates who were picking on *his* town in which to be a normal, law-abiding man.

He didn't think about the legality of crushing the next pirate's ribcage with a hefty kick, or the way he flung another one into a wall by one arm. This was a fight, and in a fight, people got hurt. The only thing he did think about was that the other pirates had struck first, which made him a defender of the town. Vardo then wondered if Miss Marlie would kiss him and call him a hero for doing all of this. He might like that.

The fight lasted a good quarter-hour before the pirates gave up and ran for it...only to have their loft torn to shreds by a massive volley from the *Dread Naught's* portside guns. Vardo wasn't the only one to cheer as the other ship sank and crashed into a field beyond the edge of town, nor the only one to rush forward, intending to capture the would-be invaders who survived. The villagers all exclaimed how the township's king would pay handsomely for captured pirates, and speculated wildly on what booty they might find.

It felt a little weird to still be around to experience the aftermath of a pirate attack, though. To watch the townsfolk cleaning up the mess left by cannonfire, swordplay, and such. But for aiding in the defense of the place, the crew of the *Dread Naught* were given free medical care, discounted supplies for repairs, and free food and ale for the rest of the night. After being patched up, Vardo found himself helping Miss Marlie's cousins to salvage goods from some of the damaged buildings in town. It was hard work, but the way she smiled at him made it seem worthwhile.

At the end of the night, he had some bruises, a few cuts, a belatedly awarded trophy for second place in the paper flower folding competition...and a damp spot on his cheek where Miss Marlie had indeed kissed him, though she hadn't actually called him a hero or anything. She didn't want to leave the hexisle, either, but she did want him to come back again for the next night's dancing. Hopefully without pirates this time.

Blushing at Miss Marlie as she bade him a good night, Vardo decided he would have to be the best crewman Captain Brandwin had a second time, so that he could pick coming back here again.