



## At the Mizzen

by Jordan Kelly

The sea waited, gunmetal and sullen. The Victory creaked like an old actor before his final line, and Hardy, steady beneath the mizzen, almost smiled. The fleet drifted in perfect order, so neat it must surely have offended the gods. “England expects...” the flags declared. *Does she?* he thought. *How unreasonable.*

The breeze tasted of powder and pride as the first reports cracked across the water. The men had traded jokes about dinners they would never eat; Hardy had let them. Better to laugh now, while there were mouths left to laugh with.

A crack of thunder — the deck leapt; splinters fell like rain. Orders drowned beneath the roar. Men reloaded by reflex, each motion an act of faith. The air burned. Above, a midshipman dropped wordless through the smoke.

Nelson turned, serene amid the ruin. “Hardy, I expect soon to be relieved of all care.” The line might almost be comic, if not for the blood on his sleeve. Hardy nodded, gall rising in his throat, caught between a salute and a prayer.

A French shot tore through the gun crew ahead. One scream, two screams; then none. The planks were slick beneath his boots, so even the ship seemed to bleed. He shouted to cease fire, but the men had not heard him. Flame. Recoil. Concussion. The world collapsed to light.

When the pallid smoke cleared, Nelson lay below, the ship still fighting above him. Hardy wiped powder from his eyes and saw daylight in shafts that gilded dust and blood together. The muskets faded, their final cracks dissolving into the silence of victory. From the shattered stern, the words still fluttered as timber, men, and the last illusion of glory drifted by.

They called it victory.

The indifferent sea called it offering.