

We scrambled above deck, fighting for the railing. A sudden blast knocked me over, a crewman's elbow connected with my head. He yelled something to me. Apologized? I could not hear him. Blood like blossoms fell, until another explosion jettisoned me from the ship, into the sea. We had failed. The empire would not advance. Oil mixed with ocean would provide our only life raft. A passenger of the currents, I closed my eyes.

It was in the fifth hour that I saw her. At least, I felt that was the case. No telling, really, how long I had been floating there. Waves kept their own time. I could only recall what I had done to stay conscious, prior to spotting the vessel.

Keep it together, or you'll go mad. It wasn't something that 'hit me', no sudden realization. I was just 'out there', adrift. Circumstances beyond my control had led me to this point. Indeed, it felt like circumstances beyond my control had kept me alive. Either I could occupy myself, keep my mind busy, or I could become preoccupied with death. There was no middle ground – it was as clear cut as the line between sea and sky. How could I waste my 'good fortune' thus far? *Bring it under control. Keep it together.*

I told myself to get my bearings. *Sky. Sea. Me – check.* Wonderful. More specific detail was impossible, as the ocean wore the same countenance, no matter my perspective. Night sky wrestled with the clouds, with an occasional star breaking up the monotony between gray and black. But it wasn't enough to calculate my place. *Not enough...* I tried to orient myself to a distinct cloud mass, only to have the ocean send me under. Rocked back and forth, twisted around, I would eventually emerge to find the wind had scattered my 'breadcrumbs'. What was the prevailing wind? To what shore do these currents lean in the dead of night? There was no way home, and no means of going had I even known the way. *Not enough training, not enough knowledge.* I cursed the sky, the clouds, even the coy stars just beyond my reach. Anger coursed through me, providing the illusion of warmth, the illusion of strength. Did I have enough energy to prolong my struggle to stay awake, afloat, aware? *Conserve. Keep it going.*

Rescue, by death or providence, then. Those were my choices. Providence?...My comrades would not be in a better state, were they alive. *Alive?* I remember us hitting the water. Men ground to powder by the huge turbine driven propellers of our vessel. Men who had only hours before sprung to their tasks, swarming the deck like ants in meaningful activity. Others were sucked into a vortex as the the

ship that had been there home begged like a lover for them to stay, one last time. Honor, duty, and flesh made one. United. *Reunited?*

Every so often, the waves performed me a kindness. None was more valuable than holding my locket before me. The one possession with which I had left the vessel, it housed an image of my Maya, my anchor. *Would I see you again?* Her image danced before me, in time with the waves, watching me tread water and the edge of madness. She had wanted to marry for some time. She wouldn't tell me outright, that wasn't her way, and wasn't our way, back home. But I saw. For me, it was enough we were together, moving forward, day by day. Our love was in the security of knowing we were there, riding it out.

The tide, like some tipsy war drummer, pounded out its maritime beat in rhythmic undulation. My back, my face, my eyes were the taut and willing canvas for the sea to slap its violent brushstrokes, painting a tattered scene. Vague recollections of fire, flood, and panic were my only companions as I bobbed up and down, playing hide and seek with the ocean's surface. I played hide and seek with memory, with consciousness. Sleep conspired with the ocean's salty tears, and mine. They mingled, settling in to a dense fog.

And it was through that haze I spied a light – a single, solitary, beautiful light. I'd dreamed of this meeting, this consummation. Would she see me? Worse still to fear, would she be friendly? Was I miles from where our ship had gone down, or blown halfway 'round the world? Having sailed enough, I realized the ocean looked the same in all directions. She was as nebulous as the sky overhead that stalked her. Only in that promise of safe harbor, in those contours of land, would she vary her fashion, would she try on something 'new'. After hours at sea, I too was ready for something new.

I began to flail my arms, hoping to raise enough unholy hell for the ship to spot me. Every orchestrated convulsion dipped me below the surface, with a lone hand raised above the brine. No light to shine, no horn to sound, I seemed just a head struggling to stay above water, and a five-fingered lighthouse reaching up. Kicking my legs like an unborn child in the womb, I cried out. The ship bore towards me, at last. Soon I would have a better look at her. If only there was a way to truly describe what I beheld.

It was unlike any ship I had seen before. Any object appears smaller in the distance, but the nearer she crept, it was as though the vessel increased in size, exponentially. She was wider than anything in our navy, and damn well wider than

anything the enemy had, that we'd seen. I blinked salt out of my eyes in hopeless ritual to behold this fortress, this city which carried my salvation in its incredible mass. And there were towers, temple spires that reached skyward, to the heavens. No sooner had I selected one I presumed to be the bridge, than I found one larger than the last. The energy, the manpower to move such a beast astounded me. It was crazy, it was impossible. Yet there it was.

My wonder didn't stop when they pulled me aboard. I felt warm, safe for the first time in hours. It had been days, really, when you consider the mission and its fateful end. I looked above at those same towers, some climbing high as the eye could see, others curling inward in vaulted arches. Like hands beckoning me into an embrace, they seemed so near. My mind almost emptied. I was aware of this strange environment, this sensation of protection. But I had no desire to question it. Not then. I was safe. That was enough. They hoisted me aboard.

“Welcome.” It was like hearing a foreign tongue, but understanding the words all the same. Every strained muscle in my face twitched as I tried to find the right sequence of motion, the right order to pronounce a 'thank you'. The shame must have been too great. I could only pass out in reply.

They had picked me up sometime in morning, I wagered. There was no chance they'd spotted me in the evening. I pondered this, trying to approximate the time. Hours at sea, hours asleep, I computed backwards. *Why?* My superiors wouldn't want to know I survived anyway. Ours was a suicide mission...wasn't it? Surely, it would be an abject failure if someone reported in *alive*. Something nagged at me, within. I turned my attention to my surroundings. My cabin was sparse. Light gray pillows and blankets punctuated an otherwise dark gray room. Bare walls, bare ceiling, it was about as scenic as hours adrift at sea, maybe even less so. There was nothing to indicate that it served as anything more than sleeping quarters. And that suited my logic just fine. A vessel of this size probably required so much manpower, there was no time for...well, anything.

“Welcome.” He was average height, I'd say six feet tall, if I were given to trust my eyes at that point. Streaks of white ran through jet black hair, which was worn in a not unfamiliar style. Brushed straight back rather than combed, I would say, as it wasn't tight enough to his skull. He had the wide eyed gaze of a child, but there was no shine, no warmth. He'd met my watch only briefly, choosing instead to scan the room. They were open, expectant eyes, ready to receive. But they gave nothing in return. I was happy when he resumed his survey of my cabin, to be free from those eyes. It was creepy enough that I hadn't heard him enter.

“Didn't we do that already?” I paused. Then, reconsidering my curtness to one of the party who had saved me, “I didn't hear you come in.” He acknowledged me with a nod, and nothing more. I pressed on. “Uh, thank you. Thanks for the assistance out there. Can you tell me what day it is?”

His head made another circuit about the room, as though he was looking for anything out of place. Convinced I hadn't altered the gray harmony in any way, he faced me at last. “It is tomorrow.”

“...Naturally. 'Tomorrow' being the day following 'yesterday'.” There was no hiding the frustration. “I meant, can you tell me the date? I am separated from my crew, my ship lost. It is imperative I contact my superior officers to tell them about...”

“Come.”

I forgave the interruption to escape the gray. Maybe the rest of the ship would be more...hospitable.

As we left that neutral prison of a room, I saw that my hopes would fall short. Walls stretched as far as I could see in a bland, almost marble texture. It was laced with veins of what appeared to be a metal, boasting a sheen unlike any I had seen. I caught my reflection in the gleam, seeing my still haggard and slouched posture. For a brief moment, my locket caught the light, blazing like the North Star. I averted my eyes, returning my attention to the walls about me. The hallway rose some 40 odd feet, a ridiculously grandiose height for a ship. Its vaulted ceiling came to a point every twenty paces, repeating a sort of square pyramid pattern. *A square. Four. Four was an unlucky number in my homeland.* We seemed to walk for miles. Were we nearing the 'center' of the ship, or simply climbing one of those towers? It was dizzying. *Dizzy?* We were rising higher, then. The walls seemed as mirrors, reflecting each other.

And no matter which hallway to which we veered, no matter how long our wayfaring, *they* were always with us. Passengers or crew, I knew not which, paced us as though in an ooze. They echoed our heading, we echoed theirs, for they were everywhere in front and behind us. Slight turns of the head were the only evidence that they saw me. My presence was clearly not an event, or at least, not worthy of breaking the apparent discipline I witnessed. They marched as one, so slowly I had to steady myself. *Marching...* It was an eerie harmony, a cadence that made me almost believe they were breathing as one. *Ants.* Or was I imagining it? Was I

passing out again? I recalled my father, urging me to join the military and serve the country.

“Look at me now, father.” It was a mumble to myself, but I was out of practice speaking. My musings must have come out much louder than I intended, for the entire company jerked to a stop. Where once I was a minor nuisance, I suddenly took center stage.

“You know The Father?” My tour guide asked.

“I know *my* father,” I corrected. “I have been told I have his eyes.”

“Really? Where are they?” He seemed agitated, impatient.

“Uh, maybe that expression doesn't translate well. I don't *literally* have my father's eyes with me. I have eyes that are similar to the ones my father had. Is what I meant.”

He seemed distraught. “Oh. We would like to have more of The Father.” Everyone returned to their steady pace, and our journey continued. It seemed more silent, then.

Not long after, we passed another group of them. They were seated in a small room, as sparsely decorated as my resting quarters. I couldn't tell if the panels before them were consoles, or simple tables. What I did notice perplexed me. Some were hunched over, others sprawled backwards, arching over their chairs. More intently I scrutinized the scene about me. Following the mountain range of sinewy muscle that broke the smooth black of their strange garb, down the necks to the arms, I found no hands. It was as though their arms were born of the panels, sprouting out of a gray machine. Their legs were in much the same condition. Their legs planted, their arms nothing more than mechanical vines, I found myself at last studying their faces. Where I expected to find agonized contortions, eyes filled with horror, I met only still contentment. Others exhibited outright euphoria. I turned to my guide.

“Who are these people?”

“They are like us. Like the rest of us. We are the voyagers.”

Voyagers, he said. Going *where*? And why? “What...What are they doing? Why are

they like this?”

“There's is the honor and glory of service.”

“How? How are they serving? What are they serving?”

“The mission. They serve the mission.”

“They're smiling...”

“It is their joy to serve. As you stay with us, you too can know this joy. You will see.”

“That's a kind offer, really. But like I said, I need to contact headquarters, and....”

“Come.”

My escort having signaled the end of our 'conversation', we ventured forth. Returning to the cavernous hallway, we passed many rooms, all of them filled with the euphoric 'plants' I had witnessed previously. A growing unrest within was betrayed by sweat, twitching. If my guide noticed, he made no indication. Nor did he try to assuage my fears. I decided it best not to argue, not to pursue further questioning. We had snaked our way through so many halls, all of them alike, and we had cornered so many bizarre rooms. I truly didn't think I could make it back to my room, let alone the deck. *The deck. Get to the deck.* We advanced.

The lighting of the hallways, of the rooms, was most mysterious. I could see no fixtures, no bulbs, no candles. Candlelight, if I had to place it, was the closest I could come to describing the glow. It was as though a flame, a warmth, was centered in every room. But it was nowhere to be seen. Because of that uniformity, that homogenous effulgence, I welcomed the sight of what was clearly sunlight, rays of color, piercing the evenness and predictability of the hallway. Basking in that glorious yellow bath, I surveyed the expanse of sea. The glorious blues of the sky, mingling with greens in the sea, were an oasis. It took me several minutes to notice, to my surprise, that we were not moving.

Turning a puzzled glance at my partner, I hesitated. Did I dare ask a question? I decided on an observation, a statement of fact. Perhaps that would elicit further conversation, more detail...

“We aren't moving”

“No.”

Well, that was a resounding success.

“*Why* aren't we moving?” I asked, irritated. And then, “After all, How will you finish your mission?” Had I baited my net correctly?

“We have been stopped for some length of time. It is unsafe to move, now. The sea creatures would be disturbed. They wait at every turn to deny us our mission, our search.”

“Sea creatures? I was flotsam at sea for hours, maybe days. I didn't see any creatures....”

“We are invincible at rest. They cannot harm us here. You do not understand. Yours is not the way. Come”

Whole sentences, I thought. Was that not progress?

Those rays of light proved to be the harbingers of twilight. The evening advanced, as evidenced by the windows we passed. Had my pilot noticed my joy in the view, and chosen to alter our 'course' to afford me more opportunities? He wasn't speaking. It gave me time to think, to try to remember. Why was this ship so strange, yet so familiar? *What are you doing? What are you contributing?* Nagging voices were my company within, stoic grays were my only escape around me.

“We are ready to move forward again.” The announcement caught me unaware. How long had we been walking? Does time mean anything, anything at all, here? *No time.*

“Ah. So, you'll be able to continue...your mission. Right?”

“Yes.”

I was truly blessed that they had chosen their master storyteller as my tour guide. I bit my lip, the mixture of sweet, salty blood hit my tongue. *Pain over anger*, and I could think.

“And what exactly is the mission?”

“We move. We grow. We grow as we move forward”

“You...grow? The ship grows?” It made no sense, but I thought of the vessel as she had approached me, helpless in the water. It did seem as though her bulk expanded, as she neared. But it wasn't an explanation.

“But why do you grow? Where do you go? For what purpose?...”

“We grow as we move forward. That is enough.” He had cut me off. I tried an evasive measure.

“I am interested. I've...never seen a ship like this. How does she move?”

“We will it. It moves.”

“You *will* it?”

“We follow the path of The Father. He wills us to follow. We will it to move.”

“How does that happen, exactly?”

“Come.”

Ah. Familiar harbor, that. Near my breaking point, I followed him. But my eyes were more calculating, more examining. I tried to make sense of the interior of the ship, find patterns. *The deck. All hands on deck.*

I was cognizant, as we advanced, that the line of voyagers followed. In fact, it split in two, and then four, then eight. Shoulder to shoulder the steady pace of the wide eyed, the eager shadowed our movements. Was this where they all met, the lines and lines? Was I to finally see this mysterious power source? My increased attention was paying off, as I noticed the slight incline of the hallway. We were headed up. I couldn't fathom it, as my earlier view out the window came at a height I estimated as a half mile. How can something a half mile tall float? How wide, how long must it be now?

My guide slowed, as the hallway gradually opened. Light, natural light, was angling into the hallway, draping the walls and evaporating the gray. I welcomed it.

When at last we stopped, I found myself on a grand balcony, itself as wide as a battleship. Rows of voyagers filled the mouth of the hallway, pouring like a delta out into the balcony. Where once they stood eight abreast, now they poured out they were fully a hundred across. My navigator waded purposely through the crowd, and I imitated his maneuvers. He seemed to be making his way for the balcony's edge...

The edge. As we approached, I became vaguely aware of what was happening. Still, I withheld judgment until I was closer, to be all the more confident what I witnessed was true. But there was no denying it. I watched in horror the final fate of those lines and lines of men. They would approach the rail, smiling. Urged on by the mindless clapping of the successive man, the one in front would grab the railing, hoist himself up, spread his arms like the wings of an angel, and leap from the side. I was, at first, frightened to finger the railing. I didn't want to be seen as a willing participant in this madness, but I must see, must know where they plummeted. Off to my left, I found an area in use by none of the intrepid divers. There were no lines. Still, I half looked over, half held myself at ready, should someone think I needed assistance in joining the 'festivities'.

It seemed almost a mouth, the yaw into which they were jettisoned, swallowed. The balcony overlooked... Well, it overlooked the whole ocean from my vantage point, but the descent left the sacrifices somewhere in the center of the vessel, into that pit framed by pillars. It was like a giant whole in the center of a city, a city floating forever. It was too much. I would demand answers.

My chaperon was frozen where I had left him, admiring the carnage as though it were the most normal, the most perfectly reasonable thing in all the world.

“This...This is insane!” The words came forth as though bubbling. I couldn't control my rage, my confusion.

“You wanted to see. We follow The Way, we move, we grow.”

“WHY?”

“For The Father. For The Way. These thousands go happily that the ship may move. Their flight is our flight, our safety, our strength. You have your father's eyes. We have The Father's spirit. We have this ship.”

Growing just to grow. Sacrifice for...nothing. For an idea, and one not clearly

explained. Thousands dying...every minute. Just to *move*. To feel that thrust *forward*. It wasn't enough. Was I talking to my commanding officers? To the empire? To my hosts? To myself? To...Maya? *All hands on deck!* I turned my head, and watched another hundred gleefully hurl themselves into the void. Wings spread like eagles, like planes...*It was hopeless. Mission failed. There was only buying time for the flagship to head home. Fighter pilots rammed their jets headlong into the enemy, in disdain for the spitting bullets even as they were torn to shreds...* Weightless bodies float, the air holds them up, cradles them, their wide eyes, mouths open in smiles, buoyed. By the will. For their 'Father'. For the mission...*The captain noted the listing of the ship. He would buy more time. Without hesitation, in favor of the mission over mercy, he ordered the starboard engine room and boiler room flooded. This balanced the ship. It also killed the unknowing crewmen in those levels below. Their eyes bulged, mouths frozen in demonic gapes, mask-like smiles. They floated...*

I saw past the reflection. I remembered. I ran.

Fleeing this traveling shrine to something or someone long forgotten, this pattern in time, this floating tomb, a womb, a cradle. I resolved to leave it, to end it. This world ended now, in the endless pause of their sentence, in the boundless silence of their stares. Undoing the bolts of this false cradle, I would hit the floor. Would watch the screws roll, the wood and metal splinter and whine. Scattered like ideas, free like thought, I ran. No pain, no crying, yet I cried out anyway. Crawling away, leaving the old world still rolling, reeling, I hurried. *All hands on deck. Abandon ship!*

Had I the memory to retrace my steps, to learn? I scrambled, past the sunlit window. "Invincible at rest...Sea monsters..." *Seasoned crew of the ship had long taken to calling it 'The Floating Hotel', it was so oft stationed at port. The cost of moving such a large vessel was great, so far into the war. And the enemy tracked our movements. Submarines waited just off the shore, waited beneath our invincible armor to launch their torpedoes into our exposed belly, our weakness, our pride.*

I fled the rows, the lines and lines following their futile tracks. I passed the seated and leaning, the planted ones, bound to their consoles, their tables, their fate. *We hurried for the ladders, making our way to the upper levels, to the deck. The admiral, in shame at the failure of the mission, had long since ordered the crew to abandon ship. He promptly blew his brains out. At news of this, several of the commanding officers resolved to go down with the ship, lashing themselves to*

consoles, to railing. It would be disgraceful to surface when the ship went under. We envied them. They would be spared the humiliation of defeat.

I was focused on escape, to avoid the smiles...It was unusual for the officers to be so cordial with the crew. We found out later why. They alone knew of our suicidal mission, to prolong the war effort with our lives. The night before we set sail, we drank hard. Our nerves steeled, we prepared for our final voyage.

I found the railing, found the side. How high was I now? Safe or not, I had no choice, and didn't even steady myself. I just peered over the side, and knew what I must do. Trading security for sanity, I dove. This was no sacrifice. It was my will. It was my true rescue...

Entering the water was coming out of the water, like piecing a thin sheet of ice, of glass. I hit the ocean, sending water in shards. It was like a two way mirror, like gazing upon a mirror and seeing 'through'. Reorientation. This side up. Breaching the surface, the newborn screamed. Hands lifted me up, I saw them like cascading branches on the roof of a sunlit forest. Black silhouettes, fingers like leaves, they dragged me from the water.

“Stay with us!” My face was slapped repeatedly, and this time it was not the ocean. Had I loosened my grip, relaxed at the prospect of rescue, I would have slipped back into the sea forever. I heard familiar voices, keyed on them. Did I know them? No. It was the speech, like a warm friend, not what they said. Words I knew, accents, dialects, enveloped me. This was a harsher rescue, but it felt more real. *Alive*. I was alive. I felt my feet scrape the deck as they ran me like a broom across the welcoming wood. Sleep proposed. I accepted. All those hours I had stared at the night sky, or the ashen gray waves, but not known how inviting the black could be.

When I awoke at the hospital, it was to a sea of white. Sheets, blankets, walls, and uniforms shone like a clean slate, straining my eyes. I took it all in, the familiar faces, my people. Outside, the steady hum of industry told of countless workers, factories. We were still trying to grow, still expanding, still feeding that war machine, marching forward. A nation's greatest resource is its people. I shook my head at the roar of a squadron of fighters taking off. A committee of smiling doctors were making the rounds, and finally made their way to me. They said I had been out for days. Days, I had lost. I would not get them back. It seems, looking back, a small price to pay for remembering how to be human. They told me in the tenth hour, I was saved.