

THE BLACK SHIP

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She lay in a dead calm sea under a cloudless sky. The dog days of summer hung oppressively over the water. A heavy heat haze shimmered above the submarine's topside deck: its tough steel surface a skillet-black, baked beach littered with bodies, as the men sunned themselves before going on watch.

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Wiley steered the inflatable close to the drifting craft. Their target was an old-style wooden lifeboat, about 11 feet long, its white paint salt-faded and cracked. In the oarlocks only one oar remained, dragging in the water.

Wiley cut power to the motor and let the rubber boat nudge against the wooden one. Davis leaned over and got a grip on the starboard side of it.

"Jesus! We've got a body here!" He quickly secured the grablines on the lifeboat so the two boats wouldn't drift apart.

Wiley clambered over the side of the inflatable into the dinghy. In the bottom of the boat lay a man in a tattered gun shirt and

navy canvas pants. His pale skin seemed paper white against the dirt on his hands, face and bare feet. His thin, gray hair was unkempt and salt-caked. A skimpy salt-and-pepper beard covered the lower half of his face. Wiley felt the man's neck for a carotid pulse.

"He's alive!"

Davis radioed the sub while Wiley checked the survivor's pupils. The man was unconscious, possibly comatose.

As soon as they had transferred the man to the inflatable, Davis freed the lifeboat and they sped back to the sub. Wiley noticed how the man seemed almost weightless as they handed him up to the sailors on deck, and then lowered him carefully through the hatch abaft the superstructure.

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In the sick bay Wiley immediately began an intravenous sugar and water solution, then checked his patient for other injuries. He was just finishing his examination when the commanding officer, Commander Victor Garbut, pushed the curtain aside.

"What's the status of the survivor, Wiley?" he asked the medic.

"He's on D-five-W, sir. There are no apparent injuries, but he's badly dehydrated and suffering from exposure. The pupils are equal and reactive, so I believe he'll come around in a little while."

"Good work. Let me know as soon as he comes to." Garbut was about to step out into the passageway when Wiley handed him the survivor's clothing.

"Look at this, sir. Pretty strange. Looks like something out of *Moby Dick*. He had no personal effects on him at all."

Garbut examined the shirt and pants. "Davis found nothing on the boat, Wiley, and no indications of what ship he was from. It looks like our guest is the unknown sailor. I guess you'll just have to call him Ishmael."



Alone with the survivor, Wiley felt a distinct chill creep up his spine.

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“You’re telling me you can’t get through on any frequency? There’s not a cloud in the sky!” Garbut stood with his fists on his hips and scowled. Shapiro knew it wasn’t directed at him personally, but merely at the situation.

“There’s some sort of interference, sir. It’s weird. I get absolutely nothing on any channel, only a little static on the lower frequencies. It sounds electro-magnetic. I could understand it if there was a storm, but —,” Shapiro shrugged.

“So the message to CinCPac about our visitor didn’t get out?”

Shapiro shook his head. “No, sir, sorry.”

“All right, Sparks, keep trying.”

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Wiley was just sitting on the stool in the sick bay, looking at his unconscious patient in the bunk, when Kashogian pushed the curtain aside with his shoulder. He was cradling his left arm in a wet towel.

“I need a little of your expertise here, Doc.” Kashogian’s voice was hoarse, his face contorted with pain.

“Geez, Kash, dinner fight back tonight?” Wiley brought the cook over to the examining table and carefully pulled back the towel. The olive skin of Kashogian’s left forearm was burned in a three-inch wide swath from wrist to elbow. Wiley filled a large basin with cold water and gently placed Kashogian’s arm into it.

“That’ll take some of the heat out of it for you, Kash. You fed those stokers meat again, didn’t you? I keep telling you that if you let those zombies out of the engine room and feed them, they’ll turn on you.”

“So you tell me.” Kashogian tried to grin. “I don’t really know how it happened. One minute I was cleaning a stone-cold grill. The next minute it was as if somebody shoved me forward. My arm came down on the grill, and it was hot!”

“Have you had any dizzy spells or light-headedness lately?” Wiley asked, alternately pushing Kashogian’s eyelids up with his thumb.

“No, nothing like that. I’m telling you someone pushed me, or—well, that’s how it felt.”

“It’s okay, Kash.” Wiley placed a clean, dry dressing on his friend’s arm. “The burn is fairly superficial. I know it hurts like hell, but it’ll be better in a few days, and you’ll be poisoning people again before you know it.” Wiley unlocked the pharmacy locker and pulled out a bottle of codeine tablets. He shook two into Kashogian’s hand and handed the cook a cup of water.

“What irony,” said Kashogian after he swallowed the pills. “I left the ships because I was always getting burned, trying to cook in rough seas. I figured subs would be safer. Guess I’m doomed wherever I go.”

“Well, just be glad you haven’t the luck of old Ishmael, here.”

“What? Did you say *Ishmael*?”

Wiley looked strangely at Kashogian. “It’s just a pusser’s name for him. The Old Man thought it would be appropriate.”

“Entirely too appropriate. That gives me the creeps, Wiley.” Kashogian bent over the man’s still form. “Are you sure he’s okay? He looks like a corpse.”

“Well, you’re a real Mr. Sunshine, aren’t you? He’s not going to croak in my sick bay. Now get out of here, I have sick people to attend to.” The medic watched at the curtained doorway as Kashogian went back to the mess hall.

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Wiley finished testing a sample of his patient's blood. The red blood cell count was extremely low. No wonder the guy looked almost white. Yet it was curious that after days in an open boat, the man was neither tanned nor sunburned. He'd sucked up one IV after another, yet there was no noticeable improvement in his condition. Wiley jotted a few notes in the medical log, then turned to find his patient sitting bolt upright, his eyes wide open and staring.

Wiley was beside him in two steps. "It's okay, fella, take it easy. You're all right."

He felt cold to Wiley's touch. Wiley tried to lay him back down, but he began to struggle. Then he moaned, trying to speak.

"Ohnhh. Uhnhh." His voice had a hollow, lonely sound, like whalesong heard in the dark of a winter night.

Wiley shivered, and tried once more to get the man to lie down. The medic was amazed at the strength with which the man opposed him. The more Wiley tried to restrain him, the harder he fought and tried to swing his legs around to get off the bunk.

"Security! Security!" Wiley yelled for help before he lost his grip on the struggling man. Davis, followed by an off-duty stoker, appeared within seconds and the three of them attempted to get the man under control.

"M-m-my shhhhh-ip! Car-mil-han!" The man began to rave, repeating the same words, then lapsing into an incoherent stream of sounds. Still he struggled against the three sailors. Though he neither kicked nor punched, his limbs flailed about, knocking the stoker back into the bulkhead. Davis was slammed against the treatment table, then jerked forward. A tray of instruments crashed to the deck.

"Carmilhan! No! No! My ship!" The man kept screaming. Lieutenant-Commander Giroux ran into the sick bay and added his strength to the others. They were finally able to restrain the survivor long enough for Wiley to prepare a syringe and inject him. After some moments, he became quieter.

“I don’t believe it,” said Wiley. “I gave him enough sedative to knock out a mule and he’s still flopping around.” The man twitched and writhed under the restraints they had now placed on his arms and legs.

Giroux sent Davis and the stoker back to their posts. “The whole boat is wonky tonight. I just had to break up a fight in the heads, of all places. Do you think you can manage him all right?”

Wiley nodded. “As long as I keep him wrapped up nice and tight.”

“I’ll be in the control room. Keep me posted.”

“Aye, aye sir.”

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The C.O. kept giving his coffee cup quarter turns as he spoke to the officers in the ward room. “Let me summarize for you, gentlemen,” said Garbut. “Comms and Nav are both out. Sparks says it’s some kind of electromagnetic interference. For the moment, sonar and radar are serviceable. The Chief has his stokers working on the propulsion batteries — a snag in the power transfer, he tells me — so we’re stuck on the surface. What’s worse is that the men seem to be in an argumentative mood. We’ve had a dozen incidents in the last three hours. Suggestions, anyone?” He looked expectantly at his officers.

Sub-Lieutenant Norris paused, then spoke up hesitantly, “Maybe it has something to do with crossing the Equator, sir? We’ll be reaching it tomorrow.”

“Superstition, Mr. Norris, has no place aboard the Bluefin. Any other ideas?”

“Well, sir, it just seems that — well, it’s all happened since we sighted that lifeboat, — sir.”

The intercom behind Garbut’s left shoulder buzzed and he picked up the handset. “I’ll be right there.”

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“Radar contact at bearing 210 degrees, range 10 miles, sir. It’s moving.”

Garbut swore softly. The Bluefin was a formidable anti-submarine/anti-surface vessel, yet at the moment, unable to dive, she was practically crippled. “Close to two miles, Mr. Giroux, then all stop.”

“Aye, sir.”

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“Tonight’s video was going to be Little Shop of Horrors. I’m missing it because of you, Ishmael.” Wiley kept up a soothing stream of chatter that he hoped would relax his patient. Though his frenetic movements had ceased, the survivor still appeared to be severely disturbed about something. Then Wiley noticed the man’s breathing had become deeper and more regular.

“Now I suppose you’re going to sleep. You don’t hold up your end of the conversation very well, do you? In fact, you’re pretty lousy company. I could always go get insulted by the ratings, you know.”

“My s-ship. Carmilhan.” The knife-edge sound of the man’s voice made Wiley jump. “Must get b-back.”

“Hold on, you’re not going anywhere, so don’t start getting ornery. What’s your name?”

The man opened his mouth to speak but stopped. There were things he could not utter. He looked imploringly at Wiley.

“In the name of God —. My ship. I m-must get back. I must —” Ishmael shook his head. Wiley watched him carefully for any further signs of violent behaviour but the man lay still, staring at Wiley.

Wiley looked into the man’s watery blue eyes. A feeling of longing and loneliness came over him as he stared into those

eyes. The man's hand, tied to the side of the berth, grabbed at Wiley's pant leg as he stood beside him.

"She's coming for me. Please. My ship. Get me back to my ship. I beg you." The sailor's plea struck through Wiley like a harpoon shot from a gun.

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Garbut joined the executive officer on the bridge. Other than the running lights on the Bluefin herself, there were no signs of life on the dark sea; even the stars seemed faint and far away in the clear night air. A stiff breeze blew from the southwest, carrying the men's words away like a schooner running free.

"Can't see much, sir. But there is something out there. She's not showing any lights."

Garbut spoke into the intercom. "Helm: all ahead dead slow. All stations stand by."

He scanned the horizon again with the binoculars. Ahead, the black sea rolled into the dying light of a late sunset sky, the last rays of golden orange extinguishing themselves in the water. In a dark blue cloud south of the sun there was a darker shape, a formless shadowy presence that showed up only on the radar screen.

"Sparks tried hailing her but the comms are still out."

They were closing to a few hundred yards when Wiley climbed up out of the hatch onto the bridge.

"It had better be good, Wiley." Garbut kept his eyes on the horizon.

"It's the survivor, sir. He keeps saying he wants to go back to his ship. He says his ship is out there, sir." Wiley pointed towards the black shape growing larger as they neared it. "That's the Carmilhan."

"That's impossible!" Giroux looked at Wiley as if he were crazy.



Garbut turned to Giroux. “You know something about this, Frank. What is it?”

Giroux said quickly, “It’s just a legend, sir. The Carmilhan is a phantom ship, like the Flying Dutchman. A ghostly ship with a ghostly crew...” Giroux paused, and turned to look at the black ship. “Those to whom the ship appears will never reach the shore.”

The wind blew stronger now, whipping the dark sea into angry waves which sprayed over the Bluefin’s deck. The black ship grew closer. It drove on, running with the wind toward the submarine.

As it advanced, the force of the wind increased. It blew thick and cold against the sailors’ faces. Waves smashed and broke over the sub’s bow.

“Let’s get a light on her!” Garbut shouted against the gale.

Giroux turned on the searchlight and pointed it at the black ship.

“Holy shit!”

The huge black ship loomed before them: a great three-masted barkentine, close-hauled with black sails full into the wind. It drove relentlessly toward the sub.

“Hard aport! Battle stations!” Garbut hit the siren control, but the sound blew away into the night. The sub rounded on the black ship and the men on the bridge watched, amazed, as the barkentine pitched and rolled, then tacked across the Bluefin’s wake.

The phantom ship heeled over to starboard in the heavy seas and drove again toward the submarine.

Three more times the black ship swept across the Bluefin’s bow, lurching as the waves struck her dead on.

“Get that man up here, Wiley. If she wants him that badly, she can have him.”

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The wind dropped as Ishmael appeared on deck. The black ship lay off the Bluefin's starboard bow, waiting.

Wiley zipped the Carmilhan's sailor into a life vest and secured a lifeline around himself before climbing into the inflatable.

Davis payed out the line as Wiley steered the rubber boat towards the black ship. In the darkness an eerie bioluminescence appeared in the water around the phantom ship.

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Wiley secured the inflatable to the cargo net hanging over the Carmilhan's starboard side. He undid his lifeline and helped Ishmael climb the net. The man was weak, but made his way determinedly up the ropes.

Wiley climbed over the railing and leaned over to help the other man. As soon as Ishmael's feet touched the deck he seemed to shimmer and grow paler. The smell of rotting flesh assaulted Wiley's nostrils. Skin, hair, remnants of clothing fell from Ishmael's body. Wiley was paralyzed, mesmerized by the change taking place in front of him. The flesh continued to putrefy and fall away, until only shreds remained. Then what was left covering the bones turned to dust. Wiley found himself holding a skeleton.

Wiley thrust the bones from him and staggered back. The deathly silence aboard the Carmilhan terrified him. Wildly, he looked around. There! On the bridge, and at the wheel, and by the mast — skeletons!

The wind began to pick up again, whistling and moaning through the shrouds on the ship. The skeleton at the wheel lifted its bony arm and beckoned to Wiley, one long white phalange pointing at him and then pulling back against its obscenely naked ribs.

Wiley fell back against the railing, his mouth open to scream but even that sound was snatched from him by the rising wind.



He held his hands up in front of his face to ward off the terror overtaking him, then caught a glimpse of his own flesh peeling away to reveal the bloody and shiny bones underneath.

“NO!”

In a blink Wiley dived over the side and plunged into the cold water. Waves splashed over him, driving water into his mouth as he tried to breathe. He got one gulp of air, then dove underwater. He looked frantically for the light of the chem-lights attached to the inflatable somewhere above him.

He broke the surface and gasped for air. Instead, he got another mouthful of water and choked. He kicked upwards and was able to breathe once again. He was disoriented now, the black ship and the black submarine were both invisible in the dark of the night.

Another kick upwards. When he came down he thought he struck something. The rubber boat! He grabbed at the lines and twisted his hand into them, then managed to pull himself into the boat.

In the heaving sea Wiley couldn't untie the line to the Carmilhan, so he cut it quickly with his belt knife.

The sea tossed him away from the black ship and he tried to start the inflatable's motor. The stern of the boat was awash and the motor wouldn't catch.

Desperately, Wiley paddled in the direction he hoped he would find the Bluefin. His arms ached from the effort. Every time he made progress the rolling sea pulled him farther away. There! He could just see the starboard light as his little boat pitched in the waves.

The gale wind blew thickly across his face, drawing the very breath out of him. He felt the air crackling with the storm and risked a look behind him. The Carmilhan rode well on the heavy seas, her skeleton crew suffering neither wind nor wave.

The air was so close Wiley felt he was being smothered. He pushed on, the Bluefin again invisible in the storm.

Just when he lost all hope of finding the sub Wiley felt the hairs on his arms and scalp prickle. He looked up.

A soft golden glow illuminated the submarine barely fifty yards in front of him. St. Elmo's fire! The crackling electromagnetic energy of the storm seemed to roll down the superstructure and crawl along the upper deck like a glowing worm. St. Elmo's fire signalled the end of the storm, but Wiley couldn't remember if it was a good omen or a bad one.

Wiley looked over his shoulder. The Carmilhan was turning away from the sub towards the south. Salt spray made Wiley's eyes sting but he thought he could see Ishmael on the upper deck of the spectral ship, a flesh-and-blood version as he had been on the Bluefin. The other skeletons, too, had fleshed out and become as real. Ishmael's right arm rose in what looked like a gesture of peace, of benediction.

Wiley turned back towards the Bluefin and renewed his paddling efforts. Then he could see Davis standing on the deck of the sub. A red flare shot into the sky and burned brightly as it drifted down.

Wiley paddled towards the light shining over the black boat as the wind died away and the sea calmed. As he neared the submarine he watched the men on deck disappear as they climbed down through the hatch. He waved his arms and shouted, but his words seemed to hang over the water in the still night air. He paddled more frantically.

Wiley was within ten yards of the Bluefin when he heard the diving alarm. As desperately as he had paddled towards the sub he now stroked away from it so he wouldn't be sucked under as the water washed over the deck. In moments, the sub was gone.

"Shit! You assholes! I'm here, goddamn it!" Wiley screamed and shouted, to no avail. "Raise the periscope you stupid jerk! I'm here. I'M HERE!"



Wiley threw the paddle into the bottom of the raft in frustration. After allowing himself a few moments to release his panic, he checked the emergency kit on board to reassure himself that he could survive until the Bluefin surfaced again. They would *have* to search for him, he knew, it was standard operating procedure. But they would probably wait for daylight now, unless they managed to get him on radar, but that was unlikely. This close to the sub's present position, in such a small craft, he would be invisible. Wiley settled down in the corner of the inflatable and tried to sleep.



The blond young man in the striped T-shirt lifted Wiley easily and handed him up to the others on the deck of the sleek ebony yacht.

“Man, he sure looks like he’s been out here for a long time. There’s no ID on him anywhere.”

“Where do you think he’s from, Dad?” asked a teenaged girl whose hair hung down her back in a heavy braid.

“I don’t know, honey. He’s so pale. He looks half-dead.” The man stroked his grey beard thoughtfully.

Wiley’s eyes fluttered open and he tried to speak through his cracked lips. “My ship. Bluefin. I have to get back.”

A sudden stiff gust snapped the sails on the yacht as the people on board scrambled to keep control of their ship.

The squall quickly became a gale. Huge swells, whipped up by the rising wind, crashed over the deck of the yacht as it pitched and rolled in the tempestuous sea.

“Jesus! Look at that!” The young man pointed towards the southern horizon, where black clouds swept across the sky.

In the dying light of the day, like a great dark whale surfacing to breathe, a black submarine rose out of the water. It turned toward the yacht, bearing down on it with a purpose, driving

straight at the smaller craft through the heaving sea. As it drew nearer, the teenaged girl screamed and clutched at her father.

On the bridge of the black submarine a skeleton pointed at them with one long bony finger, beckoning, beckoning.

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