



BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE HONOR HARRINGTON NOVELS

DAVID  
WEBER  
OUT OF THE DARK

# OUT OF THE DARK

---

---

**TOR BOOKS BY DAVID WEBER**

*Off Armageddon Reef*  
*By Schism Rent Asunder*  
*By Heresies Distressed*  
*A Mighty Fortress*  
*Out of the Dark*

# OUT OF THE DARK

---

DAVID WEBER



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK  
NEW YORK

# Table of Contents

---

[Title](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue: Planet Ku-197-20](#)

[Planet Ku-197-20](#)

[Chapter I](#)

[Chapter II](#)

[Chapter III](#)

[Chapter IV](#)

[Chapter V](#)

[Chapter VI](#)

[Chapter VII](#)

[Chapter VIII](#)

[Chapter IX](#)

[Chapter X](#)

[Chapter XI](#)

[Chapter XII](#)

[Chapter XIII](#)

[Chapter XIV](#)

[Chapter XV](#)

[Chapter XVI](#)

[Chapter XVII](#)

[Chapter XVIII](#)

[Chapter XIX](#)

[Chapter XX](#)

[Chapter XXI](#)

[Chapter XXII](#)

[Chapter XXIII](#)

[Chapter XXIV](#)

[Chapter XXV](#)

[Chapter XXVI](#)

[Chapter XXVII](#)

[Chapter XXVIII](#)

[Chapter XXIX](#)

[Chapter XXX](#)

[Chapter XXXI](#)

[Chapter XXXII](#)

[Chapter XXXIII](#)

[Chapter XXXIV](#)

[Chapter XXXV](#)

[Chapter XXXVI](#)

[Chapter XXXVII](#)

[Chapter XXXVIII](#)

[Chapter XXXIX](#)



---

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

OUT OF THE DARK

Copyright © 2010 by David Weber

All rights reserved.

Edited by Patrick Nielsen Hayden

A Tor Book  
Published by Tom Doherty Associates, LLC  
175 Fifth Avenue  
New York, NY 10010

[www.tor-forge.com](http://www.tor-forge.com)

Tor<sup>®</sup> is a registered trademark of Tom Doherty Associates, LLC.

ISBN 978-0-7653-2412-2

First Edition: October 2010

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Fred and Joan Saberhagen.  
Friends and inspirations, in more than one way.  
I hope you like Basarab, Fred!*

---









---

“Garsul, are you *watching* this?”

Survey Team Leader Garsul grimaced. Just what, exactly, did Hartyr *think* he was doing? Of all the stupid, unnecessary, infuriating—

The team leader made himself stop and draw a deep breath. He also made himself admit the truth, which was that as effortlessly irritating as Hartyr could be anytime he tried, there was no excuse for allowing his own temper to flare this way. And it wouldn't have been happening if he hadn't been watching . . . and if both his stomachs hadn't been hovering on the edge of acute nausea. Then there were his elevated strokain levels, not to mention the instinctual fight-or-flight reflexes (mostly *flight* in his species' case, in point of fact) quivering down his synapses.

“Yes, Hartyr, I'm watching,” he heard his own voice say over the link. He knew it was his voice even though it seemed preposterously calm given what was going on inside him at the moment. But his next words betrayed the fact that his calm was only voice-deep. “And did you have something on your mind for us to *do* about it?” he asked pointedly.

“No, but surely. . . .”

Hartyr's reply began strongly only to taper off plaintively, and Garsul felt most of his irritation dissipate into something much more like sympathy. His deputy team leader's natural officiousness and pomposity were an undeniable pain in the excretory orifice, and his fanatical devotion to paperwork was rare even among Barthoni. Hartyr was also prone to assume his answer was always the *right* answer to any problem that came along, and he was a pusher—the sort of fellow who would trample his own dam and herd brothers in pursuit of the tastiest grazing. But at this moment the side horror echoing in the depths of his voice was completely understandable. It wasn't going to make him *likable* (nothing was ever likely to accomplish *that* miracle), but Garsul felt an unusually powerful sense of kinship with Hartyr as he heard it.

“I wish there were something we could do to stop it, too,” he said more quietly. “Unfortunately, there isn't. Unless we want to break protocol, at least.”

He heard Hartyr inhale at the other end of the link, but the deputy team leader didn't respond to the last sentence. It did put their options—or, rather, their *lack* of options—into stark relief, Garsul reflected. The Hegemony Council had established its survey protocols long ago, and the Barthoni had played a prominent part in their creation. There was an excellent reason for each and every aspect of the protocols' restrictions . . . including the need to restrain the enormous temptation for a survey team to intervene at a moment like this.

“Make sure Kurgahr and Joraym are recording this,” he said now. He could easily have passed the message himself, but it was kinder to give Hartyr something to do. “This is going to be an important part of our final report.”

“All right,” Hartyr acknowledged.

The easygoing, centaurlike Barthoni were singularly ill-suited to the sort of spit and polish some of the Hegemony's other member species seemed to favor. A few of those other races made bad jokes about it, Garsul knew, but that was all right with him. He and his team didn't need a lot of “sirs” or bowing and scraping to get on with their jobs. They knew who was in charge, just as they knew each

them (likable or not) was a highly trained and invaluable specialist. And every one of them was a volunteer, out here because they were the sort who always wanted to see what was on the other side of the next hill. And perhaps even more importantly, because of their race's species-wide commitment to what the Hegemony Survey Force stood for.

*Unlike some other species I could mention*, he thought sourly, and returned his attention to the visual display.

The planet they were currently surveying—designated KU-197-20—was a pleasant enough place. Its hydrosphere was a little more extensive than most Barthoni would really have preferred, and the local vegetation would have been poorly suited to their dietary requirements. But the temperature range was about right, and however unsustainable the planetary plant life might be, parts of it were tasty enough, and it came in shades of green that were undeniably easy on the eye.

The only *real* drawbacks, if he was going to be honest, were certain aspects of the planetary fauna. Especially the *dominant* planetary fauna.

At the moment, the scene the survey remotes were showing him was less green than it could have been, for a lot of reasons. First, because the area he was watching was well into local autumn, splashing the landscape with vivid color . . . and showing more than a few bare limbs, as well. Secondly, because those remotes were focused on a narrow strip of open ground between two patches of woodland, and that strip had been recently plowed. The even more recent rain had transformed the turned earth into a mud bath deep enough to satisfy even a Liatu, just waiting to happen. Which, he thought, only underscored the insanity of what he was watching. Surely the lunatic local sentients (and he used the term loosely) could have found a better spot for their current madness!

“Garsul?”

The new voice on the link belonged to Joraym, the team's xenanthropologist, and Garsul was darkly amused by his tentative tone. Joraym was the team member who'd been most insistent on the remembering that the local sentients—“humans,” they called themselves—were still mired deep in their planetary childhood. One could scarcely expect them to act like adults, and it would be both unfair and unjust to hold their behavior to the standards of *civilized* races. The team leader couldn't quibble with Joraym's analysis of KU-197-20's dominant species, but the xenanthropologist had been looking down his snout for “Barthoncentric prejudice” at anyone who criticized the “human” ever since they'd arrived in-system. Garsul suspected it was Joraym's way of demonstrating his own enlightened superiority to his teammates.

“Yes, Joraym?” he said aloud.

“Can I deploy some audio remotes?” the xenanthropologist requested.

“Why in Clahdru's name d'you want to do *that*? The *video*'s going to be bad enough!” Garsul made a harsh sound deep in his throat. “I hope the Council's going to put this under scholar's seal when we get it home, but even some of the scholars I know are going to be losing their lunches if this is *half* as bad as I think it's going to be!”

“I know. I know!” Joraym sounded unhappy, but he also sounded determined. “It's not often we get a chance to actually see something like this happen, though,” he continued. “We don't do it, and neither do most of the other races, but from what we've been able to determine about the local societal units, these . . . people think this is a reasonable way to settle political differences. Hopefully, if I can get the pickups close enough to the leaders on each side, I'll be able to establish that and monitor the reactions and decisions as the . . . effort proceeds.”

“And just why is that so important?” Garsul demanded.

“Because some of my colleagues back home are going to reject my analysis without a hell of a lot of supporting data. It's so *alien* to the way we think.”

“Excuse me, Joraym, but could that possibly be because they *are* aliens?” Garsul heard the asperity

in his own voice, but he didn't really care.

~~“Well, of course it is!” the xenanthropologist shot back. “But these creatures are more . . . comfortable with this than anyone else I've ever observed. They remind me a lot of the Shongairi, actually, and we all know how well *that's* working out. I'm only saying I'd like to have as much substantiation as possible when our report goes before the Council. Their attitude just isn't natural, even for omnivores, and I think we're going to have to keep a very close eye on them for a long time to come. Thank Clahdru they're as primitive as they are! At least they've got time to do some maturing before we have to worry about them getting off-planet and infesting the rest of the galaxy!”~~

Garsul's nostrils flared at the mention of the Shongairi. As far as he could tell, these “human” probably weren't any worse than the Shongairi had been at the same stage in their racial evolution. On the other hand, they probably weren't a lot *better* than the Shongairi had been, either. And as Joraym had just pointed out, unlike the Shongairi, they were omnivores, which made their behavior even more bizarre.

Which presented Garsul with an unwelcome command decision, given that never mentioned, never admitted to codicil to Survey's official protocols. The one which had been slipped into place very quietly—by executive order and without any debate before the General Assembly of Races—after the Shongairi were granted Hegemony membership. This was the first time Garsul had actually found himself in the uncomfortable position of applying that codicil, but the classified clause of his mission orders made it clear one of his team's responsibilities was to provide the Council with the means to evaluate any new species' threat potential. Exactly what the Council meant to do with such an evaluation had never been explained to him, and he'd been careful not to ask, but Joraym's last sentence had brought him squarely face-to-face with that classified clause.

The team leader still didn't care much for the thought of recording everything that was about to happen in full color, complete with sound effects, but he was forced to admit—grudgingly—that in light of the orders Joraym knew nothing about, his request might not be totally insane, after all.

“What do you think, Kurgahr?”

“I think Joraym has a point, Garsul,” the team's xenohistorian said. He, too, knew nothing about Garsul's classified orders, so far as the team leader was aware, but his tone was firm. Not remotely anything like *happy*, but firm. “Like you, I hope they'll put all this under scholar's seal when we get home, but this is pretty close to a unique opportunity to get something like this fully recorded. The data really could be invaluable in the long run.”

“All right,” Garsul sighed. “I'll ask Ship Commander Syrahk to see to it.”

• • • • •

Far below the orbiting Barthon starship, a young man with a long, pointed nose and a savagely scarred face stood looking out through the morning mists. His name was Henry, Duke of Lancaster, Duke of Cornwall, Duke of Chester, Duke of Aquitaine, claimant to the throne of France, and, by God's grace, King of England, and he was twenty-nine years old. He was also, although no one could have guessed it from his expression, in trouble.

Deep trouble.

It was obvious to anyone that he had overreached, and the chivalry of France intended to make him pay for it. His siege of Harfleur had succeeded, but it had taken a full month to force the port to surrender, and his own army had been riddled with disease by the time he was finished. Between the combat casualties, and the need to garrison his new capture, his original field force of over twelve thousand men had been whittled down to under nine thousand, and only fifteen hundred of them were armored knights and men-at-arms. The other seven thousand were longbow-armed archers—nimble

deadly at long range (under the proper circumstances, at least), but hopelessly outclassed against an armored foe who could get to sword range. And truth to tell, Harfleur wasn't all that impressive result for an entire campaign. Which was why, two weeks after the port's surrender, Henry had put his army into motion towards Calais, the English stronghold in northern France, where his troops could reequip over the winter.

It might, perhaps, have been wiser to withdraw his army by sea, but Henry had chosen instead to march overland. Some might have called it a young man's hubris, although despite his youth, Henry was a seasoned warrior who'd seen his first battlefield when he was only sixteen years old. Others might have called it arrogance, although not to his face. (Not a man to whom the wise offered insults, Henry of Lancaster.) It might even have been a sound strategic sense of the need to salvage at least something more impressive than Harfleur from the expedition. Something he could show Parliament that winter when it came time to discuss fresh military subsidies. But whatever his reasoning, he decided to reach Calais by marching across his enemy's territory as proof the enemy in question couldn't stop him.

Unfortunately, the French had other ideas, and they'd raised an army to confront the English invasion. Although it hadn't assembled in time to save Harfleur and wasn't much larger than Henry's army when he started cross-country to Calais, there was time for it to grow, and it had proved sufficient to block his progress along the line of the Somme River. In fact, it had succeeded in pushing him south, away from Calais, until he could find a ford which wasn't held against him in force.

By that time, unhappily for the English, the French force had swelled to almost thirty-six thousand men.

Which was why Henry was looking out into the autumn mist this morning. Confronted by four times his own numbers, he'd chosen a defensive position calculated to give the French—who had long and painful memories of what had happened to their fathers and grandfathers at places with names like Crécy and Poitiers—pause. At the moment his army held the southern end of a narrow strip of cleared, muddy earth between two patches of woodland, the forests of Agincourt and Tramecourt. It was plowed, that stretch of dirt, and the autumn had been rainy. In fact, it had rained the night before, and the fresh-turned earth was heavy with water.

The French vastly outnumbered him in both mounted and dismounted knights and men-at-arms whose heavy armor would give them a huge advantage in hand-to-hand combat against the unarmed archers who constituted better than eighty percent of his total force. That was why he'd formed his own limited number of knights and men-at-arms to cover the center of his line and massed archers on either flank. That was a fairly standard English formation, but he'd added the innovation of driving long, heavy, pointed wooden stakes into the ground, sharpened tips angled towards the French. The Turks had employed the same tactic to hold off the French cavalry at the Battle of Nicopolis, nineteen years before, and it had served them well. Perhaps it would serve him equally well.

The dense woodland covered both of his flanks, preventing the French men-at-arms from circling around to turn them, and his total frontage was less than a thousand yards. A frontal attack—the only way the French could get at him—would constrict their forces badly, preventing them from making full use of their numerical advantage, and the mucky terrain would only make bad worse. In fact, the potential battlefield was so unfavorable (from their perspective) that it seemed unlikely they'd attack at all. Besides, time favored them. At the moment, Henry was in a formidable defensive position, true, and the French were only too well aware of their previous failures in attacking prepared English defensive positions, but this time they had him trapped.

Henry was short of food, his weary army had marched two hundred and sixty miles in barely two and a half weeks, and many of his men were suffering from dysentery and other diseases. Charles d'Albret, the Constable of France, commanding the French army, was still between him and Calais.

his enemies outnumbered him hugely; and his strength could only decline while theirs increased. Constable d'Albret could expect additional reinforcements soon—indeed, the Dukes of Brebar, Anjou, and Brittany, each commanding another fifteen hundred to two thousand men, were even now marching to join him—and if the English were foolish enough to move out of their current position, the overwhelming French cavalry would cut them to pieces. They knew they had him and, in the fullness of time, they intended to repay the arrogant English with interest for those earlier battles like Crécy and Poitiers. But for now the Constable, in no hurry to bring on a battle, preferred to negotiate and stall for time and the arrival of yet more troops. After all, the English position was ultimately hopeless.

Which was why Henry had decided to attack.

. . . . .

“Does anyone have any idea why those humans—the ‘English’—are *doing* that?” Garsul asked almost plaintively.

Despite the nausea roiling around inside him, he'd discovered he couldn't look away from the outsized display. There was something so hideously . . . mesmerizing about watching thousands upon thousands of putatively intelligent beings march towards one another bent on organized murder. No Barthon could have done it, he knew that much!

“I'm not certain,” Kurgahr said slowly.

Of all the watching Barthoni, the historian came closest to possessing some knowledge of “military history,” although even his knowledge of the subject was slight. There wasn't any *Barthon* “military history” to study, and while some other member species of the Hegemony were considerably more combative than the Barthoni, very, very few of them were remotely as bloodthirsty—a term no one in the Hegemony had even used until the Shongairi arrived—as humans appeared to be. None of them were represented in Garsul's survey team, either, but Kurgahr at least had their histories available.

“I think the ‘English’ have decided they have nothing to lose,” he went on slowly. “Surely they must realize as well as the ‘French’ that they can't hope to *win*, yet they appear to have chosen to provoke combat, anyway.” He twitched his upper shoulders in a shrug of bafflement. “I think this race may be even crazier than we thought. It looks to me like they'd rather attack, even knowing it means they'll all be killed, than do the sane thing and surrender!”

“That's a classic example of the worst sort of species chauvinism!” Joraym said testily. “You're unfairly applying our Barthoncentric psychological standards to a juvenile, alien race, Kurgahr. As a historian, you of all people should know how inherently fallacious that kind of pseudo-logic is!”

“Oh?” Kurgahr looked at the xenanthropologist scornfully. “And do *you* have a better explanation for why they're doing *that*?”

He gestured towards the display, where the English army had slogged its way northward along the plowed, muddy strip of open ground towards its overwhelmingly powerful foe. The unarmored archers moved much more easily and nimbly than the armored men-at-arms, even with the long, sharpened stakes they carried. On the other hand, that same lack of armor meant that if the other side ever got grips with them. . . .

If the longbowmen were worried about that, they showed no evidence of it—which, in Garsul's opinion, only proved Kurgahr's point about their lack of sanity. They simply waded through the mud, marching steadily towards the French.

The French, on the other hand, seemed taken aback by the English advance. They obviously hadn't expected it, and it took them a while to get themselves organized. By the time they'd taken up their own battle formation, the English had halted about three hundred yards from them, and the archers

were busy hammering their stakes back into the ground.

---

• • • • •

Charles d'Albret was not a happy man.

He and his principal subordinates (inasmuch as fifteenth-century French noblemen could truly conceive of the concept of being subordinate to anyone other than—possibly—God) had prepared a battle plan. None of them had been blind to the defensive advantages of the English position, and they'd had a plenitude of experience with what English bowmen could do. Those Welsh and English bastards had demonstrated only too often that no other archers in Europe could match their lethal range and rate of fire. Worse, theirs was a weapon which let commonly born men, men of no blood, kill even the most aristocratic of foes. That was one reason French armies routinely chopped off the fingers of captured archers' right hands . . . on those rare occasions when they weren't in the mood for more inventive penalties, at least.

This time the Constable had almost as many archers—counting his mercenary Genoese crossbowmen—as Henry, however, and his initial plan had been to deploy them across his entire front to give the English a taste of their own medicine. It would be hard on his own archers, given the superiority of the longbow, but better than their more nobly born betters. Besides, whatever else happened, the unarmored English archers would take serious losses of their own in the exchange, which was the entire point. Once casualties had shaken their formation, his armored cavalry would fall upon them and break the bastards up, at which point the English would be lost.

But after three motionless hours of glaring at one another, some of his mounted troops had dismounted to rest, or to water their horses, or to water themselves. God knew plate armor was a stifling, ovenlike burden, even in October, so it was easy enough to understand their actions. Yet that meant they were out of position, unable to launch the charge which would have devastated Henry's army if they'd managed to catch him on the move, when the English surprised them all with the sudden advance. By the time Charles had been able to reform his troops with some eye toward launching that sort of attack, Henry had stopped and those nasty, pointed stakes were back in place to protect his archers' frontage.

At which point, at a range of three hundred yards, they opened fire.

• • • • •

Every one of the watching Barthoni flinched, almost in unison, as the first flights of arrows streaked into the French formation. The audio pickups Joraym and Kurgahr had requested brought them the screams and cries of wounded humans and their four-footed riding beasts—their “horses”—with hideous clarity. And no Barthoni could have witnessed the sudden eruption of blood from rent and torn bodies without feeling physically ill. Yet, for all their revulsion, they couldn't look away, either. It was like watching some natural catastrophe—an avalanche, perhaps, sliding down to engulf and destroy. But this “natural catastrophe” was the result of willfully perverted intelligence, and somehow that made it even more mesmerizing.

“There!” Kurgahr said suddenly, pointing at the display. “I wondered when they'd do that!” He twitched his head in the Barthoni gesture of resignation. “Insane or not, what's about to happen to those English is going to be ugly.”

The historian had a pronounced gift for understatement, Garsul thought grimly, watching the better part of two thousand mounted knights charge the English line. It occurred to him that it probably would have been better to attack the English before they could settle into their new position, but the

French charge began only after the English had begun pelting them with arrows. Still, it shouldn't matter all that much. It was clear from the display that the knights' armor was more than sufficient to turn the vast majority of the arrows sleetng towards them.

• • • • •

Charles d'Albret swore viciously as his heavy cavalry pelted towards the English line. Now the attack had begun!

Yet even as he swore, the Constable knew it would have been foolish to expect any other response. That heavy rain of arrows was unlikely to kill or even wound many of those heavily armored men, but their horses were quite another matter. No cavalry in the world could stand in place under the aimed fire of seven thousand longbows, each firing as many as twelve shafts a minute. Its only options were to attack or run away to get out of range of those deadly horse-killing bows, and these were French knights. Running away was out of the question.

Not that attacking was any better option, when all was said.

The muddy field slowed the charging horsemen, and the English arrows continued to slash into them. Unlike their riders, only the horses' heads were truly armored, and they began to go down. Each fallen animal formed its own individual obstacle for its companions, but the wounded and panicked horses were almost worse. Many of them were uncontrollable, rearing and bolting with the maddening pain of their injuries, and the charge came apart in confusion, mud, mire, blood, and bodies. Unable to close with the English, the cavalry retreated back the way they'd come, which churned the already muddy earth into a slick, slithery morass dotted with dead and wounded horses like reefs in a sea of muck.

• • • • •

Henry watched the French cavalry recoil and smiled thinly. He knew all about the goading, maddening effect of archery. Even the best armored knight or man-at-arms could be killed or wounded under the wrong circumstances. The scars on his own face were the result of a Welsh rebel's arrow which had hit a sixteen-year-old Prince Henry in the face at the Battle of Shrewsbury. For that matter, Sir Henry Percy, the rebels' commander at Shrewsbury, had also been hit in the face. In his case, however, that experience had proved fatal.

The king saw very few armored bodies lying about in the mud, and most of those he did see appeared to be pinned by dead horses or injured when their mounts went down, rather than felled by arrow fire. But it was unlikely the French would simply stand there and take the English fire, and even if they managed to reorder their formation to get their own archers into position to engage the English crossbowmen could never match the combination of his longbows' range and rate of fire. Which was the point. . . .

• • • • •

Garsul felt the others' shocked disbelief. It seemed ridiculous—impossible!—that such a thundering mass of heavily armored warriors could have been routed by nothing more than arrows propelled by muscle-powered bows.

Still, the French mounted troops were only a portion of their total force, and it was obvious that the mounted men's comrades intended to avenge their repulse.

• • • • •

Charles d'Albret's original battle plan had become a thing of the past. There was no way he could have reorganized his own forces under that plunging arrow fire. Partly because of the arrows themselves, but even more because of the nature of his army. The nobles and knights arrayed on the field had too many defeats to avenge, their numerical advantage was too overwhelming, and the taunting yells and yelps of contempt from the commoner longbowmen which had pursued the retreating cavalry were too much for men of blood to stomach.

And so they advanced.

The first French line, with almost five thousand dismounted knights and men-at-arms, was personally commanded by Constable d'Albret, along with Marshal Boucicault and the Dukes of Orléans and Bourbon, while the Count of Vendôme and Sir Clignet de Brebant commanded the supporting cavalry wings. The second line was commanded by the Dukes of Bar and Alençon and the Count of Nevers, following in the first line's wake, and a third line, under the Counts of Dammartain and Fauconberg, was ready behind the second. All told, ten thousand armored men-at-arms, including the very flower of the French aristocracy, stood poised to crush the mere fifteen hundred English men-at-arms arrayed against them, and once those English men-at-arms had been disposed of, the archers would be easy meat.

Except. . . .

. . . . .

"I don't believe it," Kurgahr said flatly.

"Perhaps that's because we've had technology for so long," Garsul replied, still unable to look away from the display. "How long has it been since a few thousand Barthoni tried to walk across a muddy field together?" He snorted harshly. "Especially a muddy field like *this* one!"

The rain-soaked, plowed earth had been churned into mud by the French cavalry; now the marching feet of thousands of men-at-arms turned the mud into watery muck. What would have been slow going under any circumstances became a nightmare ordeal for men wearing fifty and sixty pounds of unventilated, sunbaked armor. Some of the men in the center of the field found themselves wading through liquid mud that was literally knee-deep, and even as they slogged slowly forward, the drumbeat of English arrows continued to slam into them.

. . . . .

Henry watched through merciless eyes, fingering the scars on his face, as the French struggled forward. Their heavy mail and plate armor might defeat his archers' arrows, but those same arrows forced the advancing French to close their helmet visors and keep their heads down lest the same thing happen to them as had happened to Henry and Percy at Shrewsbury. Visibility, as Henry knew from harsh personal experience, was hugely restricted under those circumstances, and just breathing through a visor's airholes could become a tortuous ordeal, especially for someone fighting his way through knee-deep mud in the hot, sweaty prison of his armor. Exhaustion was going to be a factor, he thought coldly, and so was crowding. As they advanced towards him, the field narrowed. They piled on one another, packing closer and closer together, and the more congested their formation became, the more it slowed.

And not even the best armor could stop *all* arrows. Men *were* going down—dead, wounded, sometimes simply fallen and unable to rise in the mud—and those still on their feet became even more tightly packed, their formation even more confused, as they tried to avoid treading the casualties yet deeper into the mire. Even those still upright were being battered by the incessant impacts

thousands of arrows. They might not penetrate their targets' armor, but arrows driven from longbows with pulls of a hundred and forty and even two hundred pounds hit a man like the blows of a sledgehammer. The painful battering, added to all of the advancing Frenchmen's other miseries, had to have an effect.

• • • • •

Garsul's skin twitched in disbelief. It was no longer shock; he was beyond that by now. No, this was duller than that. Almost numbing.

Despite everything, the lurching French advance had finally reached the English lines. They were so tight packed by the time they did that none of them could even take a full stride forward any longer. By Garsul's estimate, they'd probably been slowed by at least seventy percent simply because of the crowding. Yet, despite that, they'd covered the three hundred agonizing yards between them and the enemies somehow.

• • • • •

The french men-at-arms were exhausted; Henry's were rested and ready. The short English line of men-at-arms was four deep, and their supporting archers continued to fire—now into the French flanks—until they literally ran out of arrows. Yet even so, when the first line crunched into the English position, the outnumbered English were driven back by sheer weight of numbers. Not far, but back. Yet they fought savagely for each yard they were forced to yield, and the French formation was so crowded that many of its individual soldiers could find no room to use their personal weapons. Then the *second* French line drove into the melee, and the congestion got only worse.

At which point the longbowmen, arrows exhausted, swarmed over the French flanks and rear with hatchets, swords, daggers, mauls, pickaxes, and hammers. They were unarmored, true, but that meant they were far more mobile than their heavily armored, mud-mired opponents, and if they lacked the protective visored helms of their foes, they also had unimpaired vision. Worse, they were fresh, while many of the French were so exhausted from their long slog through the mud, the heat, and the lack of oxygen in their closed helmets that they could scarcely even lift their weapons. The situation could have been specifically designed—indeed, it *had* been, by Henry—to negate the heavily armored men-at-arms' advantages in close combat, and when a Frenchman went down, even if he'd only stumbled and fallen, he couldn't get back up under the longbowmen's mercilessly murderous attack.

• • • • •

“Clahdru!” Hartyr muttered the better part of three human hours later. “It doesn't seem . . . How could anyone . . . ?”

His voice trailed off, and Garsul shook himself. “Humans” weren't Barthoni. In fact, despite his own decades-long commitment to Survey and his belief that all sentient species should be treated with dignity and respect, he couldn't really think of them as “people” at all. Joraym was right about that, and it shamed Garsul somewhere deep down inside to admit the xenoanthropologist was correct about his prejudices. But even so, they *were* sentients, and what these “English” and “French” had done to one another was going to leave him with nightmares for the rest of his life.

He didn't envy the Council when it read the confidential report he was going to have to file, either. There were literal heaps of bodies, some taller than Garsul himself, piled in front of the “English” position. Clahdru only knew how many of the French had simply suffocated, drowned in mud, or been crushed to death by the weight of their own dead, and the third and final French line had declined

advance. Sensibly, in Garsul's opinion, given what had already happened to three-quarters of the armored warriors. It seemed incredible, preposterous, that such an outnumbered force could have decisively defeated such an overwhelming foe, yet the English had, and the evidence of their ferocity and bloodthirstiness was horrifying.

"Do you still think they're simply 'juvenile' and 'immature,' Joraym?" he heard Ship Commander Syrahk ask bitinglly.

"I don't know." The xenanthropologist sounded badly shaken. "I mean, they *are* juvenile and immature—they couldn't be any other way at their current level of advancement. But *this*—!" Joraym tossed his head in a Barthon gesture of bafflement. "I've never read anything in the literature about this kind of brutality."

"Let's not get too carried away," Kurgahr put in. The ship commander and xenanthropologist both looked at him disbelievingly, and he snorted. "I'm not trying to make excuses for anything we've just seen, but I've read enough history to know this sort of conduct isn't entirely unheard of among other species. For that matter, there were periods in our own pretechnic era when we did some things we would be horrified to admit to today. Not over simple political disagreements, perhaps, and nothing remotely as bad as *this*, but when herds were faced with starvation conditions and forced to fight for range, they were capable of some pretty horrific actions. And I think if you looked into the histories of some of our omnivorous fellow citizens you might find some pretty bloody episodes there, as well."

"And then there's the Shongairi," Garsul pointed out. A symphony of scowls greeted the remark, and he shrugged his upper shoulders. "I'm just saying these creatures at least have the excuse of their social and technical primitivism. The Shongairi don't."

"Well, true," Joraym said in the tone of someone trying very hard to be detached, "but the Shongairi are bound to be a little . . . twisted, you know. I mean, they *are* . . . carnivores." The xenanthropologist's distaste for the near-obscene term was evident. "I hate to say it, but these 'humans' are *omnivores*. They don't have that excuse, Garsul."

"I know, but—"

"Wait!" Syrahk interrupted. "Something's happening!"

. . . . .

"My Liege!"

Henry looked up at the messenger's cry. The king was on his knees, beside the pallet on which his youngest brother Humphrey, the Duke of Gloucester, lay. Humphrey was barely three weeks past his twenty-fifth birthday, and Henry had personally led his guard to Humphrey's rescue when he was thrown down. They'd gotten him out of the maelstrom and back to the surgeons, but he'd been wounded in the abdomen, and belly wounds were fatal far more often than not.

"What is it?" the king asked harshly now, fatigue and worry over his brother shadowing even his indomitable visage.

"My Liege, I think the French are regrouping!"

Henry rose abruptly, striding through his protective cordon of knights and men-at-arms to see for himself. The French rearguard had never advanced, but now the third line was stirring, and his jaws tightened. There were almost as many men in that line as in his entire army, and his archers' arrows were exhausted. It would take hours to get more of them up from the baggage train, and in the meantime his men were weary and out of formation and their prisoners were still unsecured. Literal thousands of armored Frenchmen lay in the mud—exhausted and fallen, perhaps, but unwounded—and their weapons lay with them.

Henry looked up the length of the field at the remaining French host and his nostrils flared.

“Fetch me Baron de Camoys!” he commanded.

“At once, Your Majesty!”

---

A messenger hurried off and returned minutes later with Sir Thomas de Camoys, who commanded the English left wing throughout the battle. With the death of Edmund of Norwich, the Duke of York, who’d commanded the right wing (and who, like hundreds of Frenchmen, had suffocated under a crushing pile of dead men and horses), Baron de Camoys had become Henry’s senior field commander.

“Your Majesty,” de Camoys said, bowing, and Henry jabbed a gauntleted finger at the stirring French third line.

“Those bastards mean to attack us, Baron,” the king said flatly, his scarred face grim, “and we cannot chance what will happen here”—the same hand indicated the mud-mired Frenchmen heaped and piled before the English line—“when they do.”

• • • • •

This time, Garsul did vomit.

Perhaps it was simply cumulative revulsion. Perhaps it was more than that. Whatever it was, when the English began methodically slaughtering the helpless French men-at-arms and knights, thrusting daggers through visors or using axes and hammers and mattocks to literally hack open their armor carapaces and get at the men within, it was too much.

He turned away from the display at last.

“Kill the audio!” he said harshly. “We don’t need to hear *this!*”

The sound of screams, babbled pleas for mercy, and prayers cut off abruptly, and Garsul shook himself.

*Clahdru*, he thought sickly. *Clahdru, preserve me. Of Your mercy, grant that I never see anything like this again! I thought those “secret orders” of mine undermined everything Survey stands for, but not now. Now I know how wise the Council truly was to issue them!*

“We’re done on this world,” he said, his voice flat. “We’ve got all the physical data we need, and *Clahdru* knows we’ve got more ‘societal’ data than any sane being is ever going to want to look at. Ship Commander,” he looked at Syrahk, “I want us out of orbit and headed home within two days and segments.”



- **[Stable Witch \(The Saddle Club, Book 41\) for free](#)**
- [Well May We Say!': The Speeches That Made Australia pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub](#)
- [First Among Sequels for free](#)
- [click Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government Is Smarter](#)
- [The Once and Future World: Nature As It Was, As It Is, As It Could Be pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub](#)
  
- <http://hasanetmekci.com/ebooks/An-Imaginary-Tale--The-Story-of-----1--Princeton-Science-Library---Revised-Edition-.pdf>
- <http://www.mmastyles.com/books/500-Cocktails--The-Only-Cocktail-Compendium-You-ll-Ever-Need.pdf>
- <http://honareavalmusic.com/?books/First-Among-Sequels.pdf>
- <http://aneventshop.com/ebooks/Democracy-and-Political-Ignorance--Why-Smaller-Government-Is-Smarter.pdf>
- <http://yachtwebsitedemo.com/books/Island-of-Shame--The-Secret-History-of-the-U-S--Military-Base-on-Diego-Garcia.pdf>