

In historical events, great men—so called—are but the labels that serve to give a name to an event and like labels, they have least possible connection with the event itself. Every action of theirs, that seems to them an act of their own free will, is in an historical sense not free at all, but in bondage to the whole course of previous history and predestined from all eternity.

Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy (1869)

PROLOGUE

APRIL 28, 1848

A DAY'S SAIL PAST THE ENGLISH CHANNEL

Swaying with the ship's motions, the four steerage lanterns cast an amber glow on the young woman walking towards the deck hatch, her shadows dancing against the canvas partitions like wayward spirits. Tiptoeing around some clutter, she timed her footfalls to match the corkscrew roll of the ship. Most below were still sleeping, though the steerage was never a quiet place, even in the dead of night. She climbed the steep staircase to the main deck.

Though aboard ship for just one week, Alvina-Kristina Gabriellsson had already learned to detest the sea. No one forewarned her that over one hundred souls would be competing for the space intended for just eighty, or of the rank food, foul water, the vermin, the stench, and nothing, absolutely nothing, prepared her for the complete absence of privacy that stripped her soul naked of its dignity.

She stepped into the fresh air and the gloom of the predawn. Even above on the decks, the sea confined her world to just nine short steps from side to side, thirty-five bow to stern. The waves, wide and broad, rocked the deck as she stumbled to the starboard bulwarks. She clung to the ratlines while fending off the cold, huddling within her white shawl as her blond braids flapped angrily in the stiff wind. High above, the tiers of canvas were full, belled against the velvet of the awakening sky, swollen hard like metal breastplates. Beyond the ship's wake, the sun glowed just below a horizon of liquid brass. A crescent moon and the morning star waltzed together above the dawning sea.

Her eyes, wide and very blue, sparkled with fresh tears while lamenting over her beloved home in Sweden. Her husband had dragged her away to sea, taking her far away from everything familiar and dear for the promise of a better life in America. She lost all she ever loved—her father, brother, sisters, and most painfully, the mortal remains of her firstborn. Their cattle, barn, and nine acres of barley had once been home, but home no longer. Now other feet trod the fields and tilled the soil. The floorboards of her house sang to some other’s footfalls.

This deep and aching sadness was as if her heart had been torn from her bosom. She convinced herself she carried a greater anguish than Cain when God exiled him to the Land of Nod—and she felt just as vanquished. She knew her husband would be angry if she stayed above deck much longer. It wasn’t fair he must tend care to the new baby while she cried of homesickness. She stole just a few more moments to compose herself. The remaining stars yielded their ancient fires to the encroaching dawn. The birth of the new day seemed so calming.

Her breath staggered. A green fireball burst from the sky—but this was no shooting star, for it remained without motion. It hovered at the exact point where the sea met the northern sky, shining so brilliantly its reflection sparkled upon the waves. Her china-blue eyes, wide in stunned disbelief, watched as tentacles of emerald lightning reached out from the orb, menacing the air and water surrounding it. She couldn’t hear any thunder, just an uncanny silence while the glittering green fireball spat sparks into the predawn.

It exploded! A blinding spit of light lit the northern sky, and from it, a shockwave of liquid green flames shot across the summit of the waves. She gasped, paralyzed, unable to breathe. It was going to strike the ship! Her fingers tightened around the bulwark, gouging into the weathered wood and she hunched down. At an exhilarating speed, the shockwave dashed by with a perfect silence.

The instant the green radiance struck the ship, her entire world lost its motion. The vessel ceased its downward fall as if colliding into a wall. Falling off balance, she grasped the ratlines to pull herself upright. The waves stilled—the ship held firm within a frozen sea. The wind ceased to blow and her braids dropped to her sides. The voices on the decks and the wash of the sea lost all of their sounds. She turned and saw that everyone else was motionless like marble statues. The smoke from the

galley stove lay frozen against the sky as fine frost on glass. With an expression of grotesque terror and a dawning realization, she accepted that death must have consumed her.

But dead people don't breathe or have beating hearts. Her mortal body breathed in great swallows and gasps while her heartbeat thudded in her chest with angry fists. This was something other than death, and she wished the ship had the courtesy to stop its motion in a level stance, for it settled pitched down listing to port, which made standing difficult. She needed to put her hands back to the bulwark to remain upright.

"Hello?" Her voice still worked. In the entire world, was her voice to be the only one spoken, the only sound to fill the air? *How long was she to endure such a lonely fate?*

She became aware of an itching—a sensation of scurrying ants covering her hands. She glanced down, slowly, fearful of what she may find. Tiny snakes of the green energy were slithering along her fingers and the back of her hands! Alvina-Kristina shook her hands free from the bulwark, fluttering them in a frantic effort to shake off the static.

They wouldn't come off. She decided to scream. No one was to hear her, and she could do so as loud as she pleased, without fear of shame. She screamed like a demon as she shook and flung her hands about. The effort was wasted. She stopped screaming and extended her glowing hands before her. The tiny snakes faded away and just a few moments later, they were gone, leaving a mist of static shimmering from her fingers. The emerald radiance vaporized with a flash and her fingertips stung as if she had jammed them in a closing door.

Her world returned to life. The ship resumed its ride down into the wave. The wind again tugged at her braids. Voices from the decks resumed their chatter. The ship's sudden motion tripped Alvina-Kristina backward and she clutched onto the ratlines as she spun with her feet off the deck. When she caught her footing, she looked about to find all was calm. The ship with her 108 emigrants continued to shoulder through the long, broad waves as if absolutely nothing transpired.

She glanced around to see if anyone else may have taken notice. Most of the passengers were still below with just a few women lined up for the galley stove. The sailors appeared to be going about their normal business. Everything existed as it should be—except for herself. Her confusion grew into a sick, thudding headache and she tried to pretend it

never happened—that it was some kind of waking dream.

Something beyond herself pulled her eyes back to where she first saw the green fireball. At first, there was nothing but the tranquil purple-black waters. A moment later, a faint orange glow appeared while a stain of black smoke rolled skyward. A terrible realization became clear. A column of smoke at sea could only be caused by a ship on fire. *A ship in grave peril!*

She searched the decks for a crewman, spotting the boatswain near the galleyhouse—a young sailor liked by the passengers. She gathered her skirt and with her fingers still biting with pain, moved towards him. Her legs were uncertain and she stumbled on the pitching deck as if she had drunk too much wine.

How she hated the sea.

“Mister Olsson, I see smoke!” She struggled with her breath. “I believe there might be a ship afire.”

He followed her outstretched arm, searched a moment, then his eyes locked onto the tendril of black smoke. His expression twisted as it veered from scepticism to one of alarm. He summoned the ship’s master.

Stepping out of his cabin, Captain Olof Liedberg shrugged into his black coat. A short, well-fed man with straggling brown hair and a trimmed black beard, tugged his cap and waved over the first mate. They waded through the passengers who were filing out of the steerage, the mate carrying his towering bulk behind his captain and the boatswain like a man-of-war among sloops. The captain extended the telescope, and swaying to the motion of the ship, adjusted the brass tubes. When the glass was in focus, he held it on the twist of smoke, appraising the magnified and inverted scene the optics presented. His expression was set, his rigid eyes curious.

“You possess a marvellous power of sight, Alvina-Kristina Gabrielsson of Kisa. A ship afire it is!” With lungs of leather, he hailed orders to change course for the burning ship. From the decks to high in the masts, the ship erupted with activity. The captain returned his eye to the spyglass, his mouth set firm.

The young woman tapped the captain’s arm. She had the look of a frightened child. “Just before I saw the burning ship . . .”

“Yes?” the captain asked. His mild eyes glowed in a weatherworn face. She stood considerably taller and he had to look up.

“I saw a green ball of fire that when exploded made my eyes quite ache with its brightness. The ocean and atmosphere were felt to be full of electricity. Some,” she lowered her voice to a hush, “went on my hands.”

The captain chuckled, amused and somewhat enchanted by her charms. “Do not make your mind uneasy, my dear. That is simply a manifestation of St. Elmo’s fire.”

“Nothing could have startled me more completely.” She didn’t dare mention the world losing its motion. He would think her quite mad.

He smiled as he placed his hand gently on her shoulder. “It is not an uncommon thing at sea.” He put the telescope back to his eye. The woman could sense the captain also saw something uncommon. Something uncommon for both a land dweller and a man of the sea: Something so uncommon he was unwilling to speak of it. Neither was willing to speak of the uncommon.

The vivid fires of the sun rose from its berth beyond the distant waves, blushing the towers of canvas and setting fire to the glimmering wave crests. The light played backward and forward over the woman’s face as the long, early morning shadows of sail, rigging and ratlines followed the motion of the ship. A conflict between the wind, sea and the ship heightened into a sharp struggle. The captain countered with orders roaring into the shrouds as the stubborn wind yielded into acquiescence, like a woman’s resistance giving way in her lover’s arms. Alvina-Kristina knew from the creaking of the timbers, the particular heave of the ship, that the wind was holding steady. She felt the ship pick up its stride in the water.

Disaster struck.

A brilliant flash burst from the burning ship. Some seconds later, a roar thundered across the waves to give voice to the blast. The ship was gone. All gone. Standing with the captain, boatswain and the first mate, Alvina-Kristina uttered an inhaling sort of scream.

“Thirteen seconds elapsed between the explosion and its report,” Captain Liedberg said, his low voice grave. “Therefore, the imperilled vessel remains precisely two and a half miles from our own.”

“It must have been carrying munitions to explode with such fury,” the boatswain said.

“We can ascertain, Mr. Olsson, if not the cause which has occasioned the catastrophe, at least the terrible effect it produced.”

“May their souls be with God,” Alvina-Kristina whispered, her voice jagged with pain.

“No sense in attempting a rescue now,” the first mate said.

The captain collapsed the telescope with a sharp click. “Fortunately, Mr. Rödin, it is I who is in command and not you! We will continue on. Humanity commands us.”

A few minutes of dreadful silence ensued—a flash of light! Using a mirror to reflect the sun, desperate survivors sent one flash after another to guide the ship to their rescue. A chorus of excitement erupted from the decks and into the towering shrouds as the ship adjusted its course.

One of the reflections seared into Alvina-Kristina’s eyes, so intense it blinded her. Her legs gave way, and clinging to the bulwark, she collapsed to her knees. Wavering in a realm of darkness, a cold dread overwhelmed her like a black wind. She sensed herself drifting into a place where no one else could follow. Another of those foreboding messages consumed her that too often came to her without warning or invitation—surreal, mesmerizing, enchanting—but never wrong. It spoke to her in utter silence and yet with a deafening roar.

A great evil will soon be amongst you.

Something awful, something dreadful, was in the making.

Eight survivors will be brought aboard. The jackals will bring terror and tyranny, misery and cruelty, violence and anguish.

Death.

This ship was too tiny to offer the crew and passengers sanctuary from their horrors.

As the black mists of her vision drifted away, the premonition whispered its final message. *One of the eight is not among the wolves . . .* and she knew, at that moment, her simple existence would never again be the same.

PART I

MINE IS YESTERDAY, I KNOW TOMORROW

Book of the Dead (3500 BC)

CHAPTER 1

AUGUST 6, 2016
CAPE LOOKOUT STATE PARK, OREGON

Perched at the edge of the cliff with the steady roar of the surf pounding the beach 100 feet below, Jennifer Burke calibrated her ultrahigh frequency magnetometer. She returned to a portable camping table, sat in a folding chair, glanced at her laptop and was pleased with the readings.

She, along with the other four members of the crew, had set up their field lab at the northern tip of a peninsula. A heavily wooded spot concealed them within the soft shadows of the overcast day.

Through a tight gap in the foliage, she watched Professor Fleming assist two of the other students, Bob Scranton and Stuart Roberts, to mount the video camera on a tripod. It was a beast of a camera with a telescopic lens perhaps powerful enough to bring out features on Mars. In his early forties, the professor packed a significant waistline and fought to catch his breath from the hike and set-up. He took off his beige canvas hat to wipe his forehead with a sleeve.

Sitting beside her, Russell ‘Cosmo’ Wynn, a curly black-haired sophomore, activated the transmitter linking three custom-made buoys to their laptops. He wore a Los Angeles Dodgers baseball cap backwards, and thinking the rugged look enhanced his masculinity, hadn’t shaved in about four days. There were four other laptops monitoring the live feed from the cameras along with various other instrumentation, including the buoys deployed five miles from shore triangulated a hundred yards apart.

“We’re live, Professor. All three buoys transmitting,” Cosmo reported

with a wide smile as Fleming joined them.

“Hopefully, this time the radio reception won’t be too adversely compromised by the event,” Fleming said through his British accent.

“The buoys are grounded with anchors which should negate the radio interference,” Jennifer said. Brushing her fingers through her short, sassy brown hair, she noted Fleming consulting his watch every thirty seconds or so and wished he would calm down—but they were right in the middle of a tourist trap, on a Saturday no less. All it would take would be one yahoo wandering right into their operation. Or worse, a park ranger. Their cover story—should they be forced to explain their field lab—was that they were studying whales.

Bob Scranton and Stuart Roberts followed the professor to the table. Scranton stood at an average five-nine, but Roberts, lanky and towering at six-five, made Scranton appear much shorter than his actual height. Scranton possessed uncannily small ears, concealed by his long blond hair, looking like a six year-old’s ears grafted on a full-grown man.

Almost worthy of a tease, they could feel the tension shake out of Fleming’s body. “We cannot bring any attention to ourselves. Once the event has concluded, we lay low in town until it is dark enough to retrieve the buoys.”

“You hear that, Cosmo?” Jennifer said while typing on her keyboard. “Don’t bring any attention to yourself.”

“I’m not, Muffins. You’re the one smashing your fingers against the keyboard. You can probably hear it from the beach.”

She continued to pound the keyboard like she would an old-fashioned Underwood typewriter. “You’re the attention seeker wearing Daisy Duke shorts.”

He looked at her with a kind of lost expression. “Daisy who?”

“Oh, my Lord! From that old show—*The Dukes of Hazzard*. Daisy Duke wore cut-off jeans so short it was indecent.”

“Oh.” He looked unimpressed as he did his own typing—with significantly less noise than Jennifer. “It’s obvious, Muffins, that I have a more cerebrally enhanced taste in television entertainment.”

She slapped the table. “You’re wearing girly shorts!”

“They’re three inches above my knees.”

“My point. Look at Scranton’s shorts.”

Scranton’s cargo shorts fell to his mid-shins. “Those aren’t shorts.”

Cosmo stood up. “Real shorts, real legs, real tan, real man—and tattoo free.” He sat back down, resuming his study of the data streaming from the three buoys.

“You could use those ridiculous shorts for hot yoga. I’m surprised no one has beaten—”

Cosmo jerked forward, dragged his chair over the dirt and roots closer to the table, closing nose to nose with the monitor. “Uh-oh.”

“What do you mean by *uh-oh*?” Roberts asked.

Cosmo said nothing. No one moved. No one spoke.

“*Uh-oh* is something bad, isn’t it?” Roberts said.

The tension ratched up a notch with Cosmo’s silence. He keyed a command to the laptop controlling the buoys. One set of the four measurements displayed a series of undulating lines. One data set peaked significantly while another became agitated.

“What does *uh-oh* mean?” Roberts’ mind binging on his internal fears overshadowed his mounting frustration of not getting a reply. Jennifer looked over to Cosmo’s computer, trying to understand what the *uh-oh* inferred.

Cosmo licked his lips and looked at the professor. “We have company!”

“Company! What kind of company?” Fleming asked.

“Some kind of boat.”

Fleming leaned closer to the monitors. “Who?”

“We’ll find out in a minute.” Cosmo controlled the large video camera with a joystick and panned to the right. “There—a yacht.”

“Ooooooh, richie-richies,” Jennifer said. “Nice boat.”

“At least it’s not military,” Fleming said, relieved. “Do you think they are just passing through?”

Scranton leaned over Cosmo’s shoulder. “Goddammit! They’re at the precise distance from shore to the center of the zone. Dead center! No chance in hell is this coincidental.”

“What if they see the buoys?” Roberts asked. “They’ll know we’re here.”

The professor glanced at some switches on the table. “Mr. Scranton, prepare to scuttle the buoys. But only do so if it is apparent they have been discovered.”

“I think we should play it safe and scuttle them now,” Roberts said.

“Chill, dude,” Cosmo said. “They’re gray, have a low profile, and are hard to see.”

“Good thing we designed them to be scuttled,” Jennifer said.

“We can never be too careful.” Fleming stuffed an unlit pipe in his mouth.

“Those aren’t cheap and we’ll lose the data,” she added.

“No, they were not inexpensive, Miss Burke. Losing the data would be an even greater loss.”

Scranton and Roberts grabbed some cameras and binoculars and made their way to the edge of the cliff to watch the boat, Scranton muttering profanities the entire way.

“How much time remaining until the event?” Fleming asked.

“Twenty-three minutes and . . . mark, 10 seconds,” Cosmo replied.

“That’s loads of time,” Jennifer said. “We’ll find out soon enough if they are passing through or decide to stick around.”

The camera stopped panning. The image of the yacht was sharp and steady. “That’s a Canadian flag it’s flying,” Cosmo noted.

“Canadians?” Fleming said, a little perplexed.

“No one in their right mind would deliberately go into the zone at time zero,” Jennifer said. “I really think that they’re at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“If they’re in the zone at time zero, Muffins, they’ll be a lot more than in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Cosmo said, holding a trace of a laugh.

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Bowlegged and hunched, Tom Trasler tried to counter the sway of *The Salty Dog*’s aft deck while pressing the BlackBerry tighter against his right ear, a finger plugging the opposite.

“Drop twenty-eight thousand on the counteroffer and . . .” He was losing the reception. The thirty-three year-old pressed the device tighter against his ear. “Sally, Sally, I can’t hear you. Sonuvabitch, I lost her!” The phone went dead, with just classic Beatles beating out of a boombox filling the silence of the terminated conversation. Tom nearly squeezed the circuits from the BlackBerry while redialling the office.

Though the ride over the waves was a little too rough for Carol Parker’s liking, Tom’s thirty year-old wife matched the rhythm of the

seas without spilling a drop of her brandy. “I told you to get an iPhone,” she said.

The dour look Tom returned was well worth the tease. The wind blew his brown shoulder-length hair across his face while he redialled three times, still not getting through.

“Why now? Why? Why?” Tom shook the phone.

Tall with wavy black hair, Carol flaunted her figure with a tight beige pantsuit unzipped to the level of an overloaded bra. She wore a pale, yet photogenic complexion that held no sibling resemblance to Ralph, her sandy-haired half-brother piloting the yacht. She took another sip of brandy. The gem on her wedding finger—a boulder of a diamond flanked by a smaller pair on each side worth a year’s common wages—clinked against the glass.

“Isn’t he supposed to be on vacation?” Alice Cousineau said, brushing her short auburn hair from her eyes and finishing with a giggle. The nineteen year-old spoke with a mild French Canadian accent. She was young, yes, but had no wide-eyed innocence about her.

“This is vacation for him.” Carol smiled tolerantly and took another sip of brandy while relaxing on the aft deck’s couch not far from where Alice sat. It was overcast, windy yet agreeably warm. Though Tom wore a jacket, Alice, barely five-foot and 90 pounds wet, was more than comfortable in her yellow tube top. She never forgave God for making her look like a pre-adolescent boy, though the short haircut was her own doing.

“Come on, Trasler, chill and have a drink.” Charlie Mason, on the opposite side as Carol and Alice, held a list resulting from the excess of alcohol consumed, not the choppy seas. A towering carrot-topped twenty-two year-old with a matching full beard, he was the company’s IT specialist for the big meeting in Long Beach, but also the target of a surreptitious attempt by Tom and Carol to set him up with Alice. To say the set-up didn’t work out would be like saying that the maiden voyage of the Titanic went a tiny bit awry.

Carol pursed her ruby painted lips into a sensually enticing pout at Tom and patted the space next to her.

“Come on, sit and relax, Tom.”

The soured look she got back from Tom was not what she strove for, though exactly what she anticipated.

“This dead zone is about to cost me a two million dollar deal and you expect me to relax?” Still in denial over Montreal relocating to Washington, Tom tugged his prized Expos baseball cap and leapt up the ladder to the flying bridge. “Take us closer to shore, Ralph. Hurry!”

Ralph, a thirty-nine year-old man of average displacement with a broad, clean-shaven and unremarkable face, put his hand in the small of his back and grimaced as his spine cracked. He glanced at the GPS, looked up to Tom’s six-foot-one level, and gave him a sharp look.

“We’re on vacation—including you.”

“We’re on a business trip, Ralph.”

“Not until we arrive in Long Beach. Until then, we’re on vacation. Mellow.”

Tom lost the friendliness in his eyes. “I’ll mellow when I close the deal.”

Ralph toasted the world with a potent Bacardi and Coke and drank. He took a deep drag of his cigarette, smiling as continued to drink, thoroughly enjoying Tom’s torment.

Tom’s deep brown eyes were venom as he thumped down the ladder. Once on deck, he jabbed his finger at Carol as if she was to blame, the look he gave her screamed profanities. Dressed in jeans and a blue polo shirt that were woefully under-classed by his Prada leather jacket, he continued to scrutinize the BlackBerry for the all-important signal. He could feel his frustration creep into cold panic.

“Forget it, Trasler, come and have a drink,” Charlie said, holding up a 40-ounce bottle of vodka, more empty than full. Alice noticed Tom’s fixated eyes on the bottle, homing in on it like a missile’s targeting lock. She was rough when she snatched it from Charlie and took it inside the galley.

“What was that all about?” Charlie asked as Alice returned.

Alice sat back down and crossed her legs above the knees. She was all legs with blue jean cut-offs so high they might be panties. She boasted a perfect tan. “Tom doesn’t drink.”

“But he drank last night.”

“He’s allowed a glass of brandy when he smokes his cigars,” Carol said. “Once a week, under supervision, and that’s it.”

Tom didn’t appreciate Carol’s response. Not so much as what was said, but her tone of voice. He was tempted to counter about the thirty or

so pounds she ought to lose, but getting cut off from sex for at least a couple of weeks wasn't worth it.

Charlie threw Alice a harsh look, still bitter at her less than delicate rejection of him. There was no subtle brush-off. She delivered an outright get-the-hell-out-of-my-life rant, then turned against Tom and Carol for the ill-conceived set-up with another overdone tirade. The mood remained toxic.

The Beatles degraded into half static, like a radio station drifting while driving under some high-tension power lines, except the music played from the boombox's internal drive.

They all exchanged unsettled expressions as Tom gave up trying to fix the issue and turned it off. He bent over the flame of his lighter to light a cigarette. He took a couple of deep drags to quell his anxieties, all the while keeping a sharp eye on the BlackBerry for a flicker of life.

As if something was dragging him away in a trance, Tom's eyes drifted from the phone. Not because he gave up hope of reacquiring a signal, but because of a creeping awareness of a low buzzsaw sound. What alarmed him was the realization that this sound had been in the background for quite some time and he just took notice of it now.

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Cosmo looked at the countdown clock on his screen. He changed his voice to low and steady. "This is Apollo Launch Control; we are at T-minus—"

Jennifer slapped his bare leg above the knee with a resounding smack. "Will you stop that!"

"You're too wound up, Muffins."

"I agree with Jennifer," Scranton said, returning from the lookout. "You're no Jack King." Cosmo laughed and the two exchanged a fist bump.

"Like, I'm supposed to know who Jack King is?" Jennifer said.

"Ya," Cosmo said, Scranton nodding in agreement.

"Jack King, the legend—indeed," Fleming said, his eyes twinkling as he added to the tease. They could see Jennifer tense up; the way her hands clawed like a prehistoric carnivore got them all chuckling.

She muttered something unintelligible and resumed her attack on her keyboard. She stopped typing with a lurch. "Oh, you've got to be kidding

me!” Jennifer gasped on her words. “Professor, big trouble!”

Fleming’s pipe, still unlit, froze in his mouth. After the initial shock, he withdrew it. “What is it?”

“We have more company. A helicopter.”

“Who?”

“Uncle Sam,” Cosmo reported. His tone, along with the look he gave, was dour to say the least.

“Bloody hell!”

“Are you certain it’s military?” Jennifer asked Cosmo.

“It’s an army Chinook helicopter.”

“Anyone but the military,” Fleming said. “This is distressing.”

“What are they up to?” Jennifer asked. The worry tightened around her words, squeezing them.

“You can be sure it’s nothing good,” Cosmo replied.

“First the yacht and now the military,” Jennifer said. “Just how many others know about this? I thought it was just us!”

“I think we should abort,” Roberts said.

“And miss this?” Cosmo said. “Dude, this is Hollywood!”

“Cosmo, there’s one thing about watching a Hollywood movie and another being a disposable character in it,” Jennifer said.

“You’re not the disposable character, Jennifer. Plucky comic relief, maybe.”

“How can you joke at a time like this?”

Fleming glanced at the image feed of the Chinook displayed on one of the laptops. “Please, Mr. Wynn. Focus. Note the probes mounted on the fuselage.” Fleming clamped his pipe back in his mouth.

Cosmo controlled another of the video cameras to track it. “They have a bigger budget than us.”

“Indeed.” Fleming lit his pipe, smouldering with a previous bowl’s embers. He glanced at Stuart Roberts standing at the edge of the cliff, following the Chinook with his binoculars. “Be assured, Mr. Roberts, if we see the military taking notice of the buoys, they shall be immediately scuttled and we flee in great haste.” He faced Jennifer. “How’s the transmission from the buoys?”

“Signal is compromised by about 60%, but as predicted, the anchors are doing their job acting as a ground. We’re just about twenty minutes from the event. My guess is that those on the boat are pretty much in a

full radio blackout by now.”

“And their electronics going to shit,” Cosmo said.

“Language, Mr. Wynn!”

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Above the ambient noises of the boat, Tom tuned into the whup-whup-whup of the helicopter off their port bow, flying at an altitude of three hundred feet about a half-mile ahead. It headed west—perpendicular to their due south course. Tom wiped the hair from his face and tightened his Expos cap. He looked at Carol in an absent, distracted sort of way as if she had something to do with it.

“Ralph!” Carol indicated the approaching helicopter with a nod of her head, her hair a fountain of black as it trailed to leeward. “What is going on?”

She directed the question at Ralph with good reason. Still wearing his old army jacket, he had served in the Canadian Army for eighteen years. Easing the chrome-plated throttle, he slowed *The Salty Dog* to quarter speed. Ralph stood and stretched a kink from his back. He recognized it as a CH-47 Chinook—an army transport helicopter.

“A Chinook. Bloody loud bastards to fly in,” Ralph said.

The Chinook veered abruptly, now headed directly towards the yacht. The whup-whup-whup of the dual rotors beat the air like war drums.

Tom lifted a hand to his forehead. “I don’t believe this.” He slipped the BlackBerry into its belt holster and stood still, swaying against the ship’s motion. “They’re coming right for us, Ralph. Why?”

“No idea.”

Carol hunched forward, her legs pressed together while she sipped her brandy in short, incremental shots.

Ralph eased the throttle to a quiet purr.

“He has no idea why the helicopter changed course and decided to intercept us. Lovely,” Carol said, splashing another shot into her mouth.

Tom leapt up the chrome ladder to join his brother-in-law on the flying bridge. He took a sharp drag on his cigarette. “Why are they intercepting us?”

A steady eyed man with features that at first appeared severe, hard, but when Ralph flashed a smile at Tom, everything changed. “Don’t worry, we’re not doing anything wrong.”

“Then why are they coming after us?” Carol asked from below.

Ralph looked down at his half-sister. “That’s an army Chinook transport helicopter, not a gunship.”

Carol gulped a mouthful of her brandy. “Whatever the hell it is, it’s intercepting us, Ralph!”

Ralph turned up the radio to see if the helicopter was trying to call them. Dry static filled every channel, and he looked at Tom with a deadpan stare. “That’s odd.”

“What do you mean by *that’s odd*? Ralph, it’s obvious those assholes are jamming our radio!”

“Keep calm.”

“Keep calm when those Cro-Magnons are about to take us out?”

The Chinook, now less than three hundred feet ahead, stopped her forward motion. It hovered with the downwash of the propellers beating mists from the water while the cockpit windows stared menacingly at them.

“That looks like a warning not to get any closer,” Tom stammered.

“You’ve got that right.” Ralph pulled the throttle into neutral and the yacht bobbed as it drifted over the waves.

“Closer to what?” Carol asked. “What is it they don’t want us to get any closer to?”

Ralph lowered the binoculars. “Get in the dink and head to shore. I’ll pick you up after.”

Carol looked at the back of the ship to the tender hanging from its davits. “In these waves in that tiny thing? Nope, I don’t think so.”

Ralph looked at her with disconcerting eyes. “Your choice.”

Carol mouthed something profane but did not speak it.

“Look at all those weird antennas and sensors sticking from the fuselage,” Tom noted.

“Why aren’t we leaving?” Alice asked. No one responded.

Ralph studied the Chinook through his binoculars and offered Tom a static no-comment. Tom scurried down the ladder. “It’s probably on some kind of classified mission and we just happened to show up at the wrong time.”

“Come on, Tom. What kind of classified mission can they possibly do five miles off their own coast?” Carol asked.

Tom hooked a thumb at the Chinook. “They’re not here for a social.

That, and they're jamming our radios, and I very seriously think we should split—like right now!"

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Cosmo sat back with his arms crossed, grinning at the monitor. "Uncle Sam is displeased." The yacht continued to drift over the waves. The Chinook moved south then a little east. Its movements were sharp, aggressive. "Look at them freaking out over each other. Is this great or what?"

"It's great if you like drama," Jennifer said.

"Do you like drama?"

"No. I prefer comedies. This isn't a comedy."

"Where is the helicopter in relation to the zone, Miss Burke?" Fleming asked.

"They're looking for the zone but can't quite locate it," Jennifer replied. "There's a lot of indecision going on. They've gone in and out a few times."

"They should have deployed three buoys in the zone like we did," Cosmo added with a tidy boast. "We know exactly where it is."

"In situ and with all of that equipment, they must have readings." The professor's mind whirled with too many thoughts. "I would think they should pick up our buoys. They are beginning to glow with static."

The helicopter was on the move again, the yacht still drifting. "The helicopter is back in the ellipse, but slightly off center," Jennifer reported. "But they seem to be sticking around this time."

"The yacht's location?" Fleming asked.

"Thirty-two meters outside the zone," Cosmo reported.

"What's that in feet?" Jennifer asked.

"No clue, Muffins."

"I hate being called that and I hate metric. It's so un-American."

"Scientists use metric, Muffins. Get with it."

Fleming puffed a couple of smoke bombs from the pipe. "I want a sterile field lab. Only discuss the event, nothing else. Is that understood?" Neither said a word or even gave a gesture to acknowledge the command, but they understood plainly enough. "Time to the event?"

"Just over eighteen-and-a-half minutes," Cosmo replied.

"The helicopter has been in the zone long enough that the temporal

static should commence.” Fleming withdrew his pipe to lean in closer to the monitor. “There.”

“Green or red?” Jennifer asked.

Cosmo waited a moment and flashed a smile. “Green!”

“A negative event.” Fleming gave his pipe a couple of sharp puffs. “As predicted. Excellent.”

“We’re good,” Cosmo said, a wide grin creasing his stubbled face. “Are we good?” he asked Jennifer.

“We’re amazing!” The two high-fived.

* * * * *

A faint glow appeared from beneath the Chinook’s fuselage, resonating in a green-blue radiance. Tom licked his lips that suddenly turned dry. Carol opened up her camera case and bent over, switching lenses when she noticed Charlie staring at her.

“Definitely not a good idea to stare down my top. Especially when my father is your boss.” She locked the telephoto lens in place. “IT guys are a dime a dozen these days.”

Charlie yanked his eyes from her, his face flushed, and reached for his own camera case.

“You flaunt it, expect a guy to look,” Alice said critically.

“When boobs are big like mine, they get flaunted whether you try or not. Something you couldn’t possibly understand.”

Alice rolled her tongue inside her mouth while Tom glared at Carol with a sharp reproach. Carol took aim at the Chinook and the camera clicked away.

“What the hell are you doing?” Tom’s voice shrieked in a high octave of panic. “It’s bad enough that we’re seeing whatever crazy shit they’re up to, but they’ll lock us up forever if you photograph them!”

She dismissed him with a demeaning kind of wave she’d use in a bar to brush off some drunken redneck. She supported the Nikon by its telephoto lens while the camera whirled away. Charlie snapped off a picture with his Polaroid. A blue-gray film whirled from the camera. Carol glanced obliquely at him between taking frames.

“I can’t believe you were even able to find film for that antique,” Carol said and resumed taking shots.

Charlie stared at the blue-gray emulsion slowly coming to life. “I

belong to a Polaroid club. A lot of people love these cameras and I've got tons of film." His voice slurred from the excess of screwdrivers.

"I can't fathom why. The quality's crap. Besides, there's new instamatic cameras out there a lot better than that piece of garbage."

"Polaroids are still the best way to get an instant print."

"Prints? They're sooooo passé."

Charlie, drunk and feeling intimidated, put his camera away. He continued to watch the print develop. The helicopter was a distant, blurry spec and he frisbeed the wasted print over the side.

Alice became transfixed on the Chinook's fuselage as the glow increased in intensity. "I think we should leave," she said to Tom.

"What do you think I've been saying?"

"Ralph isn't about to leave," Carol said, still taking frame after frame.

"He's your brother, you tell him."

"Half-brother. Don't push it." Carol stopped taking pictures and looked up to Ralph. "Ralphy, we're leaving right now!"

"You really want to miss this?" Ralph wasn't about to leave.

"Yes, I want to miss this!" Tom said while Alice motioned for his cigarette. She sucked a huge toke off it and handed it back.

The emerald glow on the helicopter brightened and spat sparks into the air. Tom leapt up the ladder. The breath shot out of him. "Sonuvabitch, Ralphy, look!" His voice was hoarse with terror, awe, or both.

A thunderbolt of emerald voltage zapped the water with the intensity of a giant death ray. Ralph didn't reply. An odd look settled on his face. Not one of fear, but of childlike wonder. The glow pulsating on the helicopter resonated in a three or four second cycle while thunderbolts sizzled into the rotors, dissipating with violent explosions, casting a brilliant verdant reflection across the waves. The perfect silence of the explosions was downright creepy. Something releasing so much energy should at least have the courtesy to make some kind of scary-as-shit sound.

* * * * *

"The temporal static is discharging off the rotors." Cosmo's excitement remained unhidden while the others took the event far less lightly.

"Barely any TS on our buoys. I wonder why?" Jennifer asked.

"They are mostly submerged, Miss Burke," Fleming explained.

“If those dudes don’t leave the zone soon, they’re going on a long trip,” Cosmo said, grinning.

“That’s nothing to smile about, Cosmo. Peoples’ lives are at stake,” Jennifer said with disdain, just short of contempt.

“Indeed, Mr. Wynn. The situation is very grave and is not to be trivialized.” Fleming took a tobacco pouch and put a pinch in the pipe’s bowl. That’s when he noticed just how much his hands were trembling.

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The thunderbolts shot off the Chinook into the sea like an alien invasion. The emerald lightning wasn’t a flash, but a long, steady discharge. The water did not react to the voltage—no vapour, no waves, no disturbance and still no sound. Within the electrical mayhem, the Chinook commenced a descent.

“Is this great or what?” Carol said to Tom, keeping her eye pressed against the viewfinder. She squeezed off frame after frame.

“Great?” Tom’s voice rose to a decibel past full-fledged hysterical. “I thought you wanted to leave?”

“I changed my mind,” Carol said as her camera whirled away.

“How can you just change your mind?”

“It’s a girl thing.”

Yes, it was a visual extravaganza, but this wasn’t Le Cirque de Soleil. This was just a little too far over on the Darth Vader side of the entertainment genre for Tom’s liking. The Chinook continued to descend with the downwash from the rotors beating the water into a mist thick as fog. The static flared up brilliantly with a massive surge of voltage. A new sound could be heard, like someone feeding metal sheets into a tree chipper—the kind of noise that didn’t sound like something good was about to happen next. With a cannon shot, black smoke belched from the port engine. The starboard engine roared to compensate, going from full throttle—then to nothing at all. It didn’t shudder, fade, or stall—it was an instantaneous shutdown. The Chinook careened into a sharp right bank and dropped.

Ralph jolted to his feet. “She’s going down!”

Crawling with the parasitic static, both of the Chinook’s rear engines exploded. The blast had a thud felt inside the body causing the ears to pop. The rear pylon tore off while the aft loading hatch spun in the air

like someone tossing a playing card. The brilliance of the explosion lit the overcast day, blushing the white hull of the yacht within an ivory fan spreading across the gray waters. Hissing with black smoke, the fuselage cartwheeled while a meteor shower of flaming debris rained down on the water, creating leaping feathers of spray, some striking close to the yacht.

Ralph sucked in his breath. Tom's hands clutched a handhold, his biceps swelled while something within him thrilled. Carol froze her finger on the shutter. Frame after frame whirled with automatic weapon-fire rapidity. Charlie screamed like a girl and covered his eyes. Alice watched with her hand moving towards her throat, her mahogany eyes open wide.

The Chinook's cadaver slammed into the water face first, performed a slow-motion somersault, and came to a rest upside-down. The aft pylon, concealed in sputtering flame and smoke, hit the water a second later. A scarf of black smoke boiled out of the tossing gray waters, marking the spot.

"Sonuvabitch, Ralphy," Tom hushed in a low, awed voice.