

From Here, to There

by

R Alan Burgess

*Someone's rocking my dreamboat,
Someone's invading my dream;
We were sailing along,
So peaceful and calm,
Suddenly, something went wrong.*

- The Inkblots

Lieutenant Carson Rutherford sat alone in a thatched roof cantina in the sweltering jungle surrounding Manila, impatiently awaiting the man that could solve all his problems back in the world. Carson wasn't quite in the world at the moment, at least not his world. His connection to home, USS Ohio, nuclear submarine at a port of call in the Philippines, was parked nearby, resting from her journey east.

He sat and watched an Aeta tribesman hack away the limbs of a lamb being prepared for the fire and winced at the brutality of jungle life. After a while in the smothering heat and

humidity, a thin man in a loosely hanging white suit, Carson's man, the solution to his problems, emerged from a door in the rear of the cantina. As the thin man neared Carson's table, the tribesman grimaced and abandoned his lamb, backed away from the fire and pulled his three children close. The thin man sat with Carson.

"I've considered your offer, but I need to know why," Carson said. "Why is it so important this *cargo* be smuggled on board my ship? Why not any one of a hundred ships or fishing trawlers that pass through here every day? Your offer is a small fortune, but I'm taking considerable risk."

The thin man reached for the whiskey bottle on the table between them and pulled the cork. He refilled Carson's glass and replied, "I need to guarantee the cargo's safety, your American ship and your American ways can do that. You're an officer, yes? A leader, yes? Your crew does what you say, and you can make sure the cargo reaches its destination. And remember...no more than seventy-two hours, or no deal." Unlike Carson, the thin man was not sweating and sat back calmly as he placed down the bottle.

"Yeah, I'm an officer, but I'm not the Captain. And yeah, with the dimensions your man gave me I can guarantee the cargo's safe arrival to Guam within three days," Carson was sweating profusely and wiped his brow. "But I don't want any bullshit from your man on the other side. Every penny I'm owed, I get. Or your cargo never sees the mainland." He picked up the full glass. "Every. Penny."

The thin man shot out his arm and grabbed Carson's drink hand, spilling half the whiskey onto the table. His grip was stronger than it should have been. He slowly leaned in toward Carson and said, "You *must not* open the container. Under no circumstances can anyone open it. For your...safety."

Carson's eyes sharpened and drifted down to the man's intruding grip, "No one else will come near it, and as long as it can't sink my ship I don't care what's in your container. Just make sure your people have the cargo loaded onto the supply palette at the pier before nightfall. You shouldn't have any trouble getting through the checkpoint, I've ensured the manifest reflects the dimensions I was given, assuming they're accurate. The driver will have it."

He moved closer. "And if your people fuck this up, I still get paid. I'm risking my neck just sitting here talking to you."

The thin man smiled and weakened his grip, slowly releasing altogether. "You will get your money, Lieutenant Rutherford. You will get your money."

The deal was done. Pattering rain drops surrounded the cantina and Carson imagined them as the sound of silver dollars dropping into a piggy bank, soon to be solving his problems. He could pay what he owed and have plenty left over. He and his wife could disappear, leave the world for good. As long he got back to the world with the money he owed, that is. He stood and wiped the sweat from his brow as the thin man made his way to the rear cantina door from where he came.

The thin man turned as Carson stepped out into the bare jungle and the rain started washing away the sweat and whiskey.

"Remember Lieutenant," he called out, "you will be a rich man. But do not inspect the cargo – where it is going and how it gets there is for you. Inside the box, is for me." With that, the thin man was gone. The Aeta tribesman stood back up and returned to his lamb. Carson, lost in thought, jumped as the machete swiftly came down on the lamb's neck.

Carson could practically smell the money, but first he had to get out of this jungle and back to his ship. A solution to a world of problems distilled down to a medium sized black cargo

case, a simple box, to be taken from here, and delivered to there. Simple.

#

The next evening Carson was in his stateroom aboard the Ohio reviewing navigation plans for submittal to the Commanding Officer. He double and triple checked their route; they needed to be at Apra Harbor within seventy-two hours to deliver the thin man's cargo. Only two days, and he could change the rest of his life. He could be free of his troubles back in Boston and whisk away his bride to somewhere tropical. Isabelle loved the tropics.

Wait, this place was tropical...maybe the mountains, he thought.

Carson sat back into his thin metal chair and stretched, at least as far as he could; his hands touched the opposite wall as he leaned over the chair's back. At the desk folded out from his stateroom wall, he saw her picture propped up on the bulkhead, her soft and innocent eyes watched him. He pulled out his phone and played back the voicemail he'd listened to a thousand times.

"Carson you fuck, you owe Mickey fifty large and the juice is running...we know where you live, we know where your wife works, we fucking know everything. That little stunt you pulled before your sailor boy disappearing act made you Mickey's favorite client that he hopes to build a long-lasting relationship with...either you pay up or parts of you and your wife are gonna start decorating Mickey's office to start that relationship on the right foot...or maybe the left."

He powered down his phone and stored it back in his desk drawer. It was time to end this.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come," Carson barked. The door swung open and a portly Chief Petty Officer, his

assistant Navigator, filled up the bulkhead frame.

“Sir?”

“What do you got, Chief?”

“Captain says he wants to change the nav plan, head south through the Luzon straight and conduct littoral ops with the SEAL team instead of heading back west so early. Should add about four days to the trip, I’ve already checked with the Chop and we should have enough supplies.”

That would not do. It couldn’t be more than three days.

Carson began to sweat, to feel that tingling sensation at the base of his neck.

“Oh, and there’s a truck topside with a bogus manifest the duty officer wants you to check out, something about an extra cargo case?”

“That’ll be all Chief, thank you.” Carson grabbed the metal door and slammed it shut. The force rattled his tiny tin box of a stateroom and sent Isabelle’s picture flying off the bulkhead from its perch, the glass frame shattered on the deck.

Fuck.

He knew it just couldn’t have been easy.

Carson wrapped up in an oversized heavy weather coat before he climbed the ladder in the forward compartment to make his way topside, the rain was coming down hard. He hoisted himself just above the skin of the ship and surveyed the pier. It was empty except for a single truck with headlights shining toward the guard shack at the head of the ship’s brow. The driver was engaged in a heated argument with the armed sailor on duty, both soaking wet and waving separate pieces of paper. Carson took a deep breath and pulled himself up out of the hatch.

He walked aft under the hulking fairwater planes that protruded like wings from the steel sail of the ship. They offered some relief from the rain, but the mighty Ohio was nearly five

hundred feet long and he got rained on every inch of his walk to the rear. He scanned the pier to make sure no one else was lingering. If this was about his cargo, one way or another it was making it on board this ship.

The driver and sailor stopped arguing and looked in Carson's direction as he approached.

"What's the problem here?" he asked sharply.

Petty Officer Greenough popped tall and saluted the Lieutenant. "Sorry, sir."

"Don't apologize, Greenough, just tell me what the hell is going on here. It's pouring and these stores need to get loaded."

Petty Officer Greenough was a good sailor, with bad judgement. Carson had caught him sneaking in late to morning muster on occasion, but since poor judgement was a quality Carson could empathize with, he let it slide. A little leniency could be powerful leverage.

"Well sir, this delivery doesn't match the manifests we get in advance." Greenough handed him the manifest, "See? It's right here in the receive column, *ten*. There are eleven containers here, sir."

This must be it.

"I can read a manifest, Greenough. And you?" Carson motioned to the delivery driver. "What's your story?"

Even with the thick accent it was clear the young driver was annoyed. He waved the paper he was holding and said in his best English, "Your regular driver was in accident in morning, I print manifest from computer and drive truck. This is delivery, this is delivery!"

"Sir, we can't load any of these if there's an issue with the box count," Greenough said. "We have to verify the delivery with the original signed manifest from the prearranged driver."

Carson ripped the paper from the driver and stared at it. He looked at Greenough, and

then back at the driver. He grabbed Greenough by the arm and pulled him to the side.

“Look, it’s a fucking shit show out here every time we pull in and we don’t have time for this. Get on the radio and get the stores party up here, load the god damn stores, and let’s get out of here. Have any undocumented crates put in my stateroom and I’ll have them inventoried at watch turnover. We are underway at oh-six-hundred.”

“But sir -.”

“Load the fucking stores or I start looking at my watch a little closer next time you think showing up to muster late and hungover seems like a good idea.”

Greenough cocked his head, he knew the game. “Yes, sir.”

#

Captain Lannigan, Carson, and a sailor manning sound-powered phones huddled together in the bridge of the behemoth ship, tucked into the highest point of the submarine’s steel sail. Ohio’s bow cut through the water as the humid air released its choking grasp, the Philippine mainland in their wake.

The Captain took a drag from his cigar. “I thought your A-nav brought you my chart changes?”

Carson put down the binoculars. “Yes sir, need to input the remaining points in the nav plan. It’ll be done by dinner, sir. I do still have some concerns with taking the straits, our boys back in DC worry about mining and we don’t have to exactly -.” He stopped, felt the Captain staring at him.

The Captain took one last drag from his cigar and tossed it overboard.

“Carson.”

Carson turned.

“Change the fucking charts,” Captain Herschel Lannigan gave his Navigator the look he gave his officers when it was time to make sure they knew who the Ohio belonged to. “Take her down, Lieutenant.”

“Take her down aye, sir.” Carson got the message. He began the practiced routine of descent and took stock of the world before he submerged below it. He was unsure what world he would come back to, but he knew if he came back to it broke and no way to pay his debt he might as well stay gone. He tried to put it out of his mind and safely dive the submarine, he couldn’t pay anybody if he was dead.

“Navigator has the conn,” he said into the handheld mic to the ship’s control room below. “Prepare to shift the watch belowdecks!”

Carson and the remaining crew topside gathered their equipment and piled in hull. The crew scurried about with purpose, preparing for the dive like programmed ants. Everyone had their job, and everyone did it. The ship’s control room watched as young Petty Officer Gabler climbed down the ladder having just shut the lower hatch on the sail escape trunk; there was no way out now. And if Petty Officer Gabler did his job right, there was no way in, either. The submarine’s crew had an interest in keeping the cold deep outside of the hull, where it belonged. They all operated with the keen awareness that if jobs were skipped and done with complacency, everyone goes down with the ship. Gabler conferred with Ensign Natalia Banks, the Supply Officer, who climbed up the hatch after him to check this and give a stern jiggle to that, and then climbed back down. They were locked in.

“Forward escape trunk rigged for dive, sir,” said Ensign Banks. No way in, no way out.

“Quartermaster, sounding!” Carson barked.

“Sounding aye sir! Sixty fathoms below the keel, checks with chart.”

Carson assessed, no reason not to go down now.

“Very well. SONAR, report all contacts. Chief-of the-Watch, flood all tanks. Dive, make your depth one-six-zero feet, fifteen degree down angle.” The control room braced for the descent.

He announced their descent to the crew, “Dive, dive!” The AAAYYYYOOOGGGAAA of the claxon rang throughout the ship. It was the call of the submariner, a call to the depths where the souls on board were only allowed the forty feet between the steel skin of the ship surrounded by the cold darkness of a different world. *Good thing, too*, Carson thought. He couldn’t go back to the other world, not now. If he didn’t port in forty-eight hours, the thin man wouldn’t pay him. If the thin man didn’t pay him, his debts would go unpaid. If his debts went unpaid...

“Conn, SONAR! No close contacts.” Carson blinked back to now.

“Decks awash!”

“Fifteen degrees down bubble, sir.”

“Very well,” Carson replied. Despite the calming precision he loved about this job, his brow began to sweat as though he were back in the jungle, the sound of the Aeta’s hacking machete ringing in the back of his mind.

“Sir, ship is at one-six-zero feet bearing one-eight-zero, fifteen knots.”

“Very well, Dive. Steady as she goes.” Carson scanned the navigation computer and checked inputs from SONAR, but thoughts of that box clouded everything. Or rather, thoughts of what could be *in* that box.

What could possibly be so sensitive as to be useless after only forty-eight hours?

Maybe they would give him half if he brought it back in one piece only a few days late.

Or maybe these guys were smart enough to give themselves a buffer and the forty-eight hours was what they told their mules to garner a sense of urgency.

Carson closed his eyes at the prospect of being considered a mule – *that was for drug runners*. Did he really think there were drugs in the box, had it come to that? Had he lost so much self-control that smuggling drugs on his own ship was the only way he could rectify the mess he had made?

The weapons officer, Lieutenant Commander Chris Olson, entered the control room and leaned on the SONAR computer stack. “You can still sink a ship with the best of them, Carson.”

Unamused, Carson did not reply.

“The old man says I’m to relieve you, something about some maps? I mean, you are the Navigator, right?”

Carson was not in the mood for Olson’s sarcasm. He stood straight and nodded his head in conceit of the jab. “Attention in control,” he said. “The weapons officer is the Officer of the Deck.”

Olson smiled as Carson handed over the fire control keys and announced, “SONAR, Conn, the weapons officer has the deck and the conn. Helm, ahead one-third, maintain course.”

#

The back and forth roll of the ship at cruising depth caused the rhythmic clank of dinnerware fancifully set about the wardroom table. The Captain held the head chair. Except, in here, during meal time, he was just Herschel. The Executive Officer was just Miles, the Weapons Officer and the Engineer were just Chris and Gabe, the other junior officers were just Terrance, Natalia, and Emily with a few more standing watches as the others dined. The idea was to relax into your more personal self and share the ship’s Officer Mess with comrades, brothers and

sisters in arms. Rank was (mostly) left at the door to allow the freedom of constructive dissent and open dialogue. For Lieutenant Rutherford, for Carson, this meal was anything but relaxing.

He had smuggled contraband onto an American ship of war, and that alone could cost him everything. He constantly reminded himself that it was for everything which he was taking these risks, to save it and keep it safe. He couldn't even think of the things those animals would do to Isabelle all on account of his drunken idiocy, unlucky bet after unlucky bet as if the stars were aligned against him...

"How's Isabelle?" Chris asked.

Hearing her name aloud jarred Carson in his daze of self-pity.

"Isabelle?" He began to sweat.

"Yeah, your wife? She just started nursing school, right?" Natalia always remembered the personal details. Carson forced himself forward from the shadows of his dark thoughts.

"She's uh, well. Her school starts next month and she's looking forward to it," Carson replied. Her nursing school was expensive and had motivated his exploits. He tried to maneuver the conversation away from things that reminded him of his own finances and ultimately his current dire straits. He couldn't tell if the rocking of the boat got worse or it was just his nerves.

"Pass the salt, will you Miles? Speaking of schooling, how are your qualifications coming Nat? Working hard, or hardly working?"

"Knives out, I see," replied Natalia.

The Captain coolly entered the conversation, "Natalia's progressing as fast as any of you did, faster even. That work ethic rub off on any of those kids at home?"

She blushed. "Yes, sir. In fact, Devin asked me the other day about 'mommy's submarine.' Someone at his school checked out a book from their library about the Loch Ness

monster and other sea creatures of sorts. Devin read it cover to cover and loves all the pictures.”

“My kid’s seventeen years old and still only reads the pictures,” Chris chimed in.

“You only read the pictures, WEPS,” Gabe said.

“Whoa, shots fired!” Natalia continued. “Anyway, he saw a picture of this Nessie monster and asked if mommy’s submarine could find it. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that we can’t actually see where we’re going on account of having no windows, not to mention that the Loch Ness monster isn’t a real thing, along with the other creatures in that book.”

“Can you please pass the salt?” Carson tried to tune out talk of family and monsters.

Herschel saw the makings of a great dinner debate. He posited, “What say you about other demons of the deep? As you pointed out, we can’t see down here save a few sound waves on a green screen. What’s to say there aren’t unthinkable creatures just on the other side of that thin metal keeping the ocean out?”

“Miles, the salt please,” the boat was rocking even more, but only Carson seemed to notice it. In fact, for him, the room was spinning.

Miles adopted a skeptical grin. “Are you saying you believe in sea monsters, Herschel?”

“Well, I think *believe* is a strong word. But, there are certain naiveties our arrogance employs in thinking we have all the answers to a part of this Earth we’ve only barely begun to explore,” Herschel pontificated, and his audience was captive, all but one. “Besides, apart from the monsters in Hollywood, real monsters can come in all shapes and sizes.”

“WOULD YOU PASS THE FUCKING SALT?” Carson slammed his hands on the table and caught all four prongs of his fork. The entire wardroom stopped and looked at him as the room stopped spinning. The humanity of his fellow officers hit Carson like a ton of bricks. They had children, they had wives and husbands. He wondered what kind of danger he’d put them in

at the thin man's behest. Suddenly the feel of his tight grip in the sweltering jungle returned and the words of warning, *under no circumstance can you open it...for your safety*, echoed in his mind.

No one moved a muscle as they processed Carson's outburst. Natalia's gaze drifted down to the white tablecloth, which started to pool with blood under Carson's palm.

"Carson..." she whispered. She nodded to the table.

"I'm," Carson stood slowly and clutched his bleeding hand. "Sorry."

A knock at the wardroom door broke the deafening silence of the awkward moment. Petty Officer Greenough opened the door swiftly and took one step in and stood tall to state his business, as was protocol.

"Captain, sir, a message for the Chop," said Greenough.

The Captain nodded at Natalia, she turned. "What is it?"

"All the food stores were stowed, and the all the non-food crates are on standby for their respective divisions in missile compartment upper level," Greenough shot a piercing glance at Carson who was listening intently and nursing his wound. "*All* the non-food crates."

Bingo.

"Thank you, place the manifests in my stateroom." The door closed and the entire room exhaled, they were not keen on airing out their dirty laundry in front of the crew.

"Have doc look at that, Carson," the Captain said.

"Yes, sir." Carson moved to pick up the glassware that had been knocked over.

"Now, Carson. Head to medical, take a breather."

"Roger, sir." Carson passed a conciliatory glance at his wardroom companions and backed from the table, his injured hand wrapped in a reddening white napkin.

#

Doc's office, colloquially termed Medical, was in the missile compartment, the centermost watertight compartment on the submarine. There were three watertight compartments, the missile compartment was long and sandwiched by the forward compartment at the bow and the engineroom to the rear. Separating the compartments were large, round steel doors that swung on hydraulic hinges, each with a small and circular double paned window right in the center. The doors were heavy and slow to move, but once they were shut and dogged there was no getting through, even if the ocean itself were chasing you. The engineroom was secured by only one of these doors on the uppermost level, and through the small window one could get a glimpse of the propulsion plant down a long, white corridor. Making up one side of the corridor was the ship's hull, and the other was the reactor's containment boundary.

Access between the missile compartment and the forward compartment was isolated on two levels by the bulky swinging doors, and Carson ducked to step through the upper most door while clutching his wound. The other door was in the berthing area one level down. The doors were kept open to be shut only in an emergency that threatened the whole ship. The exception was the engineroom access, which was always shut and open only for momentary passage of personnel or equipment.

He made his way through the twenty-four missile tubes that populated the compartment like thick Redwood trees in two neat rows. The ship's Doctor, really just a glorified enlisted nurse with an unlimited supply of Motrin tablets and the occasional bandage, had an office tucked into the side of missile compartment third level. Carson approached and found the door open, and the Doc, Hospital Corpsman First Class Wallace, tending to another sailor with a wound that looked a bit more serious than his. Carson waited at the threshold, and listened.

“What the fuck happened to you?” asked Doc. “Lift that arm up and quit bleeding all over my office. Jesus, we’ve been underway half a day and you’re already falling apart.”

“I caught it on a...a wire bundle, Doc.” For all his faults, Carson had an eye and an ear for full of shit, and this sailor was full of shit. His lower arm looked like an angry rodent got hold of it and his face was white as a sheet.

“A wire bundle, huh?” sniped Doc. “That the best you got, Mosely? I guess that’s good enough for the sit rep I gotta fly off. Want me to add any details? Like, once you ran into this malevolent wire bundle you swirled your arm around a bit to get good and cut up?”

Doc’s personable attitude, and not a general aversion to injury, was the real reason the crew wanted to avoid medical. There was only so much shame one could endure when explaining the nuances of certain afflictions, especially in faraway lands where legalities were blurred. It was clear to Carson that Petty Officer Mosely here wanted to avoid telling the real story, and Doc only applied his Hippocratic oath to the tending of wounds, not the healing of souls.

Doc applied an antiseptic ointment, bandaged up Mosely’s forearm nice and tight and sent him on his way with a bag of Motrin tablets. “Thanks, Doc.”

“Come back after your watch and we’ll change the bandage,” Doc directed. “And don’t scratch it.”

Mosley zipped up his coveralls and squeezed past Doc to make his way out of the long, skinny office. He brushed past Carson who took a step after him and grabbed his unhurt arm.

“Where’d you *really* hurt it?” Carson asked, in a hushed tone.

“Just like I s-said, sir. A w-wire bundle,” Mosely’s voice was shaky and nervous, and beads of sweat gathered on his forehead. Carson smelled a rat. But, he didn’t have time to deal

with it right now. He had bigger problems, like where in the hell his box was stashed.

“Right.” Mosely backed away one step at a time and high tailed it when he heard Doc’s voice pipe up and take Carson’s attention.

“And what can I do for you, sir?” Doc asked.

Carson moved the napkin and showed Doc the four holes freshly poked in his palm.

“Let me guess, angry wire bundle?”

Carson grimaced. “Angry fork.”

#

Carson clicked on his flashlight and popped his head up through the top of the ladder well that accessed the upper most level of the missile compartment. It was a dimly lit space that served as mostly extra storage for diver operations gear and other specialized equipment. He looked around and sighed. No sign of his box.

“I can’t catch a break.”

He hoisted himself up through the ladder well, wincing as his bandaged hand supported most of his weight. The hulking missile tubes, one after the other all the way down the compartment, gave Carson the same feeling as looking into opposing mirrors, the same image reflected for eternity. He made his way down the compartment, shining his flashlight in the outboards and between the tubes looking for his precious cargo.

He shined his light on the deck a few tubes down and saw two drops of what looked like red paint. He took a knee and touched the drops; it was blood. Carson shined his light all around the area looking for more blood, or rogue wire bundles, and found three more drops trailing to a metal shelf in the outboard. Stacked in a column on the shelf and lashed down with clamps were three boxes that looked like the ones he saw on the pier in the delivery truck. Underneath the

three stacked boxes were a few more drops of blood and a smeared red stain near a gouge in the shelf's metal.

Fucking Mosley...he better not have damaged anything. Clutz.

Carson released the clamps and unstacked the three boxes. One of them was particularly light, Carson estimated about sixty pounds. The other two were at least ninety. He inspected each of the shipping labels on the crates, not sure what he was looking for. Two of the crates had labels that detailed machinery division spare parts and carried the Engineer Officer's name in the receive block, made sense these were the heavy ones. The lighter box had a few noticeable differences.

The shipping label had Carson's name on it, but the last name was spelled wrong. Dead giveaway. He also noticed that the bottom of the box had three deep scratches running up the side and disappearing under the lid, along with a still wet blood stain.

Christ, Mosely. What'd you do, juggle these things and bang them against every branch in the stupid tree? Probably broke half their inventory. No wonder you didn't want to pipe up.

After he lashed down the other two boxes in their place, Carson reflected on small blessings. At least a sixty-pound box was manageable on his own, he could hump it to his stateroom without drawing much attention. He just hoped that whatever the thin man put in his box was invulnerable to clumsy sailors.

#

A few hours later, Carson sat dejected in his stateroom. The charts were changed and the ship was headed south, not north. He stared at the box that was supposed to get him paid, supposed to save him from himself. It was sitting on his rack taking up what little space he had.

"Can't be drugs, box isn't even full," he muttered to himself.

A thousand thoughts ran through his mind, the loudest one the warning from the thin man not to open the damn thing.

For your safety, he had said.

For your safety.

What the fuck did that mean? Carson wasn't one to be threatened. Hundreds of feet below the surface of the ocean and the thin man and his goons might as well be on Mars. Perhaps there was a way to save or fix what was in the box so it would last the longer trip, assuming Mosely's butterfingers hadn't broken it too badly. The more he thought about it, Carson became increasingly convinced the forty-eight-hour turnaround time imposed by the thin man was just a scare tactic. That thin bastard could just as easily open the box a week from now, verify its contents, and pay up. And then he would shove this box right up that thin man's –

His stateroom door flung open after the briefest of cursory knocks.

Captain Lannigan did not look amused, which was typical. "How are my charts coming, Lieutenant?"

"Done, sir. The OOD is headed south to the straits."

"You get Doc to take a look at that hand?"

Carson held up his bandaged hand. "All fixed up."

"What the hell is that?" The Captain motioned to the box.

Carson swallowed, hard. "Just some personal affects, sir. From the wife," he said as he shifted in his chair, the Captain towering over him.

"That's your fucking problem, Rutherford, always got your head stuck topside and never down here where it belongs. Emotional outbursts, personal effects...you're soft." The Captain eyed the crate with suspicion and noted Carson's unease. "What the hell personal effects do you

need stuffed in a cargo case, anyway?”

Carson was in full panic mode now, he had never been a good liar, and an even worse gambler. “Um...well, sir it’s uh...personal...”

The Captain crossed his arms and gave Carson that look again. “Open this fucking case, Lieutenant. Personal effects my ass, I swear to Christ if you’re sneaking booze aboard my submarine I’ll have your ass.”

To his own surprise, Carson relaxed. It didn’t even matter anymore. His problems in the world were so far away and maybe he could even keep them there, far away, if he was arrested for smuggling.

“OK, sir. I’ll open the case. But Sir -.”

“But what?”

“I don’t know what’s in it.”

“What the fuck do you mean you *don’t know* what’s in it? What kind of game are you playing here? Open this god damn box right now, Lieutenant, and quit wasting my time.”

The Captain moved into the stateroom at a cozy foot and a half from Carson and slammed the door behind him. They were alone and close, and the Captain was fuming.

“There, happy? Now it’ll be just between us girls whatever personal effects you’ve brought on my submarine. Let’s go, open sesame.”

Carson tried to keep it together, sweat pouring off him. He shuddered and looked down at the deck. Captain Lannigan softened a bit as he began to realize Lieutenant Carson Rutherford, Ohio Navigator, was miles away and this pathetic creature before him was in trouble, or at least damn sure thought he was. The Captain unfolded his arms and put a hand on Carson’s shoulder as he sat shaking and sweating.

“Carson, what’s got you riled up?” asked the Captain, his concern genuine.

“They said they would pay me, Herschel. I need the money, they said they’ll hurt her...”

Carson’s eyes never left the floor of his stateroom.

The Captain took a deep breath and let out a sigh, channeling the Herschel Lannigan that his friend, his sailor, needed right now. “I can’t change what you did, but right now we’re a couple hundred feet under the ocean and I can guarantee you nothing up there -” he motioned overhead with his left hand, “ - or in here can hurt you. We’re just two guys dealing with a problem, and if you let me, I can help you. I may not be able to save you, but I can help you. Now open her up and let’s see what kind of mess you’ve gotten yourself into, son.” He landed a hardy smack on top of the box.

It lurched to the right, and then the box lurched forward a bit.

The Captain blinked quizzically, and Carson rose from his seat, their intimate moment quickly dissipated. The box shuttered again and the two men looked at each other as though the joke would be up any second.

There were three clasps, one on each side, one in front, and a hinged rear edge. Carson noticed for the first time that one of the clasps, the one on the side near the gouges, was already broken. He slid the remaining clasps one at a time to their disengaged position. First the side, and then the front, then the lid was free. Carson lifted the lid of the box, winced, and looked away as if he couldn’t bear to see his fate.

#

The Reactor Operator, Petty Officer Mosely, sat at his panel in the reactor plant control room staring at the many lights and buttons and switches that decorated his workstation. He trained for over two years to know what every single one was for and exactly how it would affect

the operating reactor plant powering the ship. But at the moment, Mosely couldn't think about anything but the pain.

It started under the bandages of his arm, just an itch at first. He began to sweat more and noticed he was thirsty. He gulped from his water bottle until it was empty, and then dropped it on the deck.

"What the fuck, Mosely," the watch officer stationed behind him, Ensign Natalia Banks, blandly commented and never even looked up from her computer screen.

The itching got worse and demanded to be scratched, but the minute he dug into his arm with his other hand the pain escalated and shot through his shoulder and into his chest. He lost track of conscious time when he threw up something deep red onto his panel and began to convulse.

"MOSELY?! What the fuck!" Banks looked up from her computer screen in time to see Mosely slam his head onto the reactor plant control desk. After the second time he spun around inhumanly fast and looked at, no *through*, Ensign Banks. The panel was smoking and Mosely's head was bleeding profusely, but he appeared energized and gargled ravenously. Banks processed the last five seconds and realized that the reactor plant had shut itself down after Mosely's head bounced off of the control switch. She took one look at Mosely and realized that she had a much, much bigger problem. She screamed, and the lights went out.

#

"What in God's name is that?" The Captain's tone had changed over the course of the last few minutes from anger, to concern, to what Carson interpreted in this moment as fear. Carson held his gaze at the Captain, now afraid, standing next to him. He moved his eyes first, and then

began to move his head slowly until he could see what the Captain saw, what the thin man had seen. But he didn't believe it.

As the contents of the box began to turn its head to the duo peering in, the stringy black hair matted and compressed from the closed lid fell away to reveal remnants of a young girl's face. It was not a nice face, but a fleshy, pulpy mess grinning a set of exposed bony teeth. Her body was mangled and contorted in the space of the container, covered only by a tattered white gown. She seemed to be waking up, her eyes opened and her mouth snapped at the air. Her exposed teeth let out a loud crack as they collided at the strength of her rapidly mashing jaws.

"Rutherford, what in the fuck is —"

The Captain sucked in his breath and the words went with it as he backed against the bulkhead of the stateroom trying to put as much distance between himself and the unconscionable contents of Rutherford's box as he could. A knobby hand edged out and gripped the side, the fingernails lining up perfectly with the gouges on the box's side panel. Carson's knees weakened. The girl's body began to uncoil, writhing like a snake. Both men stared and tried desperately to reengage with reality's loosening grip on their situation.

Then she lunged. She lunged at the Captain's throat like a hungry animal and landed her bite true. Carson heard the gurgling attempt at a scream emitting from the Captain's bleeding jugular and noted that to be the worst sound he had ever heard in his life.

Once he saw the blood, his muscles reacted instinctively. Carson fumbled with the multi-tool at his belt and produced a three-inch knife blade and landed it in the back of this...this thing's skull. She shuddered and retracted her bite. Carson jerked his hand back and forth, stabbing and stabbing until the girl's body collapsed and fell from the Captain in front the stateroom door.

Carson, breathing heavily and not able to string together a coherent thought, took hold of his Captain. The wound in his throat was gaping and poured blood as the Captain's body reactively lurched in his arms. And then he was still, and Carson fell back. His breathing began to turn into frantic sobs, the room spun and shook. He could feel his own heart beating out of his chest. Carson stood up, unsure of how much time had passed or where he was. He just stared at the bodies of a young, mangled girl and his Captain bleeding all over his stateroom deck.

But soon he wasn't really the Captain anymore. As life faded from his eyes the bloody shape prostrate before Carson passed through stages as the Captain, to simply a captain, to a dying man, to a dead one. And when the lifeless mass began to stir, it became something else entirely.

Carson didn't move, he couldn't move. His breathing, his sobbing, it all stopped.

The bloodied being, his friend Herschel, his Captain, dead and lifeless not a moment earlier, rose and stood in front of Carson. What he saw, a foot from him, was certainly not lifeless and yet no longer dead. He felt unconscious, confused. He was watching himself from a distant place.

His confusion slowly became abject terror as he regained his faculties. At first it was the smell; his former captain evacuated his bowels in the throes of the attack. And then he felt the heat given off by the bloody mass that stood before him. And finally his sense of place and time returned to him. He regained awareness of the ocean depths surrounding his ship, of his now crowded stateroom within, of the company he currently kept. As acutely aware as he became, try as he might, he never regained control of his terrified body in time to fend off the undead mass as it descended upon him. And he never had time to scream.

He felt every bit of it. The sinking teeth into his shoulder, the grip around his neck that grew tighter and tighter until it was just a balled, messy fist. He saw his vision fade as he fell to the deck, everything grew dark. Lying there on the deck awash in the growing pool of blood, some his and some not, Carson saw a pile of glass shards and a picture frame. As the mass crouched over Carson's body to toil at his midriff its feet knocked the frame a little closer, more upright. All but gone, Carson's darkening vision locked onto the image of his wife and he saw in a flash the course of their lives together. His last thought was of her, and how at least now she would be free from his burdensome problems in the world, even if he would never return to it. But in truth, his very last thoughts, thoughts past the pain and past his wife, past his life, past his death, were thoughts of where he would be headed next. And then no thoughts at all.

#

"Conn, SONAR. Noise transient, forward compartment second level unknown origin. Recommend messenger of the watch investigate," announced the speaker circuit from the SONAR control room.

"SONAR, Conn, aye," replied the Officer of the Deck. "Messenger of the watch investigate the noise transient, start in officer berthing. Probably one of the junior officers making a racket." The control room snickered and Petty Officer Greenough blushed. He stood from his perch near the Chief of the Watch's control panel.

"Aye, sir," he said.

The red lights were on in the forward compartment to simulate a nighttime condition, Greenough grabbed a flashlight. He made his way to the bottom of the skinny metal stairs from the ship's control room and turned right. Away from the hum of the computer stacks he immediately picked up a repeating metallic knocking sound coming from the horseshoe

passageway that was officer berthing. It was faint, but consistent. He made the corner and approached the passageway, shined his light on the first door he saw. It was the common head area, and it was open.

The head was the only door in the berthing area visible without actually having to go into the horseshoe shaped berthing passageway. Greenough sighed and prepared himself for the transit through the horseshoe, ever wary of the female officers on board and conscious of his gaze. Fresh out of college, junior officers had been known, on very rare occasion, to confuse the ship of war for a floating university dormitory and engage in activity that Greenough understood to be a possible suspect in the generation of repeating noise transients of unknown origin. A byproduct of opposite sexes in the same quarters, and the last thing Greenough hoped to have to report to the chain of command, much less walk in on. He would never hear the end of it.

“Male on deck!” he whisper-shouted to satisfy himself he’d made his presence known but not loud enough to actually wake anyone up, another scenario he hoped to avoid. He turned the corner into the fifteen-foot stretch of passageway to see five closed doors, his flashlight bounced between each one as he hoped for a visual clue as to the noisy culprit. He approached the first door on the left and ever so lightly knocked while twisting the door handle and peering inside. One empty bunk, and two still mounds asleep in the dark.

As he carefully shut the door and released the handle the metal tapping was accompanied by the sound of glass crunching underfoot. His flashlight shot to the end of passageway. On the deck outside of the second to last door on the right was a growing pool, dark and colorless under the red lights that illuminated the compartment. “Christ,” Greenough muttered.

Out to sea not twelve hours and already something broken and making a mess, he thought.

Greenough hurried to the door marked NAVIGATOR, messes didn't tend to get better on submarines if gone unchecked, so he should be quick to identify to the cause.

He knocked loudly. "Lieutenant Rutherford!" He grabbed the door handle and gave it a push to no avail.

He put the flashlight into his back pocket and used both hands on the handle, which gave way but only opened the door a few inches. Something was blocking it, the situation was worse than he thought.

Greenough began to sweat, thinking back to his training. Suddenly he was far away from everything and everyone as he frantically tried to get into the stateroom. The spilling liquid, with the look of viscous oil possibly from a hydraulic rupture, oozed freely now from the crack in the door Greenough had made.

"Lieutenant! Are you in there?"

The noise stopped. No more faint tapping, no more crunching. Greenough leaned a shoulder into the door to force it open. A hand eclipsed his vision and grabbed the edge of the door. It began to pull.

"Oh, thank god sir! What's leaking, LT? Is it hydraulics?" Greenough stepped back from the door and left it to Lieutenant Rutherford to open.

The door opened, but it wasn't Lieutenant Rutherford. It didn't take Greenough long to piece together that it wasn't hydraulic fluid leaking onto the deck, either. He pulled the flashlight out of his back pocket and pointed it behind the mass that stood in front of him. He wasn't ready, wasn't able, to look at it yet. The white beam of light from his flashlight found a pair of boots attached to a pair of legs on the deck covered in blood. They began to gyrate, and in harmony with their erratic pulsations the metal noise began again. He traced the flashlight up further and

found a hand gripping a metal multi-tool tapping against the sweating metal bulkhead in unison with the gyrating legs of a mutilated, spasming body.

The body attached to the hand that opened the door in front of Greenough, which couldn't have been the Captain, *it couldn't have been*, began to move towards him. It was bleeding from its throat, and its mouth was full of chunky, bloody bits. Soon it was on him, and there was nowhere to go. He tried to scream, but it only came out at a third what he intended, the bulk of it trapped in his quickly constricting throat. It wasn't even loud enough to wake up the sleeping few in the horseshoe two doors down. Not loud enough for the folks awake and alert in the control room. Not loud enough for anyone in the middle or after compartments. And beyond the metal skin of the ship, whatever tiny piece of his scream that managed to escape and float through the endless surrounding waters was swallowed up by the quiet darkness of the sea. His scream was not loud enough for anyone to hear.

Before he faded, he heard the ship's announcing circuit blast, "REACTOR SCRAM."

Then the red lights flickered, and then went out completely.

#

There were three other sailors in the reactor control room with Mosely. The watch officer had just enough time to sound the power plant casualty alarm before her throat was nearly ripped out by whatever Mosely had turned into. The other two sailors fumbled with the reactor control room door handles until one of them got out, and the other was not so lucky. The unlucky one was a throttle operator that got his leg hung up on a phone box near the deck as he tried to round the corner out of the room, and that's when whatever used to be Mosely shredded his leg and climbed onto his back. After a few moments, they exited.

Out in the spaces of the engineroom there were five more unlucky sailors. They may have made it had they realized a little sooner that rushing to help their fellow shipmates after they were attacked by whatever was running around was unwise. Soon the screams stopped and Natalia Banks, her life fading with every stretching movement, crawled down the corridor toward the engineroom watertight door, but only made it halfway. She could no longer move and lay there staring at the tiny window on the bulky door to the engineroom as she began to change.

What Natalia didn't know, was that the other side of that door was no safer, and just because she couldn't hear them anymore didn't mean there weren't any screams.

#

The television in the corner of a small, run-down bar on the main drag outside the Apra Harbor Navy base on the island of Guam was too quiet for the thin man to hear. He motioned to the bartender.

"Would you be so kind as to turn that up?"

"The US Navy officially announced today the beginning of search efforts for the USS Ohio, guided missile submarine hull number seven two six. She was last heard from leaving port from SUBIC Bay in the Philippines and was scheduled to arrive in Guam over a week ago. After what were initially reported by government officials as training operations that began late Tuesday night, we now know that search and rescue teams in addition to joint Marianas task force assets have been deployed in hopes of finding the submarine. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families of all sailors involved. More on this developing story tonight at nine."

The bartender shook his head. "Damn shame, I know some of those sailors."

The thin man slowly stood and placed an old white fedora on top of his head. He pushed in his barstool and outstretched his hand for the bartender.

“Damn shame, indeed,” said the thin man. He shook the bartender’s hand and turned to leave. He walked out the front of the bar into the blinding light of the midday tropical sun.

The bartender glanced down at his hand. That old man sure had a hell of a grip.

THE END