

NO. 4 CARGO

“Goddamnit!”

The ladder bounced off the metal and the vibrations branched down towards their lifeboat like the claws of a vindictive old man. It pushed them away and slithered into the abyss like a knife over jelly. Instinctively, they all reached for it at once, nearly tipping the boat over. Some of them held their breath when they realized it had been caught.

That meant the mission was still on.

By pulling it back up one step at a time, like the delicate art of stitching a needle into a wound, they repositioned and tried to attach it to the side of the ship with as much silence as the ambiguity of the situation allowed.

The amount of noise permitted depended solely on the danger lurking inside the vessel, and the distress signal had made it perfectly clear to stay silent.

Clear and shining skies perched above. The water’s surface was so still it seemed to resemble the feeling of a sleepy limb, its surface twinkling with needles and pins. Towering above them they could hear the ships flags rustling. The small waves that crashed against their little boat and swayed it like a baby’s cradle splashed ever so slightly against the side of the ship.

“So...who goes first?”

A turbulent stillness passed between the self-proclaimed rescue crew. They were all thinking the same thing, but like in all matters of morality, nobody wanted to say it. *The sooner they get this over with, the sooner they can leave.* It was an issue of honour, yes, embedded into fine print of the contract they signed when admitted into the nautical world. But in the end it all came down to survival, not principals.

If there is trouble, help others. If there is danger, help yourselves.

“Capt’n?”

A sailor looked at his superior with the futile hope that they might be ordered to turn back. Holding onto the side of the boat his uniform, white and crisp, made him look like a child ready for a family picnic. “Sir?”

The Captain uncrossed his arms and placed the pistol into his belt. He had a schedule to keep, and a personal reputation to uphold. He shook the ladder to make sure it was sturdy, and then began to climb. Slowly, one step at a time, on the way to help others but always perfectly aware that he must be ready to help himself. He stopped just at the top, peeking

over the ledge like a scolded child. Below, the sailors did not exchange words. Their minds were already too full of confounding theories.

They had all been present in the operations room when the first of a series of calls had come in. The vessel had been displayed on the radar for miles away, but everyone assumed it was just a fishing ship. White noise would occasionally blurt out, nonetheless it was common for radio signals to interfere with each other every now and then. But when they closed in, the signals became...clearer.

Morse code.

*S.O.S. * * * we float. S.O * * * all officers including the Captain * * * in the chartroom* * * We float * * * probably whole crew * * * on the bridge * * *. We float. * * * S.O.S.*

This was immediately followed by a sequence of undecipherable dots and dashes, randomly put together in a moment of recognizable despair. No coherent structure, no comprehensible code. But by now it was obvious that the message didn't have to be familiar to be understood.

And then suddenly, as if by a window of ephemeral clarity, two words:

“I die.”

The Captain gestured for the others to follow, and then turned around to climb over the railing. His boots stepped on the deck with the heaviness of a conquistador, but his confidence was far from it. The floors were too clean, the surrounding too well organised. The *Emerald* was not a warship, yet he felt under attack. Something was terribly off. This was too much stillness for a vessel this big.

One by one the crew climbed up. They signalled to their own *Golden Star* and then together walked towards the helm.

“What if it's an ambush? Pirates?”

“We would have seen it on the radar. In any case a kidnapping situation. But there are no marks on the side of the ship, and we circled it twice. No evidence of struggle or any sort of invasion. In fact, this whole deck looks like it hasn't seen human life in days...”

The sailor wiped his brow. “No seagulls, neither...God, how I wish I saw a seagull!”

“No, son, not here.”

The sailor grinned. “Wh—”

“Seagulls eat carrion.”

The sailor turned to the others as their Captain walked on, and they all responded with expressions of doubt.

Unfamiliarity is scary because it is subjective. Your mind and your mind alone knows what you fear most, and it isn't afraid to show you. The scary moment is not when you see the monster. You might jump and fear and your heart might race, but the physical response will pass. The moments before, now *that* is the real demon, because you conjure up the cruellest memories to make up for those yet to be had.

Nobody else was grinning now.

"You three, stay here and take watch. Feedback every five minutes to the *Star*. Two to the stern, explore the cargos. Two to the bow, into the engine rooms. Us three, to the bridge. If anything happens, abandon operation. Get up here and get out. In other words, every man for himself. Don't try to be heroes. We don't get paid to save lives, we get paid to transport merchandise. What we're doing here is cashing a blank check from the kind banks of our heart. Now somebody go write that in a god darn poetry book and it will sell more than what we earn. Off we go, boys."

The first few steps were determined, but then everybody quickly remembered they weren't supposed to be eager.

The sailor looked up towards the sky. "If we get to the engines and see nobody, what then?"

"I don't know," His colleague hissed. He was an older man who thought it highly effective to hide a receding hairline with a flat cap, despite the blistering conditions of the engine rooms. The sailor often wondered if this was the cause for his short temper. "I don't like this. The Captain acts like he's got it under control, like it's a situation of everyday occurrence, but you can tell he's not fooling anybody, especially not himself. Splitting us up like a gang of detectives, huh, what sort of movie does he think we're in?"

"If something goes wrong somebody else can look for help. I think he has a plan."

"Oh really? Let's board an unfamiliar ship and go find the engine room, not questioning where her crew is or what could have happened to them. Suppose we get there. And nothing is wrong. Suppose there is nobody on this ship. Where did the S.O.S come from, then? The other vessels heard it, too. But we are the closest to her and all other ships know this. If we find nothing, they'll point fingers. The Captain has a plan, all right, yes, but no concept of the real problem."

The man rearranged his hat and wiped his hands on his trousers before turning the wheel of the first door. It was not locked, it was not rusty, and inside the lights were still on. A cloud of a thick steam-like gas embraced them. The smell was musky and acrid, like wet

shoes left in the basement. They covered their mouths and noses with their shirts and began to head down the steep ladders into the heart of the ship.

Neither of them spoke. The lower they went, the stronger the smell, the quieter they became. The fluorescents appeared to occasionally radiate onto the walls a pale green light that seemed to make the rooms smaller. Not so far ahead, they could hear the machinery rumbling and digesting.

They opened another room and the heat of the machines pushed them back. They were indeed strangers, and it was clear they were not welcome.

“Hello? This is the crew from the *Golden Star*; we’ve come in response of a distress signal emanated from this vessel!” the man cupped his hands to his mouth. “Is anybody there? I repeat, we are crew of the *Golden Star*, is anybody there?”

They began to move about the premises, occasionally calling out. As they examined the machinery they became aware that everything seemed to be running smoothly. The sailor skimmed through the safety guidelines posted beside one of the boilers. He glided his hands past the metal, mesmerized with the equipment, though it was not something he hadn’t seen before. Every pipe, every screw, was like a piece of fantastic, unprecedented art. His skin felt like an overstretched piece of cling film, his lungs like oversized raisins. And yet, his hands trembled. “They seem to have been running for a while, slightly over heated but not abnormal. *Somebody* must be controlling them,” he noted.

Upon hearing this, the old man halted his steps. For a while, silence. He turned around in a moment of sudden realization. A drop of sweat fell from his brow and coiled around his eye. It lingered there long enough to allow further drops to assemble, and then together they glided down his cheek like long, melting crystals.

“Engine rooms are never left unattended,” he murmured. “Whoever controlled them must have been here not so long ago.”

The sailor moved his hand away from the machines. “...or... is still here.”

The sounds of the engines roared like they had before, but in those brief seconds the men’s breaths muted any noise. Suddenly and without exchanging words they turned around and ran upstairs. They didn’t bother closing the doors behind them. The way up was much more difficult and it seemed like new doors appeared where they weren’t before. In a moment of panic, the easiest escape becomes a labyrinth. This was no different. After it seemed like they had crossed the whole ship, they finally reached the comfort of natural light only to be greeted by the sounds gun shots emerging from the far end of the ship.

The Captain stood on the side opposite the *Star*, firing into the sky. Her crew retaliated with signals.

“Capt’n!”

The Captain’s eyes were red and disoriented, but his mind was still intact. He didn’t bother explaining, but instead pointed to one of the lower cabins that led into the bridge. The sailor, being younger and quicker, reached the cabin first. The rest of the *Star*’s crew were already running back to the life boat.

“Jesus have mercy on their souls! Spare yourself the sight, kid!” A crew member ran out of the cabin covering his mouth with his hand. The sailor looked back but his feet moved forward. Ever so cautiously, like when he entered his sleeping nephew’s room, he tiptoed up the stairs. As he was about to open the door to the chartroom he heard another set of screams and glanced out the window. Beyond the chaos that ensued below, the blue plains served as just another reminder of their near insignificance in this speck of the ocean. If they needed help, help would not come right away.

He nudged the door just enough to peek through.

In front of him were not a couple, or a quartet, or even half a dozen, but a whole crew of them, littering the floors, their faces looking up, their mouths gaping open. Eyes that seemed to see, lips that seemed to scream. The radio controllers were turned off, their buttons scattered across the room like marbles and the cables ripped apart like violin strings. The smell was putrid but it was not one of flesh. It was the smell of a dentist’s office after a particularly long day; it was the odour of a million bottles of acetone slashed open at once.

Yet the corpses themselves were not harmed. Their skin was fresh and not a laceration across their bodies. No blood, no gore, just the peaceful preservation of life. But there was one of them unlike the others. The sailor, defrauded by all those crime movies he had seen, walked over close enough to observe that the one particular body belonged to a man not much older than himself.. His eyes were blue and glazed, staring at nothing and yet, something. The clothes, once white but now stained with grease, covered his body like blankets of an abandoned house. His hands looked rough and coarse from work, and one finger, pointing.

Suddenly the room behind the sailor became very warm, unlike the rest of the ship. He stood up and felt a small drop of sweat run down the back of his neck like an icy finger.

Examining those in front of him, it was clear the corpses were not staring at random spots, but rather, a very specific place in the room.

Your mind knows what you fear most.

The heat was stronger now, an aggressive draft of a tenacious fire. Still staring ahead, he stretched his hand backwards. The air was indeed hotter behind him. He gulped, closed his eyes, and the sailor began to turn, slowly, ever so slowly, gently, deliberately unhurried as if a sudden spin might scare It away.

Then, he stopped.

There was nothing there.

But that meant he had his back towards *Them*. He looked around the room, his eyes always returning to the same spot. He took a deep breath and heard the faraway sound of a loud flock of seagulls.