

Hero

How did it come to this?

Eyes closed against the ocean spray, James pulled at the rope with all his might. Slowly, the great net rose out of the water.

"Faster, Marco!", he yelled to his crewmate on the other end. The poor guy probably weighed less than the rope. Behind them, the crane whined and wailed.

Of all the days for that thing to break down... Any respectable captain would have turned back then and there, but not Varela. He pushed on.

James had no complaints. Varela's reputation to never shy away from a big catch was the reason James had sought the old captain out. If it meant braving a storm that kept even the most hardened sailors in port for the night, so be it. If a night at sea brought him one night closer to home, James was all for it -- but when the rain bit at his neck and every wave threatened to throw him over the rail, his resolve, like the ship itself, was reeling.

When James and Marco finally dragged the net back on deck, James had to hand it to the old captain. They had fish up to their ankles. *That's half my ticket home, just tonight*, James thought, allowing himself a small smile. Marco shared the excitement.

"You were right, captain! The worse the weather, the better the fish!" Kissing the cross around his neck, the thin Chilean raised his hands to the sky.

So now God had something to do with it, James thought. *Didn't see you kiss that cross when we had to run out to help the crane along. But that was probably just God testing us.* Marco always had an answer, no matter what. When he got robbed of everything he had in San Vicente, he said "God gives, and He takes", and that was it. More than a month's pay, and he just let it go.

James had thought he was out of his mind. In some ways, Marco was a strange man, but in all the time they had worked together, James had never seen the guy have a bad day.

At Marco's call, Captain Varela stuck his head out from the cabin. Seeing the sprawl of fish covering the deck, he returned the shout.

"Great job, boys! I told you, a storm is a fisherman's dream!"

Guess I'm not a fisherman yet. Varela liked to throw around these weird expressions he might as well have come up with on the spot, but at least he said them with true conviction. James would take that over the lies and tired mantras of his commanding officers any day.

"James! The computer wants something", Varela said. *"I think it's the radio."*

Ever since James had told Varela about his experience in the military, he had been the one to operate "the computer", as Varela called it. The old captain didn't care much for technology and was probably glad to just have someone else take care of it.

If James had come to Varela for his fearless reputation, he had stayed for his discretion. When James said he could operate the computer, he was hired and the matter considered done. Varela never once asked any questions about James' time in the military; it didn't matter, as long as the fish kept coming.

Inside the cabin, James pulled his hood back and sat down by the computer. He put on the headphones and read through the radio log.

"Here, boys, have a drink", Varela said, holding up a dark bottle. *"You deserve the best after working so hard in the wind and rain."*

"Oh, was it raining?", Marco said. *"I couldn't tell."*

Laughing, Varela uncorked the bottle and sniffed it, recoiling. *"I'm sorry, this is all I could find. I thought these things got better with age."*

Marco happily accepted the bottle, but James declined.

"Come on!", Varela urged. *"Not even now?"*

Epecially not now, James thought. *God tests me too.*

"I commend you, James", Marco said, raising the bottle. *"Your reward will taste more sweet than any wine."*

"Hope so", James answered, *"but something sweet right now wouldn't be...it..."* His voice trailed off as he noticed a pattern in the radio log. The hairs stood up on the back of his neck.

"SOS!", he shouted. Varela ran up to him.

"You sure?"

James nodded. *"I'm sure. It's coming from a small freighter, the Lucia II."*

"How far?"

"Hard to tell from this, but maybe...an hour?"

In the blink of an eye, Varela was Captain again.

One of the first things he taught James was the importance of responding to distress calls. Apparently, both Varela and Marco had been saved in the past, and it obviously made an impact. Since James' first day on board, they had always been among the first responders.

"Marco, secure the net. James, give me a bearing."

As James rattled off a string of numbers, Varela heaved himself on the wheel to force the ship through the oncoming waves. They pressed on, engine roaring against the might of the ocean. The repeating distress signal offered steady reminders of the task ahead, but after a while, it stopped coming. No one said it, but they all must have thought the same thing.

The further out on the open sea they went, the harder the storm raged around them. When a massive wave struck them from the side and almost pushed James out of his chair, he turned to Varela.

"Captain-", he started. Varela ignored him.

"How far?"

James shrugged, pointing at the screen. *"According to the last signal, we should be able to see them by now - but that was almost half an hour ago. How can we even know they're still alive?"*

"Some things are not meant to be", Marco chipped in. *"Not many could hope to survive in such a storm."*

Varela didn't listen. He kept his hands on the wheel and his eyes on the horizon. *"These will."*

Just then, the sky cracked, sending deep rumbles straight into James' chest. He looked out the window to see ripples of thunder run through the dark sky. Below, the sea rose and fell.

"Captain", James started again, *"it's not worth it. They've probably gone under already-"*

"Look!", Varela yelled, pointing out the window.

Far off, partly hidden behind the crashing waves, a broken ship fought to stay afloat. Split in half

down to the keel, it somehow stuck together and clung to the surface.

Varela turned on the searchlight and pointed it toward the wreck. *"Turn on the speakers",* he told James. *"Marco, get here and keep the light on them."*

The speakers screeched to life, carrying Varela's voice over the pillar of light that connected the two ships. *"IS THERE ANYONE THERE?"*, it boomed. *"GIVE US A SIGN THAT YOU ARE ALIVE!"*

They waited.

Nothing.

Did the sound even carry?

The air in the cabin took on a strange stillness, despite the crashing of the storm outside. Then, a light flashed from somewhere on the wreck. Three short flashes, three long, three short. SOS.

Marco swung the searchlight toward the source, but before he got it there, another strong wave pushed them back and threw him off balance. A loud metallic shriek pierced the air, sending a shockwave through the deck. As the ship struggled to right itself and Marco scrambled to get back on his feet, Varela roared:

"Find out what happened! And throw anything broken overboard!"

They wasted no time. A wall of icy water hit James in the face the moment he stepped out of the cabin. Whether it came from above or below, he couldn't say. Holding his arm up to shield his eyes, he saw what had happened: The force of the wave had thrown the net, still overflowing with fish, overboard. It lay draped over the edge, threatening to drag the entire boat down with it. Bending to the weight, the broken crane screamed as it did all it could to hold on.

Careful not to slip on the wet deck, James made for the crane as fast as he dared. *Fuck.* The metal had bent over the hook that secured the net, making it impossible to untie it. He turned to Marco.

"We have to cut it!", he yelled. *"You got a knife?"*

Producing a small switchblade, Marco rushed to cut the rope. *I'll be damned. Where was that when you got robbed?*

James could do little more than watch as Marco frantically hacked at the thick rope. He scanned the water for any sight of the wreck. Their searchlight had been knocked off course and was of no help. He saw a rough shape rise up over the horizon, black on grey, and then plunge back

down behind the waves. It wasn't that far away. *How the hell is it still in one piece?* Much bigger ships had been torn to shreds by less, and once the hull snapped, it should have been over.

The next wave lifted the wreck high, bringing it into full view. As it reached the peak of its rise, lightning filled the air and lit up the world. Though his eyes struggled against the rain and the blinding light, James had no doubt what he saw.

Hanging amidst torn cables and bent metal, a man bridged the gap between the pieces of the broken ship. Arms outstretched with a hand on either half, the dark figure fought to hang on. His head tossed back and forth, legs dangling limp in the air. *What the fuck is he trying to do? Hold the damn thing together?*

The light faded just as the stern got dragged back down. The current looked to drag the pieces apart, but as the stern fell back into darkness, the bow slowly turned and followed its other half. James thought he heard someone scream.

"Hey! Pull the rope while I cut it!", Marco yelled. James didn't hear him. He watched the place where the wreck had appeared. Nothing.

The next wave rose. Still nothing. *Where the hell did it go?*

"Hey!"

Marco shook him by the shoulder. When the third wave came up empty, James gave up.

"Did you see that!?", he asked. *"The wreck!"*

"No! Help me cut this loose, before the storm claims us too!"

He pointed to the rope. James gripped it with both hands and pulled as hard as he could. It wasn't that long ago that they had struggled to drag the damn thing *out* of the water. Together, they tore the net free and watched it disappear beneath the waves. *That's another month until I get home.* Marco patted him on the shoulder, gently but firmly dragging him away from the rail.

"I know, amigo. But there's bigger things at stake here."

They went back in the cabin, where Varela fought the current.

"The net was thrown overboard. We had to cut it", Marco explained. Varela grunted.

"Get back on the light."

Marco quickly found what remained of the wreck. Only a portion of the stern still broke the

surface, and it was sinking fast. Below, a light flashed at them from somewhere on the water.

Marco brought the searchlight around, revealing a lifeboat carrying two, three, maybe four people. They waved and cupped their hands around their mouths, shouting, though the sound didn't carry. In what must have been their first stroke of luck that night, the current brought the survivors straight toward the trawler.

They were close enough now that James could see their faces. A balding middle-aged man sat at the front with a woman of about the same age beside him. In the back, a younger woman cradled a boy, maybe 11 or 12 years old, in her arms.

"PREPARE TO BOARD", Varela's voice boomed overhead. *"WE WILL THROW DOWN A LADDER ON OUR LEFT SIDE."*

James and Marco went out on deck to prepare the ladder while Varela brought the trawler around in an arc on the lifeboat's right side. Slowly, he brought them closer and closer, careful not to smash the survivors. A strong wave at the wrong time could send them crashing into each other, but there was no other way.

The balding man at the front rose on shaking legs to catch the ladder. Wet and heavy, it swung in the wind like a deadly pendulum. It nearly hit the man in the head, but he dodged it at the last moment and lunged after it, getting one hand on the lowest rung. He would have jumped right off the lifeboat if not for the woman's firm grasp around his legs.

Pulling at the ladder to bring the lifeboat closer, he yelled for the woman in the back to go first. She approached the ladder, the boy lifeless in her arms and covered in blood. Every time the rain or the waves washed him clean, fresh blood kept coming from somewhere. She threw him over her shoulder and climbed the ladder without hesitation. Reaching down as far as they could, James and Marco helped her get the boy over the rail. Marco took him inside while James helped the woman.

"Get inside!", he told her. She shook her head.

"No...no comprende!"

"English?", James offered, and the woman seemed relieved, even allowing herself a quick smile.

"Yes! Where's the boy?"

"Inside!" James pointed to the cabin. She nodded.

"Do you need any help?"

Together, they helped the middle-aged woman over the rail. As the man stepped onto the ladder and started climbing, James watched the lifeboat get carried off by the current. It wasn't empty.

"What about him!?", James yelled, pointing to the lifeboat as it disappeared into the night. The man shook his head. He didn't even look back.

When the sun rose the following morning, the sea had taken on the kind of stillness you can only find in the wake of a terrible storm. The sun lingered on the horizon. The water stretched out like a mirror, blurring the line between earth and sky. Only a few distant clouds hinted at the inferno of the previous night.

It would have been a stretch to call Varela's trawler spacious, even when there was just him, Marco, and James. Now, the extra passengers had to pack themselves almost as tight as the fish they bunked with. As the last catch of the previous day had been lost, the hold felt somewhat more roomy than usual, but Varela had refused to dump any more fish in the sea.

"I risked everything for this", he'd said. *"I will not have it all go to waste."* To his credit, he offered his own quarters to the middle-aged man and woman, who turned out to be the married owners of the wrecked ship.

Whether he did it out of kindness or for the overall sake of peace on board was unclear; the old couple had been furious ever since they regained their strength. He yelled at her. She yelled at him. They both yelled at the mother. The only one spared of their anger was the boy, who still hadn't woken up.

Once Varela persuaded the couple to retire to his quarters, James spent the rest of the night with the boy and his mother. Amelia was American - as American as it gets, actually, with fair skin, blonde hair, and brown eyes. She only spoke English. The boy, Mateo, supposedly understood both English and Spanish. He lived with his father in Santiago since a couple of years back. When the father suddenly died, Amelia had come to pick him up.

The story seemed innocent enough, tragic as it was. James probably wouldn't have thought anything more of it, if not for the massive wounds the boy had suffered. Once they got him out of the rain and managed to lessen the bleeding, it turned out that the poor kid's hands were riddled with deep cuts. His arms were practically ripped out of their sockets.

All in all, the boy barely had a scratch, but his arms and hands were completely ravaged. It

couldn't be a coincidence. It *couldn't*. James had almost forgotten about the man in the storm by then, but once he saw the boy's wounds, he couldn't get the image out of his mind.

In the early hours of the morning, he still sat with Amelia in the hold.

"I have to tell you, it's great to speak English again", she said, cradling the sleeping Mateo in her lap. "I felt so lost down here, having to let Mateo do all the talking." She smiled.

"I used to call him 'my little rainbow' - you know, a dash of every color."

"He's a beautiful boy", James said. He meant it. Apart from his heavily bandaged hands and bruised arms, Mateo looked like a boy from a christmas commercial. Thick, dark hair, strong features, and perfect, glowing skin.

James had to ask her about what he saw. He didn't care if she thought he was crazy. He had gone over it in his mind, over and over, and he couldn't find any other explanation: he saw a man holding two halves of a broken ship together against the might of the ocean.

It wasn't possible, of course. The logical part of James' mind screamed at him that it couldn't be, but he knew what he saw. He *knew* it. *I wonder what Marco would think of all this. He probably wouldn't believe me... or he'd start talking about miracles.*

And at the center of the web was Amelia. She seemed so sweet, but there was something off about her. She didn't react the way James would expect. When she boarded, she didn't run to her child; she stayed to help the others. She didn't shed a tear when her son was bruised and broken in a puddle of his own blood. *I'm not a mother, though.* You shouldn't expect her to be an emotional wreck just because she's a woman. But still...

"Listen", he started, "I have to ask you something."

A curious look spread across her face. "Ok...what?"

He took a deep breath and started telling her of the flash of lightning and the wreck on the rising wave. All the while, she smiled and nodded.

"I know what you mean", she said when he finished. "You're not crazy."

James held his breath. "No?"

"No, of course not! I did the same thing: I thought I saw two rescue ships before you guys came. It's just what the mind does. And in the wind and the rain, it'd be strange if you *didn't* see strange things. It doesn't mean you're crazy."

James thought about it. Could he really have imagined the whole thing? Maybe...but what about the boy's hands? That couldn't be coincidence. No, it couldn't. By themselves, the pieces were weak, but together, they hinted at something more.

"Oh", Amelia said, raising a finger to the air, "*that's* why you pressed me so hard about Mateo!"

"How do you explain it, then?"

She sighed. "I can't! We were all hurt in some way - I hit my head, the captain broke his toe. We were shipwrecked, for God's sake! Will you please let it go!"

Guiding a stray lock of hair back behind her ear, she took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry. I just... I feel awful. I'm the one who urged the captain to head into the storm. I just...I couldn't get a flight and I just wanted to get away- to get *Mateo* away - from all this. Now look at him..."

She grew silent, running her fingers through the boy's hair. *Maybe she really is telling the truth.* All of the survivors had suffered some kind of injury, that was true enough. The last thing James wanted was to harass a grieving mother over some ghost of his mind. And yet, the image of the man in the storm remained etched in his mind.

James had heard every tale there was to hear about mermaids, ghost ships, krakens and all kinds of "strange things", but he had never experienced any of it himself. Not even back when he spent most of his days in a drunken stupor.

His mother always said he was born a skeptic. She liked to tell the story of how he figured out the truth about Santa Claus on his first Christmas. His father maintained that James had just accidentally ripped the fake beard off, but they both agreed that superstition and imagination had never been James' strong suit.

He hadn't been home for Christmas for three years. *Three years...I wonder what they would say if I just knocked on the door on Christmas Day.* He had no idea what the Army told his family about him, if they even said anything. Maybe they said he was dead, or still on deployment. Maybe they told his parents the truth, despite the arrangement. *Wouldn't surprise me if they did.*

Either way, even if he did make it back, it wasn't like he could just ring the doorbell. *I can't do that to Mom -- she'd be devastated.* And his father would probably turn him in, without even listening to what he had to say. *Honor before reason, that should be Dad's motto. And he'd probably take pride in it, too.*

Amelia's voice brought him back to the hold. "I fly down here on a whim...", she said, shaking her head, "waving my American money around to get what I want...oh God, no wonder they

hate me. They might have left me on the wreck if not for Mateo.”

“The captain knew the risks”, James assured her. “He has only his own greed to blame.”

Amelia pondered that. “Maybe. But if not for me, he never even would have left port.”

“And if not for him, neither would you.”

She settled for that. Noticing the sunlight through a small round window, she gently lifted Mateo’s head aside and stretched her legs. Yawning, she got up and took in the view.

“God, the sea is beautiful sometimes”, she said. “It’s hard to believe this is the same water that raged last night. The power of it...makes you wonder if we should have just let it be.”

“I don’t know... we would never have known what was beyond it.”

“Exactly.”

She obviously didn’t want to talk any more about Mateo’s wounds. James decided to leave the matter...for now. The boy had to wake up eventually. As James got up to join her by the window, Marco opened the door, flooding the room with sunlight.

“We need you on the computer”, he told James. “I think it’s about the survivors.”

“Can’t you do it?”

“It’s an American. He wants to talk to you.”

James followed Marco to the cabin, where he found Varela by the computer. Seeing James, Varela stood up and handed him the headphones.

“Find out what he wants. If it’s anything out of our way, we don’t want to do it.”

James nodded. *Sounds like Varela’s stance on the U.S. hasn’t changed.* As James had learned the hard way, many people around the world had mixed feelings about his homeland. Whether it was rooted in anger or in jealousy, James didn’t know. Whatever it was, he didn’t blame them.

“Hello?”, he asked tentatively into the mic.

A southern drawl greeted him on the other end of the line. "Hello! James, is it? Wow, lemme tell ya, it is great to hear an American voice!"

Likewise, James might have said, if he'd been able to get a word in. He could almost feel the spittle flying through the headphones.

"My Spanish is not...well, it's shit, to tell you the truth. I was never supposed to be down here, but there you go. I've got Emilia here to translate for me, but, you know, this whole thing is much easier in English."

"What thing?"

"Oh, I'm sorry! You guys are like the eleventh ship I'm calling, so please forgive me if I forget some parts. Let me start from the beginning, then: I'm Rick Sherman, and I need your help. I work for the U.S. Chilean Embassy - or, actually, I'm an investigator back home, but a case brought me here. I was hoping you could help me."

Investigator? So he's a cop? What kind of cop follows a case to another continent?

"I'm not sure how I could help you", James said. "We're pretty much isolated from the rest of the world out here... but if there's anything I can do, I'd be happy to help."

"Great! You can always count on a fellow American, right? OK, I'm just gonna lay it on you: my department has been investigating this human trafficking league for quite a while now, and one high-ranking member, Susan Fickler, recently left the country. We tracked her all the way to Santiago, where we gathered a whole bunch of evidence. I'm talking about the kind of shit that's illegal everywhere but Hell. The thing is... we lost her. She just vanished. Maybe she was tipped off, or one of our guys messed up -- I don't know. Anyway, after a few days, she turns up again in San Antonio, looking for a ship to take her north - paying well over the usual price, by the way. Guess most captains wouldn't take her in that storm. But someone did.

"So we're basically trying to get a hold of every ship we can, since there weren't that many out last night. We're pretty sure Fickler was on the *Lucia II*. Have you heard anything about that?"

Lucia II, that's the ship, all right. But no Susan Fickler. With everything that was going on, James didn't want to close any doors.

"I'm sorry", James said, "I'm just terrible with names. But we stopped by San Antonio a couple of days back; maybe I saw this Susan Fickler. What does she look like?"

"Ah, don't worry, James, I don't blame you - I even forgot what ship I was talking to, for crying out loud! Well, we're pretty sure Fickler boarded the *Lucia II*, but I might as well give you her

signalment. Last time we had eyes on her, she had blonde hair down to her shoulders, she's about 5' 9", er...mid-to-late thirties. Brown eyes. She's probably done her best to change all of that, though."

That's Amelia down to a T. And there probably weren't that many tall blondes in San Antonio. Before James had a chance to consider what all that meant, Varela gestured for him to cover the mic.

"*What does he want?*", Varela asked.

"*He wants to know about the survivors.*"

"*Well, tell him what he wants to know and nothing more.*"

For the moment, Varela and Marco didn't need to know that Sherman was a cop - claimed to be, anyway. It wouldn't help one bit. James addressed the mic once again.

"Tell you what, Rick, I'll ask around and get back to you. That okay?"

"That's great, James. You'll probably reach me on this radio, but I'll give you my number too, just in case. You can call me any time -- the sooner I get Fickler and can go home, the better!"

Sherman started spitting out a bunch of numbers, but James didn't pay much attention. Whoever he was, this Sherman was clearly looking for Amelia -- Susan Fickler, he called her -- supposedly guilty of horrible things. But what kind of agency sends an investigator who barely speaks a word of Spanish to Chile? And he seemed in a pretty good mood for a guy who just lost a target he's tracked for weeks.

And then there was that whole thing about Mateo drenched in blood. When you add the man in the storm, it would take Amelia beating Mateo bloody herself for James to believe what Sherman said. Of all the claims hurled at James over the last couple of hours, at least half of them were lies, and all he knew to be true was what he saw in the storm.

Taking off the headphones, James headed straight for the hold.

Amelia, Susan...whoever she is, she's got some answering to do.

Mateo still slept on the floor when James walked in. He didn't care. His head throbbed, the

world spun around him, he couldn't make sense of everything and everyone.

She sat beside Mateo, flashing James a smile that quickly faded when she saw the look on his face.

"I have questions", James hissed at her, "and you're gonna fucking answer them this time."

She seemed shocked and started backing away. "Wh- what are you talking about? You look awful! You should get some sleep."

"Shut up. I just talked to Rick Sherman. That ring any bells?"

"No! What are you doing?" She backed into the wall, jumping at the impact. James jabbed his finger at Mateo.

"You're not his mother, and you're not who you say you are. You're either a wanted criminal or...or God knows what. Either way, you're a fucking liar. You have *one* last chance to explain yourself before I turn you in."

James hadn't planned to approach her like that, but once he got started, he found it hard to stop. It felt good. She gave the innocence bit one more try before the veil was lifted. Her face took on a whole new air of sincerity. She sighed.

"Fine."

Her reaction took James by surprise. He had expected her to be mad, or at least frightened, but she just seemed sad. Shoulders slumped, she slid down to the floor.

"No, I'm not Mateo's mother - though I never said I was", she added, finger in the air. "I said his father died and I came to pick him up, which is exactly what I did."

"So who are you?"

"I'm his...guardian, I suppose is a good word."

"What's your real name?"

To that, she just gave a humorless laugh. "My *real* name. Who I *really* am. Well, I've been calling myself Amelia for a while now, so I guess that's who I really am."

"Tell me the truth about what I saw."

"You know what you saw. You made that clear enough."

"So why didn't you tell me when I asked you?"

"Why the fuck do you think?", she snapped. "You didn't tell me you were a soldier."

What the fuck? "How the hell did you know that?" His voice cracked on the last word.

She pressed her fingers to her temples. "I read your mind... Oh, come on, you're a clever man." When James didn't speak, she sighed again. "I know Spanish, that's how special I am. Trust me, Mateo is the gifted one."

"Trust you", James echoed. He followed her eyes to Mateo, still sleeping like a baby. *The gifted one.*

"Who - what is he, then? How the hell did he do it?"

"I don't know. He just does."

"You don't know."

"No."

Of course you know, you lying bitch. "What else can he do?"

"He's not a circus freak with a range of tricks."

"What have you *seen* him do?" With every question, James' voice grew louder and louder.

"What the situation demands."

"You're not really in a position to avoid my fucking questions!"

She said nothing. Fuming, James realized he had his hands coiled into fists. He loosened them and took a deep breath.

"Show me", he said.

"Show you what?"

"Mateo! Show me. It's the only way I can be sure."

"He's still sleeping."

“So we’ll wake him up!”, James shouted, advancing on the boy.

“No!”, Amelia screamed. For the first time, she seemed genuinely afraid. It didn’t suit her.

“Please”, she continued, her eyes never leaving Mateo. “Don’t.”

Standing over the boy, James watched that little chest rise and fall with long, deep breaths.

Where does all that power come from?

“Why not?”, he asked.

“I’ve never seen him push himself like he did last night. I didn’t even know he was capable of that. If we wake him now, he’ll be very weak - at best.”

“So he’ll be a little tired. That’s fine by me.”

“Listen! James. This isn’t about you. Mateo’s future is more important than yours, or mine, or anyone else’s. This” - she pointed to the floor to emphasize her point - “this is the most important choice you will ever make. Rick Sherman, was that what you said? I don’t know who that is. Mateo has been chased and pursued and hounded since the day he was born.”

The most important choice I will ever make. The last time James had heard that was graduation day.

“They need good men like you”, his father had said. *Good men like me.* That time, James had listened to the stories and the dreams, and he had followed them to Hell. *I could have been something. Anything.*

“So what does he want?”, James asked. “Sherman.”

“I told you, I have no idea.”

“Take a fucking guess, then!”

“Look...you’ve seen what Mateo can do. That kind of power... it’s a terrible thing for a child to bear. Most people are scared of him. They want nothing to do with him. And those who don’t run away are drawn to him for all the wrong reasons. Either way, the innocent little kid gets lost in the fog. All people see is the power.”

“You’re still just fucking talking! I’ll believe what I can see with my own eyes.”

“You’ve seen it already!”, she snapped back. “What more do you want?”

“Tell me about it. What happened?”

“What do you mean, ‘what happened’? The ship was being torn apart, and I knew we had no chance if the hull snapped. I didn’t want Mateo to go out there, but we had no choice.”

“What about the other passengers? Did they see anything?”

“No. They were all inside.”

“Didn’t they say anything when a little kid went outside?”

“They had themselves to worry about.” She pointed at the roof, toward the cabin.

“You’ve heard the captain and his wife; they were going at it even more when the ship was sinking. No one cared about what the others were doing. You must have seen the same thing in your service.”

My service. Such a strange word. James drew a heavy sigh. Burying his face in his hands, he tried to make sense of the web of lies that only grew thicker and thicker.

“So that’s Sherman”, he said. “What about you?”

“What?”

James gestured to Mateo. “What are you doing with him?”

“We’re trying to keep him safe until he can make his own decisions.”

His own decisions. There’s no such fucking thing.

Exhaustion fell over James. Like everything from the last 12 hours caught up with him all at once. The fire that had raged in him had burned itself out, and now he felt the singe. Leaving Amelia without saying another word, he went straight to his bunk and collapsed on the bed.

He had no idea how long he had slept, but he needed every second of it. Leaning over the rail where, almost a day earlier, Amelia had climbed the ladder with Mateo on her shoulder, James watched the sunset. She said watching the ocean made her feel small. He just felt lonely.

The deck creaked under heavy footsteps that could only belong to Varela.

"Thought I'd find you here", the captain said, joining James by the rail.

"How's the old couple?", James asked.

"Asleep. Or maybe they just ran out of breath. Tell me, what came of that American who called earlier? You said he wanted to know about the survivors."

"Oh, yeah. I answered his questions and nothing more, like you said. I told him I'd get back to him if something came up."

"Strange, then, that he just called us again."

Fuck. What the hell did Sherman want now? I'll have to lie to him. And to Varela. James sighed. Even the honest path was riddled with lies.

Laying his hands on James' shoulders, Varela looked him straight in the eye.

"Look, you're a good kid. You're smart. I'm sure that whatever choices you make, they are for a good reason. Now, I have no need of knowing everything that happens on my ship, you know that. But -- and I will be very clear on this -- if there is danger to me, my ship, or my crew, I need to hear about it."

James kept his head down. *"Yes, sir."* Just like the Army. At least Varela knew enough to stay out of what wasn't his business.

The cabin was empty and dark but for the computer screen that flashed *"Incoming Call"* in bright, green letters. James sat down and put on the headphones. Taking a deep breath, he answered the call.

"Hello? Sherman?"

This time, it took a while before the response came. A woman greeted him in perfect but heavily accented English.

"Hello. Mr. Sherman will be with you soon."

A little while later, a familiar southern drawl came on the line, but that was the only familiar thing about it.

"Hello again, James Tillner." Sherman sounded tense, more serious. *Did I tell him my last name?*

“Hi! I’ve talked with some of the others”, James said, “and they don’t seem to know-”

“Enough lies, or what do you say, James? I’m sure you must be tired of them. I know I am. So let me give you today’s truth: I’m calling to offer you redemption.”

Redemption? What is that supposed to mean?

“I know she is on your ship, James. I know all about it, and the only part that’s missing is the location of your fucking piece of shit boat that doesn’t even have a GPS tracker. I can’t imagine why you’d lie to me earlier, though your history does offer a few explanations.”

What does he mean, ‘my history’? He’s got to be bluffing.

“Wait...the woman we rescued is Susan Fickler?”, James tried. “She doesn’t fit your description - you didn’t say anything about-”

“Please, James, don’t do that. I know about her, and more importantly, I know about you.”

As Sherman sighed, James heard the rustling of paper.

“Here we go”, Sherman said. “Private James Tillner. Dishonorably discharged due to... insubordination and misconduct, among others. Boy, you didn’t last long, did you? And all this despite your family history. T-t-t-t... I wonder how daddy would react to *that* letter. Something tells me you didn’t want to find out.”

Who the hell is this guy? And how did he get that information?

“I had to dig pretty deep to get this, you know”, Sherman continued. “That’s not usually good news for me, but this time it is: it tells me you’re no stranger to striking a deal when the battle is lost.”

“What do you want?”, James asked, trying and failing to keep his voice steady.

“As I said: redemption. I’m offering you the chance of a lifetime - and I must say, I’m being extremely generous here. If it were up to me, we wouldn’t go about it this way. But I’m told to give you the sugar first.

“Here’s the deal: I make this” -- he ripped the paper in half -- “I make it go away. You weren’t discharged. It was a cover. In reality, you played an essential part in the capture of Susan Fickler, one of the most notorious criminals of our time. You chased her around the globe, finally caught her and can return home a national hero. Now, *that’s* something to put on the mantelpiece.”

Before James had time to answer, Sherman added: "Of course, if you refuse, we have a completely different situation. An alcoholic troublemaker that even the Army had no use for flees the country and then turns up harboring a wanted criminal? I don't know about you, but that sounds a whole lot like treason to my ears. As much as I'd like, I'm not sure I could keep those news from reaching Mom and Pop."

"How can I trust anything you say?"

"Oh, I may just be a voice on the line for you now, James, but know that my voice is loud. It carries far and wide. It reaches many ears. You can either trust me now, or you can trust me when you go to sleep one night and wake up to a rapist squeezing your balls in a Chilean prison cell."

James just stuttered. Words fled him.

"Let me guess", Sherman continued, "you need some time to think. By all means, take a break to think things over. With you and me, time is on my side.

"We're gonna get her sooner or later, James. I'm just giving you the chance to be on the winning team." *Click.*

It took some time for James to notice he was listening to static. He took the headphones off and leaned back in the chair. His mind raced. Had he just been given a golden ticket?

The following night, twinkling stars dotted the sky, watching over rough seas. In the darkness of his bunk, James Tillner sat on his bed with a half-empty bottle as his only companion. It was a reunion, the return of an old friend, and things were just like the good old days.

Except for one thing.

Before, he always drank to forget. To numb. To get away, even if just for a few hours. His old friend had never failed him. But this time, the more he drank, the more obsessed he became. With every sip, what he tried to forget only lodged itself deeper in his mind, and his emotions' hold on him only grew stronger.

He saw himself standing in the doorway on that unusually warm spring day. *The last day of my life.* Mom had ironed his uniform. Dad had tied his tie. Chest up, shoulders down, James grinned at himself in the mirror like an idiot. 19 years old. *I thought the world was mine.*

Only a year earlier, he'd been too scared to ask Jen to prom. He thought she would go with Jack instead, but one day, she ran up to him on the way home from school.

She supported me too, when I said I'd join the Army. They all did. Everywhere he went, people were cheering him on: "Way to follow your old man, James!" "We couldn't be more proud!" They'd probably spit on him now. What the fuck do they know? They've never been more than a hundred miles from the place they were born.

When his old friend had nothing left to give, James had made up his mind.

I deserve this. I fucking deserve it more than anyone. How the hell can she throw her shit on me and expect me to just take it? To give up MY life for her! I bet she's laughing her ass off right now. The gullible fucking jarhead throws himself under the bus.

No. This is my redemption. My justice. They took my life from me. This is where I take it back! I'm gonna be a fucking national hero.

Wiping his mouth with his sleeve, James pushed himself to his feet. The rush from standing up forced him to steady himself against the table. It felt like his first week on sea all over again. But the fire in his heart soon took over. It drove him out of his bunk and into the cabin. To his surprise, he found he wasn't alone.

Three figures stood out like marble statues in the moonlit cabin. Varela had the wheel, and beside him stood Amelia and -- Mateo. The boy turned his head as James entered, tugging at Amelia's shirt to get her attention. *How did he hear me?*

"Oh, hi, James", Amelia said, giving him a small smile. She frowned. "What's up with your eyes?"

James felt his cheeks. *Have I been crying?*

"Nothing."

Laying her hand on Mateo's head and gently stroking his hair, Amelia knelt down to the boy's level.

"This is James", she explained. Still stroking Mateo's hair, she turned her eyes to James.

"He saved us."

Mateo looked at James with huge, clear eyes. At Amelia's gentle push, he left the safety of her arms. He carefully approached, his expression turning from shyness to curiosity. His chin held

high, he walked with perfect posture. His skin glowed silver in the moonlight, smooth like a pearl. *He's perfect.*

As if suddenly remembering something, the boy eagerly reached out a hand in greeting. Like the rest of him, it was flawless. *Not even scars...* They shook hands. His skin felt warm and smooth like a baby's. James just stared. He couldn't believe it.

"Thank you very much, James", Mateo said, trying to sound grown-up. He smiled the way only a child can, revealing a gap in an otherwise sparkling set of teeth. James couldn't help but grin himself. This time, he felt the tears coming.

The computer beeped.

"*Look*", Varela said, pointing out the window. "*Coquimbo.*"

Far away, a range of twinkling lights dotted the horizon. Following the guiding light from the Coquimbo lighthouse, Varela let the current take them inland.

"*So, James*", Varela said, "*do you finally have enough money for that ticket?*"

James took a seat and watched the buildings and the factories.

"*No, you're stuck with me a little while longer.*"

Amelia came up behind him and leaned against the table.

"Thank you", she whispered, just loud enough for James to hear. "I know how much you had to sacrifice. It means the world to us. You saved many more than two lives tonight."

The cabin was silent as they drifted past the lighthouse and into the harbor. James stood up and met Amelia's eyes for a moment. Then he went to help Marco unload the fish.