

## The Water that Lures the Anchor

By every right, the colony killer named Solemnity deserved to sink. Decommissioned by nine-day storm. Assaulted by the persistent attack of a smaller, maneuverable, more capable enemy ship. Burning from the inside by the inflamed lower-decked crewman fighting to break the final door barring them of their insurgent prize. Every member on board maddened by the ever-shifting gravity as the ship climbed and surfed the unnatural burgeoning swells.

All while lost, out in the open Atlantic.

But the HMS Solemnity kept its place. Between sea and storm. Walls thick. Its rooms, floors and interiors were sealed by carpentry techniques employed by craftsmen and workers stolen from all walks of life under the sun of the British Empire. By carpenters forced to toil for their new king. Forced to ensure that no threat would prove too much for this ship. To ensure that when the enemy, nature, the men within and the waters that lure the anchor below beg for it to go under, to break apart, to sink and to stop moving, it never could.

The moving ground meant sickness in the minds and stomachs within. It meant a ship with enough stores and farms of food to feed five villages could not feed its own. It meant a command structure, containing those said to be the smartest alive in the fields of naval warfare, could not find the breadth to finish a single thought. It meant Jensen, a stranger to voyage over open sea, cowered within the Officer's Quarters hoping for the sure words of a brighter mind.

Jensen dwelled over the unspoken command that might lift the unwell fog clouding his every notion as the mad scramble of men played out before him. In his fear he could only wait. For the Captain. For anyone, to give the order that might ease the knot twisting stomach to heart.

Jensen was the lowest ranked officer in the room due to an emergency conscription, though what he had been conscripted for was a mystery long forgotten. Even under tame seas he required escort to help him back to his own quarters. The naval jargon and day to day workings of the ship were lost on him. Being raised by a rank and file family who sent him to the regiment camps he learned how to judge a wound while under fire and how to march in the endless lines drawn by the King during the aftermath of the Seven Year war.

In truth he was only a passenger. A transfer whose false papers told the crew that he was under orders to join the effort in pacifying the rising tensions of the New World and Solemnity took him without question.

He watched as nameless Officers of unknown rank clutched to their stomachs and to the furniture nailed to the floors. Not one of them with the mind to speak. All of them holding tight as those at the door strained to keep it shut long enough for a plan to form.

Water streamed down the walls and drops fell from the ceiling. Scattered fires and their back and forth battles with the creeping seawater clouded the air with steam and smoke. A small puddle of water moved around the room, sometimes flooding Jensen's corner.

"It's done." The Captain said. Voice soft with defeat. Cracking from dehydration. "No orders to give," he knelt, "none left to order." The Captain's attention was on a map laid out on the smooth carved table he clung to.

Transfixed, he loomed over the lavish portrayal of the world. Colors no longer holding. His eyes watered over the blurring borders of the water-logged parchment. The red-inked countries of the British Empire bleeding into the sky-blue sea.

The Captain held his world-spanning gaze. Deaf to the battering of mutiny on the other side of the door.

Outside the room men were shouting, but if they shouted words Jensen couldn't make them out.

Jensen's only thoughts were half-formed memories of the men he used to march with. Loyal men who'd never turn to what those outside had done to send the Officers running into their Quarters. He never guessed a crew on a ship like this could be anything other than tight knit. He never guessed it could be like this.

A vibration in the floorboards brought quiet to those outside the door and it brought what Jensen mistook as the spark of life back to the eyes of the room as they turned to the Captain.

Jensen's mood lifted, for the rebellious outside had been soothed and not by violence. He listened for the miracle that calmed them. For the good fortune about to be spoken.

Words from the Captain came. Spoken to the map. Not to the crew. Spoken to the paint stroke that used to be home.

"There's no coming back from this."

Cold-water floating. Jensen missed the greatest promotion of his life. Vision foggy. He imagined Solemnity submerged and that the water's surface was far above him. His head ached as the colors and lines before him shaped into a tightly growing forest that left no room for the river surrounding him.

The woods swirled when the cold currents changed course. Feeling came back in freezing shudders. The forest snapped into place and he saw the trees for the lines of boarded ceiling they were. His back brushed the floor and he grabbed hold of the door frame as the waters tried to carry him from the room.

Clog in the damn. He barred the others from passing until the strength to stand in the knee-high current came back to him.

He was still in the Officer's Quarters. He looked for the Captain. The waterline rose to his chest. He held tight to the frame as the others were brought back into the room. The severity of the ships bucking clear in the blunt trauma on their passing faces. Dead bodies bobbing, he watched the waters rush them back out from the room and down the dark hall.

His grip tightened when the thuds of cannon-fire spoke through the frame. Telling him that Solemnity still floated and that the enemy was unaware that the echelons of command had parted. Jensen also felt a new malice to the way the ship moved. As though the ship spun as it climbed, crested and made its way down the waves.

Jensen spotted the Captain after a tilt of the ship cleared the floating objects from the room. Wedged under the smooth carved table, the blue-cloaked Captain was face-down in the water. Scraps of map wrapped to hand and sleeve. The leaving currents failed to pull him free.

Jensen kept his eyes on the Captain. Hoping to see the Captains face turn from under the water and give some form of direction.

“What do I do?” He asked the Captain.

The ship lurched and turned, bringing the officers and lower crew back into the room and hiding the Captain.

After some time, the sounds of the water became the sounds of his hometown and while still holding tight, he shut his eyes. He tried to see the docks where small boats knocked softly over the smooth lake and just as the pattering of rain washed over the small-town voices the Captain spoke. Using the deep voice of Jensen's old Lieutenant, the Captain gave his order.

“For those who fight for the King. For Majesty. Do not be the one to let that sun set. Go down there. Cut free the anchor,” the buoyant body said. “Cut it free.”

“The anchor?” Jensen asked and though it took some time the Captain’s silence eventually answered. Someone down there had dropped the anchor and now that four-ton hook dangled down in tides that countered the storm.

The waters swirled around the room and retreated, revealing the gold and red rug. Jensen couldn’t look long, for the waters came back quick and freed the Captain.

“Where is it?” He asked as the Captain passed him.

Jensen never got an answer and he hesitated for as long as he could before setting out on his search for passage to the floors below.

Jensen started off lost and things only got worse as he climbed, descended and clung to the burnt artisan carved halls and red rugs of the floor. The currents carried people, broken candlesticks, canteens with fresh water, charred pieces of wood, papers holding orders, and letters from loved ones. Under the water was broken glass and everything else too heavy to float.

The corridors of this floor-like maze meant many corners were dead-end fakes with broken shard steps making every inch gained a disconcerting guess and when gravity was against him he would often lose his grip and get swept up by the currents that would drop him off in new places that looked like the old but he never could tell and when the floor became the red-furnished wall or when the wall would turn into a hard sculptured floor he would climb and crawl and when he found that the doors he had been leaving open were being shut by the waters rushing behind him he began to see that he had seen these halls before and that the halls he walked were taking on the appearance of those he hadn’t and when the waters fell flat to the

wall, when the ship turned in its twist, Jensen learned to leap over the door frames, even the closed ones as the ground had given way more than once and the drop into the room below was a terror that came close to drowning him and as time passed he began to believe that he was the only one alive that was left, that this ship couldn't last and that it wouldn't be so bad if the passage he found led to the storm above the deck.

Often, the ship would collect everything at the lowest hanging section and when the next tilt came it would crash through the halls in one big wave. Or, when the waters were quick, they would hit the corners and frames and spray as a mist that forced his eyes shut and after long enough the closed-eyed images brought to his mind the marble-eyed face of Perseus and though Perseus tried to show him Solemnity for the labyrinth it was, he could not hear the words that came from the statues mouth. It couldn't speak. Not to Jensen. Not on this floor at least.

There was one moment, where the ship was level enough for him to rest. But all he could do was watch the strange faces pass over the slow-moving waters like a low river moves the many petals of fall. Each one of them brought to his mind the villain. Whoever it was. The one who dropped the anchor. The killer. Who must have known what was being done and though Jensen could not see the villain's face he knew that he laughed and rejoiced over every nightmare turn and glass jagged step and that he, the villain, was there, cheering for every salt-water drop coughed out from Jensen's lungs. The villain became the voice of every ill-omened creak that shot out from the woods of the ship as they bent to the waters that lured the anchor.

Slowing down. Giving up. He tried talking himself into action, but with no mind of his own he used the only words that came. Scattered half-remembered phrases, words from an old Lieutenant.

“Remember and move. You’ll forget all aches and complaints. Don’t dwell over what doesn’t make you faint. Don’t bother to think about your complaints, not one of them bothers to think of you.” They were wartime goading’s. Small snippets crafted to keep men marching despite the danger. Tools for superseding the sane voice that can sometimes exist in the minds first sent to the front lines.

“If it’s still in me to act, I can act well. Think of the sun and what it would mean to let it set. What it would mean to not take the next step. If it’s still in—,” the vibrating floorboards interrupted him. Jensen latched to a broken lantern post jutting from the wall, unsure of what it meant.

Once the vibrations ended, Jensen realized that the anchor had been reeled in. The halls, while still moving with the storm, no longer twisted.

“Finally, men who know duty. Knew to take control and take in that anchor.” Jensen said, “Might not know they’re the last ones left. That this ship is more theirs than mine. That they just need to take control, if control can still be taken.” He stripped the undershirt from a floating passerby and tore it into strips.

“The ship is yours. I’m giving you the command you need to get us out from the storm and away from the enemy ship. I’m to be dropped off in the New World. That’s all I know. That’s it.”

He pulled the strips tight to curb the bleeding in his feet. “What matters most, is that this ship does not get taken. Remember. Solemnity was built to represent,” Jensen lost track of the thought, “if we go down, the world will know. They will know the sun can set. That the night that comes after, won’t be ours. The eternal day must be kept. The sun will never set so long as

we don't lose," he stepped over the crew while snapping his fingers, "the solemnity of the British horizon." He finished, trying to hide his contempt.

"Or maybe, you're all heading to the New World with me? Colonists on a Kings ship? If I had known, I would've helped. I'm with you. How many of you are there?" He asked. Trying to keep his tone light. Trying not to think of the violence that had him cowering in the corner of the Officer's Quarters. "Where do you need me?"

In the center of the hall he noticed a glimmer. An iron clasp. Passage to the lower deck.

"What can I do to help?" He asked as he reached for it.

The crew never answered. The floorboards did with a familiar vibration. Turning Jensen frantic. He lifted the hatch just before the ship could jolt the currents rapid.

Sour fumes sprang out while waters from the labyrinth poured in. Quickly, he climbed down the steep wood steps and closed the hatch above him. Sealing the floor from the one above.

Vapors burned his eyes as they adjusted to the dark shapes forming the hall before him. It was a living cavern. Stalactite, thick enough to hang and sway, liquid enough to grow and form fell with plodding claps.

Noxious red apples floated over the slow-moving batters alongside protrusions of crew and animal. His nose told him of rotten meat, ale, grease, dead farmlands and vile mixtures of every herb and ingredient of the compromised kitchens. The flour-made coagulates were slow swirling and Jensen's first step into it brought back his childhood marching. The smell of death then was nothing compared to the smell of it mixed with the stores of the kitchen.



“Everything outside my control. All complaints. Make no memory of them. They’ve no memory or concern of me. No excuse. There’s no excuse for those who fail before their body does.” Jensen said. Using the repetitions to keep his mind from he was walking through.

“When the enemy, pain, weather and sickness are against me. Remember them for what they are. Distractions. Distractions that won’t remember me once I’m gone. So long as I can carry on.”

The viscosity of the mixture made it easier for him to stay standing through the tilts of the ship. Every foot felt planted. Every step, slow until the waters that lured the anchor grabbed hold.

The sound of the waterline slapping the ship outside turned to the sound of boiling water over flame. The cavern floors and walls began to move, and Jensen fell right in.

Carrot in the stew. Blinded. Unable to breathe. He reached out but every tightened grip on every perceived surface was only ever sludge between fingers. He fought against the potion as it thickened. He struggled as the closed-eyed images came back, showing him the floor for what it was. A rot drought of the witch who stewed. Of the witch he saw. Ready to eat what this floor could become.

Once or twice he heard the grunt and felt the struggle of another. He felt a hand, the wooden spoon, but nothing held on this floor, where he could not hear the wicked words that were said, only the cackle.

A favorable retrieve between the valley of two swells gave Jensen the chance to collect himself. He wiped a slab of the mixture from his face. He looked for whoever it was that had been there with him.

Caked in the pale stew of the deck was the shape of a man without any features. The closest thing to familiar were the eyes but if they contained any emotion, Jensen couldn't see it.

The cavern, the creature came near and Jensen, immobilized by its approach, did nothing as he was struck in the stomach. Jensen fell back and was caught by the cavern wall.

“Where's the Captain?” It said. Voice soft.

It was then the old urge in Jensen resurfaced. He may have been weak, but he wasn't weak enough to lose to some concoction incapable of throwing a proper punch. Another blow came, this one slipped off his back as Jensen reached down, latched his fingers around the shape of its leg. He yanked the thing right from under it.

“Why didn't you take us from the storm?” It asked, lying on its back. The question slowed Jensen, who was aiming to press his foot to the neck of the cauldron creature. Not knowing if pressing its face into its own creation would kill it, or only serve to make it stronger.

“Who are you?” Jensen asked.

“He was dead when he told me. The waters below. We can't let it.” His voice was broken. Before Jensen could ask again, it flung the stew up, into Jensen's eyes. Then Jensen was pressed deep enough to where he could feel the deck of the floor against his back.

Fighting for breath, fighting for leverage, the retrieve ended, and the witch stirred the currents renewed.

They tore and clawed at each other and though he didn't know how or when, Jensen soon found he had the upper hand. He strangled its neck from behind as it took him deeper into the bowels. They came to an abrupt stop when the arm of the creature got caught in the iron ring of a hatch. Jensen held on, waiting for the rest of the stew to pass. Jensen stood up. He untangled the arm from the ring. It couldn't have been a human, but Jensen knew better than to check.

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In a storm like this the ship that maintained control, maintained the battle and once every few hours, when the sea allowed for it, the USS Jamestown, secret frigate of the Continental Navy, fired ten shots on the enemy ship. Jamestown was dead in the water before this miracle storm came and saved them from Solemnity, that two-hundred cannon monstrosity.

The Captain of Jamestown knew a rebel ship taking down the King's warship would do more to aid the colonies than any gunpowder redcoat land squabble ever could. It could rally the other countries; it could inspire France. It could show the world that the seas were no longer under British control.

Taking the Colony Killer for themselves, letting them surrender, was brought up and discarded. The Captain knew that the numbers on Solemnity could overwhelm the fifty people aboard Jamestown. And though it was strange to the Captain that the enemy never tried to fire back and that they had given up on steering their ship, the Captain of Jamestown only saw it as a trap. He saw the lure, a ploy to make them think it would be safe to board but the Captain refused to be tricked and so he ordered Jamestown to fire and to never quit.

The Captain looked up from his map as a lower-deck crewman came into the room and spoke between ragged breaths.

“Mutiny below. Killed four. In the anchor room. We couldn’t stop him.”

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“Understand your part. Whether you want it or not.” Jensen’s inner mantras of duty were the only thing allowing him to continue on. The only thing keeping the visions in his head silent as he slipped out from the cauldron and into the drum.

On this floor the water was cold and only came up to his ankle. He could take great deep breaths of air without any of the sick and smoke and death of the floors above. By some miracle, there was even a lantern, still lit, not far from the hatch. Unlike all the broken lantern posts that jutted from the walls in the floors above, this one dangled from a hook, built into the ceiling.

He knelt and used the water to clean off the floor above. The soft flame of the candle flickered in the splashing water.

Under the waterline, the rungs of the massive chain being pulled in echoed the floor like dull thunder striking the ship. It rippled the water and set off the pain in his feet. Between the strikes came a rhythmic tapping, from what must be the spool, reeling the anchor.

Every hit rifled his nerves, interrupted his sayings and brought to him open-eyed images of what he had seen in the floors above.

“Remember what it would mean,” Spoken under the pounding of the drum, “to put this off. Remember the letter your brother sent. What it would mean to not take the next step. Remember—.” The drums stopped. A single sob came down the hall.

“Who’s there?” Jensen asked. The floor was silent.

Jensen asked again. Afraid to go forward. He unhooked the lantern. The floor tilted and the rug's appearance moved down the hall.

He heard it again. The sound of another. Then quiet. Then came the drum.

It rattled his ribs. His grip on the lantern tightened and hand against the wall he moved on.

The drums made him think of the floors above. It made him think of the villain, the one who laughed at every glass jagged step, who must know that the storm was easing and that the waters below no longer cared to grab hold.

Jensen believed the villain was trying to tease the water back up, the anchor the lure, and if that didn't work, that four-ton anchor could rip out the floor of a weak enough ship.

Jensen sped up his pace. Every time the anchor pulled the chain tight the ship lurched, he lost a step and somewhere ahead, the wood of the ship gave off an ill-omened crack.

The closer he got the louder the drum. His heart quickened to match the anger they whipped up. He tried his mantras but if any words came out, he couldn't hear them.

He hated those sayings. The mock duty mantras. Like brand to cattle he despised how well they worked. The way they were used on everyone he knew. Small easy sayings. Right into the muds those words led his friends. Always being told how fortunate they were. To march and to fight in the glory of a King's war.

In the candlelight, just ahead, he saw a man hiding in the wall. Hiding in a crack that had formed in a pillar somewhere near the center of the ship.

Curled up. He wore the loose jacket of an Officer. His hair, wild. Pants, ragged. The patches on them spoke of lower-deck labor.

The drums stopped. Jensen came close and asked for a name. Asked him his reason to be in the wall and for him to come out and help. Jensen couldn't hear his answer. Then back came the drums and Jensen lost control.

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Jamestown cracked. Dark ocean taken. Each of them being led by the waters that lured the anchor.

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To hide there now, only helped the villain. After a strain and a snap and the breaking of lantern glass, Jensen had him out. The loss of the candlelight amidst the assault was just another slight. He pressed the man, hard into the wall.

“I don’t know why.” The man from the wall cradled his broken arm. “I don’t know why. He’s down there now.”

Jensen pressed him once more.

“I don’t know anymore. I don’t know anymore. I can’t think. My arm. It wasn’t us. An Officer did it. He came down here. Wanting to drop the anchor. Wouldn’t stop. Even after we killed him. He used the names of my kids.” He said, voice sharp. “My own kids. Right in front of me. He gave me this jacket and he gave me an order.” His good arm reached for the fissure.

Jensen pressed him once more. “It was the water that did it. That brought him down here. He ordered us to release the anchor. We had to kill him. Then more Officers came. Then violence, then fire.” He freed himself from Jensen’s grip and crawled back into the wall.

Jensen reached to press him again, but he was interrupted. Broken by a tortured wail. Jensen covered his ears. One by one they came. Breathless sounds familiar to what Jensen already knew. Gun-powdered gutturals, from the dreams that fueled his dishonest passage. Bayoneted baritones of the violence he tried to flee. Torn tenors, Jamestown’s last human heard plea.

The man in the wall was looking at Jensen. He covered his own ears, using his hand and shoulder.

Visions silenced. Jensen’s anger stifled and once it passed, the drums no longer held the power they had.

Trying for soft Jensen spoke. “Help me. Tell me where the anchor room is.”

The man pointed. “Middle of the hall.”

“Come with me.”

The man in the wall turned his head, back into the fissure and Jensen left him.

Jensen found the latch under knee high waters. Jensen tried to lift it, but the water was too heavy. The anchor dropped, there was a loud crack and for a moment Jensen thought the main mast had snapped.

The drums started up and Jensen pleaded for the strength to lift it before the next drop of the anchor could be the one that did it.

He heard movement in the water. Someone behind him. He looked up and saw the spark of recognition in the eyes of the man from the wall. Without a word the man reached his good arm in and together the two lifted the hatch open.

It was then the anchor dropped. There was a tilt of the ship and the broken-armed man slipped and he fell without sound into the dark chamber below.

Jensen called down but he never got an answer. The only thing visible was the top rung of the ladder. Gripped by fear and with no better idea, he brought them back out, his old Lieutenants and those mantras. He started them up, as best as he could remember. They all together, descended the ladder.

“I won’t complain or dwell over any end. If I die, it will be in service of what I believe to be good. If I can act—.”

the hatch above him slammed shut. Cutting out all light. His grip on the ladder tightened.

“If I drown in the dark, I’ll try and do it well. I’ll be happy to die, so long as it’s not in the cauldron above. I won’t keep tally of my aches and complaints. I won’t—.”

A sharp commanding voice came up from below. “Stay up there. Don’t come down. Don’t even try it.”

Jensen could hear him wading through the water.

“Keep clinging to the dead wood. Right where you are.”

Jensen started to move again. The voice down there grew louder. “You haven’t yet. You have it in you to recoil from the majesty of your own kind. You will not run from mine. Stay up there.”

“If I am,” He said, trying to ignore the threats below, “if I am to fight some monster while blind, I’ll, I’ll—” Jensen interrupted himself, not bothering to finish. That old, ancient urge came back to the surface. He let go of the ladder and dropped into waters colder than anything above or below. Waist deep he swung wildly. He cursed and threatened and called for an answer.

The answer came sharp and right into his shoulder blade. Jensen was stabbed, but not deep, for the waters that lured now only had one good arm and even that was now weak.

Jensen grabbed the thin wrist. His other hand pulled the broken broom handle out from his shoulder. He twisted the arm and holding the crown he pressed it down into the water.

“Don’t,” it said with an out of place softness. Lips kissing the water, Jensen pressed, not having to wonder if this would kill the creature or if it would only serve to make it stronger.