

Heirloom Series

Number 5

RING OF SWORDS

by
Eleanor Arnason

with a new introduction by
Ursula K. Le Guin



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For the Yard sisters
& their families

Everything has consequences, inaction as well as action. But as a rule, it's better to do nothing rather than something and a little rather than a lot.

Hwarhath saying

If you must act, act decisively

Hwarhath addendum

Contents

Introduction by Ursula K. Le Guin	i
A Note on History	1
Memo	3
Part I: Nicholas the Liar	7
Part II: The Rules of War	117
Part III: Returning	291
Appendix A: On Time	332
Appendix B: On Rank	334
Appendix C: On Theater	336
Appendix D: On the Social Theories of Tsai Ama Ul	338
Appendix E: Miscellaneous Facts About the People	346
Appendix F: On the Pronunciation of the <i>Hwarhath</i> Main Language	349

Introduction by Ursula K. Le Guin

WHEN *RING OF SWORDS* was first published, I wrote a back-cover blurb for it, as did Gwyneth Jones, Suzy McKee Charnas, and Charles Platt—a variety of people, all knowing their way around in science fiction, each coming at the book from a different angle. The angles converged: we all truly liked and admired the book. I said it was “full of complicated and irresistible people, some of them human.” Platt hoped the book would shake up the field a bit. Charnas pointed out the rare fullness of the cultural constructs and convincing interplay of human and non-human understanding. And Jones hit on what might be the most unusual aspect of the book: that it is not about fighting a war, but about trying not to.

Early in the last century, the war of the worlds was one of many themes and scenarios that speculative writers pursued. But as the genre was relegated (by critics and sometimes by its own choice) to the ghetto, and as the general belligerence of peoples and nations kept increasing throughout the years, sf became more preoccupied with war and conquest. It was humanity vs. hideous alien Others, Earth vs. humans or humanoids native to other planets, vast Space Empire vs. vast Space Empire. Sf began to overlap considerably with another genre, war fiction. The finest inventions of imaginary engineering were weapons. Everybody in space always wore a uniform.

In the 1970s, after Viet Nam, the scenario got a little more complicated. Joe Haldeman’s *The Forever War* is anything but complacent about accepting endless war-making as inevitable. But soon the American government decided, complacently, that if you have the lives and resources to waste, it’s politico-economically useful to get

into a war that goes on forever. Since then, most of the wars in sf are mere reflections of reality decorated with rayguns.

Eleanor Arnason published *Ring of Swords* in 1993. As if accepting, even embracing, the inevitability of war, she shows us a species, the *Hwarhath*, as conflict-obsessed as ours or more so—a society in which every man, without exception, must be and is a soldier all his life. The so-called division of labor, the assignment of social function by gender, remains, is quite absolute: women bring up the kids and keep the household going, men go out and fight. But *Hwarhath* women differ a bit from human women in not being rendered vulnerable by gender dimorphism; they're as strong as the men and often bigger. They are an equal power. No *Hwarhath* is considered as property. No one is penned into kitchen, nursery, sweatshop, whorehouse, or harem. And the reduction of women to sex objects for men to rape is far less common, because heterosexuality isn't the social norm. It's the abnorm—disgusting, a forbidden perversity, a crime. Insemination is entirely artificial, the result of a bargain between a woman and a man.

Having recently brought their own competitive, feud-ridden society into a fragile balance of peace, the *Hwarhath* have been facing an unexpected problem: the lack of enemies. Given the apparently innate male propensity for finding pretexts to fight, and the fact that their men were all trained as warriors, the women running things at home make sure the men stay out in space protecting the home planet. The drawback is that there seems to be nobody to protect it from. So, when in the vastness of space they finally stumble into another intelligent species, they rejoice. Enemies! At last!

This scenario is inherently funny, unavoidably satirical, and potentially tragic—a solid foundation for a story. Arnason doesn't play it for laughs or reduce it to satire, and lets tragedy remain potential. *Ring of Swords* is an intellectually fascinating science-fiction story told in the novel tradition, peopled by ordinary people content with their ordinary life, appalled to find themselves swept up into a social crisis, forced into acts and choices of historical consequence. Its an-

cestry includes not only *The War of the Worlds* but also *A Tale of Two Cities* and *War and Peace*.

Interwoven with the dominant theme is a contemplation of the human/animal relationship. People in cultures that hold the human above and apart from the rest of creation call their enemies animals—beasts, brutes, vermin, dogs, etc.—thus making them eradicable without pangs of conscience. In such a mindset, the enemy and the animal get confused, and fused.

Anna, the main protagonist of *Ring of Swords*, is a marine exobiologist studying a species whose intercommunications, via changing colors and patterns of light, may be a language as we define language, or just a signal code like a cat's purr. Anna wants to read it as language (and it's so beautiful as described in the story that most readers will share her wish). She wants to be able to understand the alien not only as a fellow creature, but as a fellow intelligence. This mindset is more or less the opposite of the animal/enemy equation. She's already equipped to meet an undoubtedly intelligent alien with more expectation than fear.

Not all the *Hwarhath* are of that mind. Their soldiers would very much like to class our species as threateningly belligerent sub-humans—the eradicable enemy they long for.

Here is science fiction doing what only it can do: setting up a non-existent situation that is consequent, thought-through, mind-stretching, vividly and exactly imagined, and peopled by characters the reader comes to care about—vulnerable, imperfect, unpredictable.

And, in one case, unreliable. The central male character, Nicholas, is the only human captive the *Hwarhath* have yet taken, and hence invaluable to them as a source of information. The *Hwarhath* soldiers who captured him consider their own species as defining the human, and that the human being is apart from and above all creatures. So they see him—can see him, want to see him—as sub-human, an animal. They routinely torture him for information. Like everyone under torture he confesses whatever they want hear.

The *Hwarhath* women, when he is brought to the home planet, are less certain how to judge him, much slower to come to any decision about him.

And one *Hwarhath* man falls in love with him, species be damned.

As this man is a general of considerable clout, Nicholas is released and brought to live with the general as his lover. He has been (more or less) accepted as such for years, though never trusted. Now, sent as a translator to the cautious interspecies negotiations that are going on concerning options of peace or war, he meets no trust among his own people. All they can see in him is a turncoat, a traitor to his people and his species, a sex toy for a semi-human. And how is he to see himself in any other light?

What that other light might be is perhaps the question at the heart of the story. Inevitably its source is in love, but what kind of love, sexual, intellectual, spiritual? And how far can love of any kind reach through deep, unreconcilable difference?

Anna loves her beautiful glimmering sea-aliens, but she understands almost nothing about them and is fully aware of it. Understanding between the two interspecies lovers is immensely complicated by cultural difference, by shame, and by the fact that neither Nicholas nor the general understands very much about himself. And over them all looms the imminent shadow of a ruinous war.

Chekhov famously advised dramatists that if you have a gun in your first act, it's got to be fired before the curtain falls. Similarly, the usual assumption is that if you threaten a war early in a novel, you'd better hurry up and get the bombs bursting in air. And they usually do. Novels that portray war as totally destructive and futile still focus on it—war is what they're about, war is central to them, just as it was central to the old epics that glorified heroes and battles.

But a war not fought? What kind of subject is that? What kind of drama, tension, gut-churning suspense, etc. could it possibly generate?

In 1935, a few years before Europe, Asia, and America began the immense orgy of destruction that was World War II, Jean Giraudoux wrote a play, a very topical play, *The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*.

Although it's extremely funny, Wikipedia properly identifies it as a tragedy. We find the Greek armies encamped on the shore under the walls of Troy. All the heroes are there, Hector and Achilles, Ajax and Odysseus, all with swords half drawn. As they discuss the possibility of a last-moment peaceful solution, quarrel, reason, get angry, sneer, squabble, desperately try reasoning again, the tension builds almost unendurably. Yet with that particular war, we know what has to happen. It makes no difference to the dramatic tension of the play.

Arnason's story also begins in meeting rooms not on the battlefield, during an uneasy truce. Human and *Hwarhath* confront one another without violence—for the moment. The imminent possibility of violence, the tug and strain of ambition, belligerence, and fear, fill the story with tension, and dramatic urgency. We don't know whether the war is going to take place or not, but we come to care very much, because we come to care for the people who will be destroyed by it. It's a beautiful subject for a novel, and *Ring of Swords* is a beautiful novel.

A Note on History

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, a group of remarkable thinkers changed the basis of physics. By 2015 it was evident that an FTL drive was possible, by 2030 the drive was built. Humanity, which had believed itself trapped on Earth and doomed to stew in the poisons it had created went suddenly out into the galaxy.

Or rather, some of humanity went. Most people (there were nine billion of them by 2070) stayed on the home planet and tried to deal with the terrible consequences of environmental collapse: the greenhouse effect, ozone depletion, acid rain, and the seemingly endless series of plagues that swept the planet, all caused to one degree or another by pollution.

Explorers found a multitude of planets, many habitable, though none inhabited by intelligent life. The problem was: the life already there was not compatible with life on Earth. In some cases the native life was toxic; in others it was simply not nourishing. Almost always, in these alien environments, life from Earth did not thrive. There were many voyages of exploration and many research stations, but only a few planetary colonies.

In spite of this, the ships continued to go out, traveling distances that were close to incomprehensible, often in competition. (Nations did not go out of existence until the end of the century.) They searched for two things: planets that were habitable for humans and other intelligent life.

MEMO

RE: Negotiations Coming-Forward
FROM: Sanders Nicholas, information-holder attached to the
staff of First-Defender Ettin Gwarha
TO: First-Defender Ettin Gwarha
FOR HIS EYES ONLY

The problem, as I see it, is an information gap. The People know far more about their enemy than the enemy knows about them. This is due mostly to the difference in the two cultures, but also to pure dumb luck.

For a long time, this was an advantage, and most of the Men-Who-Are-in-Front think it still is.

I disagree.

The enemy is continuing to gather information. At some point, they are going to know enough to mount an attack on the Weaving. (That point is near. All the models run in the past year have looked bad.) Whether they will decide to attack is uncertain, and how much damage they would do is equally unclear.

What does seem clear to me is this: the enemy does not know enough to act intelligently.

There are worse things than an ignorant enemy. (A stupid enemy. An enemy who's smart and crazy.) But ignorance is bad enough to frighten me.

The other side cannot judge consequences. They simply do not know what kind of behavior is unacceptable or disastrous. They could destroy us all by accident.

It seems to me imperative that the Weaving begin to look for ways to share information. Not, obviously, military information. We have discussed this over and over. I refer you to your memory and to previous memos.

I realize that most of the other frontmen do not agree. They think no change is necessary. The People can continue as they always have. This war—with a strange new enemy—can be fought like all previous wars, and there is no special danger in fighting a people who do not know what they're doing.

I realize as well that prudence and honor require that you do nothing without the agreement of the other frontmen.

This makes a trap that is large enough to hold all of us: me, you, the Frontmen-in-a-Bundle, the Weaving, and the People. I can see no way out. Maybe you should think about the situation. Keep in mind the computer models. They do not look good.

PART I

NICHOLAS THE LIAR



☞ THE PLANET WHERE Anna was stationed was in Earth position: 148 million kays out from an ordinary G2 star not visible from Earth. Farther in was a double planet, one of those anomalies just common enough to drive theoreticians crazy. Both worlds had atmospheres, thick and poisonous and brilliantly white from a distance. On Anna's planet they were the morning/evening star, that waxed and waned as the pair rotated around one another. At their point of farthest separation the star became two stars, shining side by side in the blue-grey sky of twilight or dawn.

Farther out — beyond her planet — were four gas giants, all visible in the night sky, though none was as bright as the Twins. No one had bothered to name the giants. There was nothing special about them.

That was it, except for the usual bits of space debris: comets and planetoids, moons and rings, and the dark companion that traveled around the G2 sun a good long distance out. It was a singularity, and it made the system a transfer point.

The planet she was on was habitable by humans. The atmosphere was remarkably like the old preindustrial atmosphere of Earth. The ocean was H₂O. There were two continents. One lay in the southern hemisphere and was shaped, very roughly, like an hourglass; the other, far bigger, stretched from the equator to the north pole and looked something like a boomerang.

Her station was in the middle of the hourglass, on the east coast of the narrow waist. Until recently, it had been the only location on the planet with for certain intelligent life.

Eleanor Arnason

Now there was another base on the planet: on the south coast of the boomerang, right at the bend. It had been established by the aliens who called themselves *hwarhath*. Humans called them “the enemy”; and her station — her nice quiet biological survey station — was full of fucking diplomats.

II

↳ DARK CLOUDS BLEW in off the ocean. There were whitecaps on the bay. Anna fastened her jacket as she came out of the main building, then started toward the beach. The local form of ground cover—it was something like yellow moss—had sent up spore stalks in the past few days. They were tall and feathery and bent in the wind.

Early autumn. The ocean currents would be starting to change, bringing her particular area of study up from the cold waters around the pole. In bays like this one they would gather, signaling each other with elaborate displays of light, then exchange genetic material (carefully, carefully, the mating tendrils stretching out from among the many stinging tendrils), and then produce young. After that, if they were in the mood, a few would hang around and chat with the humans.

She climbed on the dock, which extended, long and jointed, into the bay.

This was her favorite part of the day. Moving over the narrow segments was a kind of micro-journey. As on all journeys, she felt (for a time) outside her life. She was not the person who had left the research station, nor the person who would arrive at the research boat; she could consider past and future with an equal mind.

Mostly she noticed the present. The dock rose and fell, responding to her weight and the motion of the water. The wind blew cold and fresh.

On Earth, a day like this would be full of gulls and the noise they made; but this planet had no birds, and the native bugs had been driven into hiding by the weather. She listened, hearing only

water and wind and the creaking metal sound that the dock segments made as they rubbed against each other.

The boat was at the extreme end of the dock. Beyond it, anchored in the middle of the bay, was a communication float: ten meters long and white, called (inevitably) Moby Dick.

She climbed on board and ducked into the cabin. Yoshi was there, drinking tea and looking at the screens. He glanced at her. “Red-red-blue came in last night, flagella beating and making good time.”

“Three weeks early,” she said.

Yoshi nodded.

“The usual routine?”

He nodded again, which meant the alien had flashed a series of lights that meant “greetings — welcome — no aggression.”

“I replied. The lights on Moby all work fine. Red circled a couple of times, then made the signal for recognition and moved away.” He tapped a screen with a glowing dot. “That’s Red. Close to the entrance and not moving. Waiting for someone who is more sexually interesting than Moby.”

After five years, the aliens — her aliens — knew Moby and knew Moby did not exchange genetic material. Until they had finished mating, they would have no interest in the float.

She looked out the window at the grey-green bay. There were drops of water on the plexy: spray or the start of rain. The *hwar* sub-base was out there, on an offshore island that would have been just barely visible on a clear day, close enough so the *hwarhath* could commute to the diplomatic compound, but far enough out so they could be reasonably sure of privacy.

“They’ll be flying in and out daily,” she said. “Right over the bay. I hope that isn’t going to be a problem.”

“I don’t think Red and company are going to have anything on their minds except sex and fear, if they have minds.” He got up and closed his thermos. “Have fun, Anna.”

She settled in for eight hours, her thermos open, coffee steaming in a cup. As soon as Yoshi was gone, she turned the audio system up.

Yoshi found the noises produced by the animals in the bay faintly irritating. But she liked them: the moans and whistles of the various kinds of fish, and the bursts of clicking that came (they were almost certain) from creatures sort of like trilobites that lived in the muck on the bottom.

Ah! Today it was the whistle fish. She drank her coffee and listened, checking the screens from time to time.

At ten hundred hours, she heard the sound of an engine, got up and went on deck. There it was—the *hwarhath* plane—coming out of the east. A fanwing, she saw when it passed over. Perfectly ordinary-looking, a little stubby maybe, blunt and inelegant like the alien ships. Though maybe she was reading in; we see what we expect to see. Rain fell steadily. A lousy day for the first meeting between humanity and the only other known starfaring species.

She went inside and turned on her communication unit. There, as promised, was the landing field, a wide strip of concrete with rain pounding down on it. A dozen figures stood on the field amid pools of water: the human diplomats. They were all civilians, dressed in long dark coats and holding umbrellas, and all men. The aliens had insisted. They would not negotiate with women, which did not speak well of their openness of mind. But maybe there was an explanation other than bigotry; it was always a good idea to suspend judgment when dealing with a really foreign culture.

The human military people were off-camera, and everyone else was in the station. The field was off-limits until the official welcome was over and the aliens were all safely inside the diplomatic compound. But as a gesture of courtesy, a camera had been set up and hooked into the station comm system. Every human on the planet could watch the moment when history was made. She poured fresh coffee into her cup.

The plane landed. Water rose in clouds. The long coats flapped, and the umbrellas tried to escape, rising like coal black kites. One turned inside out. Anna laughed. Ridiculous!

The plane door opened. She paused, her cup halfway to her mouth. A stairway unfolded, and people came out. They were broad and solid-looking, humanoid, as grey as the sky and the mist. No coats and no umbrellas. Instead, the aliens wore close-fitting clothing the same color as their fur.

They moved into the rain as easily—as casually—as if the weather did not matter, as if the rain did not exist. The first ones out carried rifles, a strap over one shoulder, one arm resting on the barrel, keeping the muzzle pointed down. They looked relaxed, but they moved (she noticed now) precisely, though not with a military precision. Like athletes or actors.

Very nice, she thought. Very impressive. The aliens had a sense of drama.

They spread out to either side, leaving a passage between them. Now the important people came out: more stocky grey bodies and, among them, one body that was much taller and thinner, with shoulders hunched against the rain.

For a moment—who was operating it? —the camera zoomed in. She saw a face without fur, long and narrow, hair dripping and eyes half-closed. A human.

At that point the transmission ended.

She started punching buttons, trying first to get the picture back and then to reach someone at the station. No use. Her unit was still on. She could hear it: a faint low hum. But nothing came out of it, except the hum. The entire system must be down.

She went out on deck. The diplomatic compound was on top of the hill that rose in back of the research station. It was a cluster of prefab domes, barely visible through the rain. The landing field was beyond the compound, entirely hidden.

She could see the research station, and it looked the way it always did: low buildings set in a landscape of yellow moss. Lights shone from the windows. A person came out a door and hurried across an open space, then ducked in through another doorway. Not running, she told herself, merely hurrying because of the rain.

She went back in and tried the CU again. Still nothing.

What was going on?

She tried to keep her mind focused on the problem at hand, but it kept going back to the landing field and the man coming down the stairway, out of the alien plane.

Humanity had encountered the *hwarhath*—*when?* Forty years ago? In all that time, no one had ever changed sides, at least as far as she knew.

They were the other, the unknowable, the people in ugly stubby faster-than-light vessels that came into our space and ran if our ships found them or fought and were destroyed. After forty years of skirmishing and spying, humanity knew what about them? One of their languages. Something about their military capability. We had mapped the edges of their space, but never found a settled planet, only ships and more ships and a few deep-space stations. (She had seen a holo of one: a huge cylinder turning in the light of a dull red sun.)

Everything was armed. As far as humans could tell, the aliens had no civilian society. There had never been a human culture— not Sparta, not Prussia, not America—so entirely devoted to war.

So what was this man—this perfectly ordinary-looking human, pale face and lank sandy hair—doing among the aliens? Was he a prisoner? Why had they brought a prisoner along with their negotiating team?

She went back out on the deck. Nothing had changed. Maybe she ought to go over and ask what was going on. But if there was trouble, she would rather stay out of it; and if there was trouble, wouldn't she see a lot of people running and the flash of gunlight?

For the next hour or so, she paced back and forth between the cabin and the deck. Nothing happened, except that the whistle-fish moved into deeper water and she could no longer hear them. Shit. Shit. If she had wanted to be in a war, she would have joined the military and gotten a free education.

Finally, at thirteen hundred hours, the comm screen came back on; she saw Mohammed's face, dark and thin.

“What happened?” she asked.

“We had a temporary interruption of power,” he said carefully. “It’s not likely to happen again. I have been assured of that.”

Mohammed was their expert on the comm system. He wouldn’t go to anyone else about a technical problem; so the problem hadn’t been technical. Someone had pulled the plug.

“What about the aliens?”

“They went to the diplomatic compound, as planned.”

She opened her mouth, and he raised a hand. “I know nothing else, Anna.”

She turned off the CU and settled down to watch her other screens.

At fourteen hundred, one of Red’s buddies came into the bay. She picked it up on the sonar, swimming rapidly through the narrow entrance channel and then stopping when it noticed Red. The aliens did not use lights during the day. Instead, they communicated with chemicals excreted into the water. None of her instruments could pick up the chemicals at this distance. She could only watch the two dots on her screen. They remained motionless for a long time.

Finally the new alien moved on. It did not approach Moby Dick, though there was no way it could have missed the float, and Moby bore a superficial resemblance to an alien. Good enough to fool Red, at least at first. But this fellow showed no interest at all, which seemed to indicate that it had gotten information from Red.

She imagined a conversation.

Is anyone else here?

Just that funny creature that can talk like us, but never tries to eat anyone or to screw.

Oh. Well. There’s no point in even bothering to say hello.

The alien stopped midway down the bay. At fifteen hundred Maria arrived.

“You’re late.”

“I got hung up at the station. It’s going to drive you crazy, Anna. One hundred field-workers, all speculating at once, and none of them with enough information to say anything that makes sense.”

“Great. Red has company. It just arrived, and it didn’t try to check out Moby. If they are not intelligent, they’re giving a very good imitation.”

Maria shook her head. “What we have here, Anna, is a bunch of very big jellyfish with funny nervous systems. An intelligent species is like those people up the hill.”

“Maybe,” said Anna.

She walked back to the station slowly. The rain had turned to mist, and the evening animals were emerging from their holes. Most were one species: long and segmented and many-legged. Their backs shone in the light of streetlamps. (Was that the right name for things that stood tens of light-years from the nearest street?)

Hunters, she knew, looking for the worms that would be driven to the surface by moisture, and not in any way intelligent, though splendidly suited for what they did. Her aliens were different. They had brains, as many as ten in a single animal, all interconnected; though Red and its buddies out in the bay had maybe five brains at most. They were half-grown. The big fellows, with tendrils a hundred meters long, never mated or came in from the deep ocean.

Maria was right about the station. The dining hall was full of people, and the noise level was far higher than usual. She got food and went looking for Mohammed. He was at a table in a corner, people sitting all around him, looking intent. Obviously they wanted to know what had happened to the communication system.

Anna stopped, her tray in her hands, and Mohammed glanced up. “I did not want to talk over the comm system, Anna. There was a military fellow with me during the broadcast of the landing. When he saw what was coming out of the plane, he turned off my power, and he wouldn’t turn it back on for over an hour. Crypto-fascist! I was angry, I can tell you.”

“Does anyone know what happened to the man?” asked someone at the table.

“He must be in the diplomatic compound, mustn’t he? He isn’t in the station, and they could not have left the poor fellow out in the rain and dark.”

Anna grinned. It was typical of Mohammed. He’d use a word like “fascist” as if he knew what it meant, and at the same time he believed that people were civilized. There is a right way to behave; you cannot leave a member of a diplomatic mission out in the rain.

Someone else said, “They aren’t going to be able to get away with this, are they?”

She didn’t know who “they” were—the *hwar*? The human military? And she wasn’t interested in listening to speculation. She nodded to Mohammed and turned away, looking for a table with room.

Later, on her way from one building to another, she heard the low roar of the alien plane and looked up. There were its lights—white and amber—moving above her, heading out to sea.