

Growing Storm

A short story by Richard Holliday, published on richardholliday.co.uk in March 2020.

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Prelude

Like they always did in the sleety, late-autumn rain, the bridge windows of the *Star of Rio* rattled against their salt-encrusted frames.

Behind them, the dim glow of instruments. The rattle from the action of the waves permeated throughout the entire structure of the ship. Three men stood silently, surrounded by gloom, watching the gentle but constant roll of the grey waves across an even greyer sky.

"Course?" the first man grunted, the words emerging from a bushy beard. The stripes on his jacket denoted him as Captain. The second man, younger and neater, made a few paces.

"Course is correct, Captain Madigan," the other man, James Bliss, peeped. "Everything's running fine."

"If only your words were true, Mr Bliss," Madigan mulled. "We're two days behind. And you know, by God's almighty, what that means."

Bliss nodded. "The weather's been terrible. But not unseasonable."

Madigan grunted. One hand came off the wheel. Bliss watched the hand. Was it headed for the cloudy glass with a trickle of clear brown liquid balanced on the windowsill? This time they weren't. The binoculars moved up to his eyes almost automatically. Madigan barked. "Get hold of Bennet. I want more speed."

Bliss walked a pace forward, past the instrumentation, astride the wooden ship's wheel. "He'll not be happy, you know."

Madigan looked to Bliss, whose eyes moved for a second. Madigan's hand encircled the glass. "Yes. I know. But more speed is God's will to get us out of this wretched squall," the captain rumbled, pulling the glass to his lips at last.

Turning on his heels, Bliss rolled his eyes. He knew not to respond, not when the captain was in one of his... moods. The Bakelite phone felt weightless in Bliss's hand.

"Yeah?" came a voice on the other end, speckled with distortion. The phone was aging, like the *Star* herself. "What does he want?"

"More speed. What's our current?" Bliss murmured. He pulled the handset away from his ear.

"Is he mad?!" Bennet, the chief engineer, shouted. The words squawked from the receiver, across the bridge. The mate tried not to react, but Captain Madigan did, with a glowering

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glare. "There's no speed to give. Come on, James," Bennet implored. "You know what the old girl can do and can't do. Fifteen knots is the most I can magic out of the hat down here."

"Do what you can," Bliss said insincerely, replacing the handset without another word.

"What can I expect?" Madigan grunted.

"Two more knots," Bliss lied fluently. "If the weather calms down."

The bowels of the *Star of Rio* reverberated with a steady thrum of mechanism. The thrum rocked through every beam and plate that made up the hull. Cocooned amongst a warren of pipes, cables and walkways, the chief engineer, Alex Bennet, wiped his brow of the dirty beads of sweat that accumulated there.

The phone from the bridge had just fallen with a clatter of plastic onto its cradle. They'd might as well be twenty miles away, up there, Bennet thought aloud. Getting up from his worn chair he examined the gauges. The starboard engine was registering zero revolutions. But the din on his right was no illusion; the engine was thudding away with some labour in the next compartment. With a fleeting look of concern, he tapped the gauge. The needle didn't move. "Not now..." he sighed with resignation and tapped it more resolutely. The needle bounced. The position it bounced around was nothing impressive.

Ducking beneath a pipe he'd often banged his head on, Bennet walked slowly though, mindful of the lazy roll of the *Star*. He filed down a flight of metal stairs between two great hulks of machinery – the two *old ladies*, as he called them. Bette and Bertha. The junior engineer, Carlow, standing with his clipboard, acknowledged his superior with a knowing nod. The rest of the engine room was deserted of life. Four other engineers and mechanics slept in worn beds up top. Bennet's face spoke so his mouth needn't bother.

"I'm going to quarters," Bennet hummed, just audibly above the steady din of the two old ladies against their mounts. The *Star* gave a low, lingering roll. A moan accompanied it, a low, metallic groan of effort. Maybe pain. Both men grabbed instinctively for a pipe to steady them. It was a learned behaviour – the *Star* liked to roll, but it was always harmless.

She rarely moaned though.

"Bridge not happy?" Carlow, surmised. Bennet's eyes rolled as heavily as the ship did.

"When are they ever? Do what you can to get an extra two-fifty out of them. Wake them up a bit more if you can."

Carlow shrugged, and at that Bennet turned to head forward. Both men knew that an 'extra two-fifty' was fanciful. Duty called.

"We're still having trouble with the glowplugs," Carlow reported. Bennet hummed, nonplussed.

"Another for the list of repairs that'll get rejected due to cost. Engine's still firing." Bennet saw that Carlow had more to say. "Go on, I've got a mo."

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Carlow led him beside the machinery to a tiny space that was shrouded in darkness. He waved a powerful, dirty beam of light. Patches on the pipe shone out like blue band aids on a cook's hands. Bennet gave the work a quick inspection.

"Bit unorthodox, nothing you did here is standard," he admitted, "or strictly legal. but it'll hold. If not, I'd definitely call this a hostile working environment." Bennet met the young man's face. "Fuel vapour in the engine room. But we're close to home, they can't ignore that."

"I'd hope not," Carlow replied meekly.

"In the morning then." Bennet excused himself.

Bennet went through to the end of the compartment toward a spiral staircase that punctured the maze of metal pipes and conduits toward the crew quarters. The light at this end of the compartment hung lazily from its fitting, the metal shade tapping on the pipes around it. It hadn't had a bulb in it for months, the gloom from the other light aft casting murky shadows on the bulkhead. Grabbing the handrail, Bennet trudged up resolutely. It was a bad night on the *Star*, but all across since leaving port had been bad nights.

The spiral staircase from the engine room opened onto a tight landing. A sparsely lit corridor led two ways: forward, through the cargo hold to the inspection chamber in the bow; or aft toward the stairway to the crew quarters. Bennet paused momentarily, not knowing why.

He felt a shiver. The forward hold was ice-cold from refrigeration. The door hung lazily open, the misty interior beckoning with some unnatural persuasive force.

Forward, he thought he saw a flicker of... *something*.

"Hello?!" he called, but the roar that followed pushed him to the metal floor. The front of the ship seemed to lift up completely from the surface of the sea, or so it felt, with the roar of the storm winds coming down the passageway, filling Bennet's ears. "What the hell?! Bennet yelled in surprise, but there was no wind blowing, but the engineer was thrown hard to the floor and backward, sliding on the worn lino.

What he didn't see in the depths of the *Star of Rio's* belly was the massive flash of electric blue light in the sky, almost directly above the aging freighter.

Broken glass tinkled with the hefty roll of the ship.

"Bliss? Bliss!" Captain Madigan yelled irritably, on the cusp of panic. "I can't see!"

Bliss picked himself up from the floor of the bridge. He wiped his eyes, feeling wetness. His vision, fuzzy, blurred and indistinct, slowly came back around.

"I'm here, sir!" Bliss replied. "Can you see now?"

"Just about. What in God's dear name was that?"

"I don't know," Bliss hummed. He got up and saw to the helmsman, who was propping himself up against the wheel. Bliss dusted the young man down before turning to Madigan. "Solar flare?"

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"At this time of night?" Madigan countered. The captain approached the bridge window, peering outward. The foredeck was damp with rain. Glancing up, Madigan looked into the sky. It was like nothing had happened. "Can't be."

"Is there any damage?" Bliss said, joining the captain.

"No, I can't see. Call Bennet, I want the ship sounded. That was quite a wave."

"If it was a wave..." hummed Bliss.

Bennet glanced down the dark corridor in front of him. With another roll, the door fell open. Taking a furtive step forward, he repeated his inquiry, shouting loudly now. "Is anyone down there? Are you all right? Is anyone hurt?"

No response. The lights at the far end of the passage fizzled, though they always did that, big wave or not.

Bennet walked uneasily further. The metal walls of the corridor, lined with hefty doors that were latched shut with inch-thick bars of metal, banged and boomed. Rhythmically. Quietly at first, but with each step the thuds got steadily, slowly, louder.

His head darted. But the darkness concealed its own mysteries. Metal banged some more. Something was happening, deep below Bennet's feet. The banging seemed to rise up, to envelop him. Bennet's hand reached a railing, holding tight, despite the cold.

He stopped, a third of the way down the passageway. The booms now came from behind, approaching him. Bennet felt his blood fall from his veins. Almost wanting to scream, his lungs belied the impulse and diverted the oxygen to his legs. The gloom of the lights became total with a spark of strange energy.

That was enough for Bennet. He looked around. Something seemed to be sliding up the passageway, toward him. The passageway was filling with the irregular shapes of something the engineer couldn't identify.

Running back aft, Bennet crossed into the corridor and looked, panic-stricken, for a mere moment. Turning, he pulled on the door to the corridor and pulled it. The door, almost asleep, didn't want to move. The otherworldly hammering from the corridor became louder, filling the man's ears. Then came the rending of metal, a wailing shriek that ran like electric current down Bennet's spine.

He glanced around the door as flashes of vestigial light illuminated the passageway he'd just run from. Irregular things, shapes, filled the split-seconds of clarity. And with each passing moment the shapes in the dark moved, assuming different forms. Bigger. The booms against the walls became wet slaps on the worn lino.

Behind Bennet, from the pool of light from the upper decks, Bliss emerged. The passageway was completely dim, his flashlight providing the only juddering column of light. His face fell into confusion, seeing Bennet pulling on the companionway door with all his might.

"What's going on down here?" Bliss called above the racket.

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"Bliss!" Bennet yelled, almost animalistically. "Get this door closed! Help!"

Glancing quickly, Bliss saw the shapes. "Are those..."

"CLOSE THE DOOR!"

The two men quickly heaved, pushing the bulkhead door into its closed position with a thump. The corridor was silent in a moment, the door pulling the breath from both men's lungs. Both falling to the floor, Bliss and Bennet panted.

"Did you see..." the officer asked?

"I don't want to know what the *hell* that..." Bennet replied, trailing off.

"What?" Bliss barked. Then he felt it. They'd had their backs to the door, but now they felt the warm ooze come from around the metal panel. Scooting back and standing, they saw the entire circumference of the door seemed to be almost bleeding in the bulkhead a dark, viscous substance.

"Oh. My. God." Bliss breathed, his eyes agape in horror. He looked to Bennet, the fear cracked across his face as it must've been across Bliss'. Both men turned, knowing instinctively what they must do. Looking up to the light of the crew stairwell, they ran for it, closing every door behind them they could.

This is the freighter Star of Rio... we're just off the coast of England... please... please help... there's... things on the ship... I don't know how they... they're coming! We don't... not much time! Please God, if there's any... help!

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Hheavy seas buffeted the small Navy cutter *Royal David City*, the bow riding up the crests of the swelling seas, pitching to and fro. At the helm a bulky, tall man peered out seaward through a resolute brow.

"How many were aboard?" the *City's* skipper, Jon Golding, asked above the din of the storm outside.

"Crew of twelve according to the manifest," his XO, Lena Farhill, said with the vestiges of an American accent. "I hope they can hold out."

Golding didn't take his hand off the throttle, willing it further. The handle was at the *Full* position already. He didn't look away from the angry ocean ahead. "I hope so too. ETA?"

"Twenty minutes," Farhill reported. She grabbed for a handrail, unexpectedly. Golding's view shifted quickly in the dark cabin.

"You alright?"

"Just the weather," Farhill gasped slightly.

"If you wanna throw up, outside, please?" Golding ribbed. He smiled to her.

She returned the smile weakly. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Good. Reckon you can see to the guys down below? Get prepped. I want to be home drinking my tea before sunrise."

Farhill steadied herself then headed aft. The *Royal David City* was a new brand of Royal Navy rescue craft, akin to a small private yacht but outfitted for heavy seas operations. There wasn't a wave in the English Channel that was thought able to sink her.

But the weather that night seemed determined to try.

Farhill returned a few minutes later to the elevated command post.

"They're prepping. Look," she said, approaching the rainswept windows. The wipers were fighting a losing battle against the worst the English weather could muster up. Another unkind winter. "That's it. It must be."

"I think you're right..." Golding hacked. In the distance, beyond the waves stood the sentinel hulk of the *Star of Rio*. It was festooned in artificial light but seemed oddly lifeless. "Take the wheel," Golding requested. Farhill stepped into his post. Golding raised a pair of loose-hanging binoculars. He squinted, trying to compensate for the undulation, the constant movement of the deck beneath him in completely unpredictable directions. "She's under power but there's no-one at home. Rudder's doing its own thing."

"Could be a messy dock," Farhill hummed.

"We have to attempt it. I'd rather be on dry land, compared to out here."

Farhill didn't respond to Golding but reached for a mouthpiece. She spoke clearly into it, past the electrical crackle it produced. "Be ready boys. It could be a bumpy ride."

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The *Star of Rio* loomed ahead of the much smaller Navy boat. Gingerly, the smaller boat edged closer, coming alongside, though riding the waves up and down the height of the freighter's grey hull. The *Royal David City* bobbed on the waves, letting the *Star of Rio* gradually overtake. From the interior, three figures emerged from the *City's* interior, grabbing with heavy hawser cables. The crew stairway that overhung the stern of the freighter swung wildly.

"Keep it steady, nearly there..." Golding soothed. Farhill concentrated too much to reply. She spun the wheel a few times, quickly flicking the Navy boat.

The three boys at the front of the boat threw their cables, one hitting the jackpot. It pulled tight in the rough squall, the *Royal David City* bobbing like a toy boat on a turbulent bathtub against the hulk. Metal squealed as the two vessels tussled. Farhill joined the three men on the fo'c'sle, followed last by Golding.

"Ready guys?" she asked above the wind rush.

The three men, clad in wetsuits that covered every inch of their faces, murmured and nodded. Golding grabbed the first step of the ladder. "I'll go first, we work topside first. Hopefully the crew are..." he started, realising his words were basically inaudible against the noise of the sea. The ladder swayed with each footstep. Persevering with effort, Golding led the team up and emerged onto the main deck of the *Star of Rio*.

"Is anyone here?!" Farhill yelled, taking her helmet off. Golding followed suit, as did the three wetsuits.

The deck was deserted, bathed in clinical, sterile light cast from lamps around the deck. Looking up, Golding observed the bridge. Not a light on. He squinted, just to be sure. No signs of life. He gesticulated. "Start there and work down."

"Okay," Farhill acknowledged. She pulled the three marines with her. They took off their masks, revealing their faces "Stairway this way."

Keith Harris, one of the marines, wrenched the door open, with some effort in his weathered features. The wind cast invisible hands that wanted to hold the door shut tight.

"Get it open then!" Golding called.

"I'll help," Farhill replied, brushing her ruined hair out of her face and tugging at the rusty paint on the handle. The door wobbled as the ship heaved. They tried again. The door moved a little more, snapping back into place with a hollow bang. Third time, this time with all five sets of hands pulling. The door finally gave, snapping against the wall of the deckhouse. The Marines scuttled in, just as the door banged closed behind them.

The howling of the wind was now muted against the superstructure, replaced with the heavy breathing of exertion.

"Flashlights," Golding huffed. Five discs of weak light illuminated the dark interior of the superstructure. Metal walls entombed the group, and a doorway led to a series of stairs. A good start. Golding beckoned forward. "Come on."

The discs of light bounded around the stairwell. The ship was continuing to heave in the heavy sea outside. Farhill grabbed the handrail, like before. She paused, dead on the stairs, the rail firmly in her grasp. "Jon, can't you feel it?"

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Golding swung around. "Feel what, Lena?"

"Grab the rail," she chattered. He did so. Quickly he let go, his face cracking into a firm scowl.

At the top of the stairwell the bridge beckoned. Golding stepped from the narrow stairway into a cluttered space. The others followed, stepping meekly into the dishevelled wheelhouse. Noses wrinkled.

"What is that stench?" Farhill gagged. "I think I'm gonna be..." she started, rushing to outdoors.

"I don't know," Golding gasped. He walked purposefully to one of the bridge wing doors, past Farhill, wrenching it open with a wobbly clatter. He stepped out into the breeze outside, the freshness of the salty sea air pulling him from the pallid musk of the bridge. Grabbing the bulwark he looked down. The ship continued to bob in the endless grey sea, endless until, with a squint, Golding saw the faint glittering of lights. Land nearby.

He turned back into the bridge with a cast iron determination, and a look of refusal to allow it to corrode.

"Stop the engines," Golding said with purpose. One of the men pulled on the brass telegraph, the old bell rasping within. The bell didn't ring back in acknowledgement. The inner pointer stuck fast at *full ahead*.

"No answer, sir."

"Is there a phone? Lena, have a go." Golding now examined the bridge more carefully. Papers were strewn everywhere, haphazardly. Had there been some struggle? He couldn't be sure. Pacing along the front wall, where the windows were, he felt the irregular bump under his shoe. Broken glass, and the smell of alcohol.

Golding's gloved hands poked the pieces of glass. Moonlight refracted on them as if they were icebergs. A pool of fluid surrounded the broken glass. Golding huffed knowingly. Someone enjoyed a drink on a cold autumn night's crossing. "Any news on that phone, Lena, I'd really like to speak..."

"Nothing Jon," Farhill said without hesitation, still trying the bridge telephone. It was proving uncooperative. She glanced across, seeing Golding slowly raise from his crouching position. "Jon, are you..."

Golding's face was as sheet-white as the moon that reflected through the foggy windows.

"Wh... what is... *that*?" he gasped. She turned to where his trembling arm was pointing.

"I don't know what you... oh *shit*."

Marking the worn paint of the back wall of the bridge were shapes of *darkness* that formed handprints. Smearly handprints. The darkness was the stain of only one fluid that came to the mind of everyone: blood. The trail led along the wall, Keith following it tentatively.

Flashlights illuminated the spackle, confirming its claret colour. Smears of another, more brown and orange fluid, swished through the blood trail. Eventually a brown wooden door with louvred panels, covered with the viscous substance, punctured the wall. The Chart Room.

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Damon, another marine, younger than Keith, approached.

"Open it," Golding hawked. "Get it open."

Damon tentatively touched the door. It didn't rattle, but rather moved slimily. The gel-like substance it was encrusted with wobbled just enough. He rolled his shoulders.

"You sure?"

Golding replied without hesitation. "Do it. Get Eddy to help."

Damon rolled his shoulders. The third marine, Eddy, joined. They both grasped the slimy handle and pulled it open in a swift movement. *Something* fell out of the Chart Room, with five booming screams accompanying it, landing on the floor with a wet, sick thud. Five flashlights danced wildly before settling on the *something*.

"The fuck is that?" Farhill coughed. She spoke no further, instead retching violently.

Golding stepped forward, holding off his own gag reflex, though by the convulsions in his chest it was a battle he could lose at any moment. Light glistened off an ochre ooze-like substance that coated the *something*. Reaching out, he pulled at the dark shape. A limp limb fell from underneath.

"Help me," Golding coughed. He swallowed hard, keeping the gag reflex at bay just about. Keith stepped over and, with some effort, and a wet, slapping squelching, pulled the *something* over.

"Dearest Jesus..." Keith coughed. Footsteps behind Golding ran to the open bridge wing. Distantly, vomit fell down the side of the ship with a handful of harsh, taught retches.

Golding stood up. Trembling, he reached for his flashlight, almost forgotten. The disc of light wavered with his hands. The *something* was the figure of a young man, no more than twenty, doused in scarlet fluid and a wobbling, trembling gel that refracted the meagre light. Golding turned. "Lena, I need you."

"No way, Jon. What the hell is – " she jabbered, almost unintelligibly. She ran outside, and retched over the side of the ship again.

"I need you," Golding repeated, resolutely. "You read the crew manifest. Who's the youngest aboard?"

Farhill trooped back in, wiping her mouth. She shivered, shocked, but was regaining composure. Keeping her distance, she recounted: "Youngest was the helmsman, he was about twenty-two. Why, you don't think that's..."

Golding reached up onto one of the ramshackle consoles and found a slim implement: a pen. With a beckon the marines shone their light on the helmsman's body.

"He had a hell of a time..." Golding said aloud, to no-one in particular. The pen became a crude probe. The helmsman's chest was a wrecked mess of torn fabric and blood that seeped out, glittering with wetness.

But the exposed skin was more of interest – every pore of flesh had become swollen and inflated. Blotches of purple and pink ran across stretched skin, showing bones pressing out,

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about to burst through the flesh. The head was the worst, enveloped almost entirely by the blotchiness, the flesh across the young man's face spitting open.

Gingerly, Golding probed toward the split, finding the first few millimetres spongy and squishy. A foul smell permeated the space, intensifying with the probing in the split across the unfortunate helmsman's face. It told Golding to probe no further. He got up. One of the marines went to move the helmsman away from the doorway. Golding barked quickly.

"Don't touch him. I don't want any of you to touch him," Golding barked quickly, tossing the bloody pen away with a flick. He went to take a deep intake of breath, just as what felt like a wave hit the ship. The whole hull rattled with a booming roar. It was no wave, and Golding knew it, deep inside his subconscious. "Let's move. Find any survivors. I don't want to be on this ship a second longer than I have to."

The three marines swept by, into the chart room. Farhill moved over to Golding, standing in the bridge wing doorway. From behind she saw him take big gasps of the fresh sea air from outside. Subtly she placed a hand on his back. The muscles there felt tense and bundled into knots beneath the polyester and webbing.

"Jon, are you..."

"I'll be fine, like I said, Lena," he growled, turning back inside.

"We can abandon the mission if you think that's best."

"No. We're here to do a job. Whatever..." he gestured toward the body of the helmsman, "whatever did *that*, I want to know. And there might still be people alive somewhere on this-"

"Sir! Come quickly!" Damon bellowed. Pushing Farhill gently aside, Golding ran over, past the body and into the chart room. His eyes followed the beading, dancing discs of flashlight illumination.

Farhill clopped across the deck and into the now-crowded room. "What?"

Golding wordlessly flapped a hand toward the lights. Farhill, in the doorway finding the switch, flicked it with a resolute click. A fluorescent light flickered on. She suppressed a yelp.

The room was festooned in irregular gloom, much like that encrusted on the door handle. The goo wobbled, infused with some otherworldly gel. But the wall, where paper charts had been torn from their hangings, leaving torn fronds of paper and wood in their place, was daubed in splotchy, dark orange letters.

SINK THIS SHIP AND SAVE EVERYONE – OR THEY ALL DIE!

"Everyone out! Now!" Golding commanded. The room drained. Golding grabbed the greasy handle and slammed the door firmly shut. Lined up in front of him were four scared people, their faces draining into moonlight.

"Sir," Eddy said with a tremor. "What's happening here?"

"I don't know, man, I really don't."

"Let's get off this tub. Don't you feel it?" Damon, almost whimpering. "This is bad. Real bad. We should go."

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"No," Golding said, but his words felt hollow. He was questioning it himself. Cut their losses. But he remembered what he said to Farhill. She did, too, and stepped forward.

"We've signed up to do a job, remember. And there's people who could still be alive," she said, glancing toward the stairwell. "It might get a lot worse, but we have to think of them."

Keith spat. "Look, you've seen what they did to that poor lad. That could be waiting for us. It could be here *right now*."

Golding took a pace forward. "You want to stay, do your duty? Or go."

Keith locked eyes with his commander. "My *duty*, Commander Golding, is to my family back home. Whatever weird as hell shit's going on here, I want to be there for them."

Golding stepped back. He took another deep breath of the stale air in the bridge. "I respect that, I really do. But feel free."

Keith stepped forward, toward the exit.

"However," Golding continued Keith stopped. "I'll personally sign your dishonourable discharge. Would your family want to know they were spared by a coward?"

Keith spun on his heels. "You wouldn't. You're, what, thirty. What do you know?"

Golding's face was stony. "I would. And thank you for reminding me of my age."

"You don't know what you're dealing with here."

"Right. But I won't give up on anyone who's here, alive, waiting for us."

"That," Keith said, pointing to the gored remains of the helmsman, "could be what's waiting for us."

"I accept that. I hope we all live to tell the tale. But," Golding said, sweeping around more generally to address the rest of his crew. "We die, if we do, knowing we did what we could to solve whatever awful thing has happened on this ship. Now, I suggest we proceed downstairs. What I said about not spending more time on this ship than we need to. This is wasting time." Golding turned back to the errant marine. "Are you in?"

Keith thought for a moment. He rolled his shoulders, considering for a moment. "Fine. Fine!"

He walked back to the fold. "Good man," Golding smiled weakly. "Lena," he said, turning his attention back to Farhill, "we go to engineering via the crew quarters. We'll do a sweep. Then head back to base."

"What about the cargo area?" she asked matter-of-factly.

"Ignore it," Golding told her. "There's nothing alive in there anyway."

"Yes sir," she said, marshalling the marines down to the stairwell.

Golding took a final look at the bridge. Even now the horrors that had clearly transpired here were impossible to visualise. The grey, rolling sea continued in all directions.

"At least," Golding concluded, just to himself, "I sincerely hope not."

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Footsteps clattered quickly down the stairway. The lights faltered, flickering and buzzing with the waves hitting the sides of the ship. Each roll was subtly worse. More extreme. Metal creaked, louder the further the team descended into the bowels of the ship.

"I don't like this..." Farhill mused. Her voice echoed, exhibiting the slightest of tremors, exacerbated by the resonating hull all around.

Golding replied shortly. "Me neither." He directed to one of the marines to open an ajar door. He cast a flickering flashlight on the sign. Mess Room. "Eddy. Look in there, see if you see signs of life..."

Eddy nodded, casting a wavering disc of flashlight onto the handle. It moved, the door scraping across. Beyond was a space enveloped by pitch black. The marine went inward. The others followed, hesitantly.

Golding murmured. "Try the lights."

Farhill reached for a nearby nub on the wall. The switch felt greasy and gooey. The consistency was eerily and horrifyingly familiar.

"No," she said with barely a breath. "Let's leave this place."

Golding stopped, peering into the darkness. Flickers of light from outside filtered through the door portal. Snapshots of ruined furniture piled toward the walls stamped themselves onto the young commander's eyes.

He took a breath of dirty air, laced with decay. His heart wanted to open the room up to the light, but his head firmly decided not to. "Okay," he whispered, turning away. "Let's continue."

The last marine out pulled the door closed behind him, resolutely clicking it into its frame. Footsteps fell away, leaving the ruined room.

Then the piles of ruined tables, chairs and apparatus shifted, but subtly. Not in tune with the motion of the ship; that heaved with a now heavy, regular rhythm that continued to grow. A fraction of a degree more roll each time. The hull felt the twisting, moaning with metallic wailing.

The shifting rumbled on, dislodging the piles of debris. The dry sound of the moving objects stopped, replaced with a wet slapping, and a gasping, hissing wheeze. This sound closed on the door, and with a thick thud, the door fell to the ground. The slapping, wheezing sound proceeded into the corridor.

Golding stopped around a corner. He examined a legend on the wall, opposite a narrow doorway. Beyond was another, smaller stairwell that led one flight up.

"This place is a total maze," he said aloud. "Crew quarters should be easy to find. It's where I'd go."

"Let's go up," Farhill recommended. "It's an old tub." She heard a sound, indistinct but nearby, and turned to look down the corridor. She cast her flashlight back down. Nothing. Only the motion of the ship now belied that they were floating on a restless sea outside. She looked to Golding. "I'm going up. I'm not waiting for you."

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Golding's head moved in agreement. "Alright."

The short stairwell wrapped around, opening into a corridor that branched into three avenues, each at ninety degrees. Each of these branches was lined with small rooms. Most of the doors were open, some smashed. The ethereal goo that seemed to pervade this ship was smeared across the walls.

Flashlights bounced quickly into each open room. They were all trashed. Some rooms were only slightly ransacked, but a few had been totally demolished, the remains coated in the shimmering, foul-smelling jelly. Golding, Farhill and the marines met each room with a universal response – horror, followed by gagging.

At the end of the central branch was a wider door, labelled Captain's Quarters. Golding approached, alone. The door was still intact. Approaching slowly, one hand on his flashlight, he reached to his hip. his other hand found the pistol in its holster. Golding stopped, just shy of the door. He put his head to the door. He heard a single shuffle on the other side.

Mentally he counted. *Three. Two. One. Bingo...*

Golding raised his knee and grunted, pushing sharply forward. The door fell open, splitting at the latch, falling limply inward.

"Who's there?!" a voice yelped. Golding stepped into the cabin, his head darting. The flashlight darted similarly, flickering over upturned furniture. He reached for the light switch, a finger reaching...

"Touch it and we're *dead*," the voice hissed. Golding found the source, in the corner of the room, huddled underneath the remains of a bureau. Two wet eyes peeked from behind the barricade.

"Who are you?" Golding hissed back. "You crew?"

"Yes, now shut it!" the voice rasped. A hand beckoned Golding forward. "How many of you are there?"

"Five."

Bennet looked to the floor, speaking to no-one. He mused aloud, in the hoarse whisper. "That might be enough."

"To do what?" Golding said in a hoarse whisper again. "And why are we being quiet?"

"This ship has been... possessed. Now, kindly, shut up. They might know you're here."

Golding ducked behind the barricade. He finally got a good look at the man behind it.

"Alex Bennet, engineer. And this is Marta," Bennet indicated behind him. Golding turned the torch in that direction. A trembling second set of eyes, belonging to a woman in faded cook's whites, emerged. "She's one of the cooks and..." Bennet began, trailing off, looking back into Golding's eyes. "It doesn't matter what else."

Golding didn't react. "You the only crew left? We saw..."

"In a manner of speaking," Bennet said flatly. "I can explain, but we must be quick. And quiet. It's the biomass. It's... alive."

Growing Storm by Richard Holliday

Golding's face shifted subtly with scepticism.

"Believe me," Bennet continued in a rushed whisper. "It's taken the crew."

"If you're the last of them, let's get you off this ship," Golding began, motioning to get up with a raspy rustle of synthetic fibres.

"That won't be enough," Bennet said.

The hull gave a laboured, loud groan. Footsteps approached, furtively. Golding took a breath, holding it. He hoped it was who he was waiting for.

Four discs of dirty flashlight shone into the cabin, glaring into the huddled three's eyes.

"Jon! I'm so glad you're here."

"Farhill," Golding said with a deep sigh of relief. "Did you find any other survivors on this floor?"

"No," she said gravely. "It's a mess. Let's get topside."

"Agreed," Golding heaved, pulling Bennet and Marta up. "Come on, let's get you off this ship..."

"I told you," Bennet cursed again, "we have to *sink* it first!"

Golding pulled the older man forward, on autopilot. They emerged into the landing outside the captain's quarters.

"I keep telling you, we can't just get off this ship!" the engineer growled in frustration. "Bloody *listen*, will you!"

Golding scoffed, an automatic response, but caught Farhill's severe grimace. "What? Tell me, what?"

"I think the engineer's right. I meant it was a mess down there." She gestured toward the stairwell. Her voice lowered to almost a hush. "And remember what was upstairs..."

Golding turned to Bennet, to ask him to elaborate. Then a thud came from the corridor behind, snapping like a gunshot in the tight metal corridor. The engineer's face was ghostly, drained of all colour, frozen into a look of pure horror.

Bennet raised a hand to his mouth, covering the gaping maw. Then, on his heel, Golding turned.

The flashlights came up, illuminating the figure behind them.

It filled the corridor, dripping wet. The legs, once human, were inflated and swollen with pulsing, bulging growths, glistening with blood and weird, unknown fluid. The torso was a mess of bleeding, pupating mass, waxy in spots and glimmering with wetness in others.

Finally, the head, brushing against the ceiling, a swollen mass of veins against spongy, bursting mass. Shreds of clothing hung off distended, crimson, purple limbs, the joints white with bone twisted into shapes only describable as inhuman.

Beyond came mysterious shadows, like tentacles, shiny with moisture, against the matt walls.

Growing Storm by Richard Holliday

"RUN!" Golding yelled, pushing everyone to flee down the corridor.

Then the maelstrom happened. The corridor ahead was blocked. Keith opened fire first, pushing the others back away, the *ratatatatat* strobing through the dark, dank space. It hit another of the figures with a sick, wet *thwack*.

"No, come on!" Golding called, looking over his shoulder. He saw Keith standing resolute outside the captain's quarters.

"Go," Keith bellowed, turning to the *thing* that approached him. With a great yell, the grizzled marine emptied his weapon into the shapeless, gurgling lump before him. Stumbling, but not stopped, it loomed over Keith. He squeezed the trigger. The gun clicked. Empty. Without blinking, Keith's gloved hands formed fists and his arm lifted. The creature brought around one of its limbs and punctured, with a sudden, swift movement, the flesh of the marine's throat in an expungement of blood and gore.

Golding saw the fists fall limp as the creature whinnied, an ear-splitting exultation followed by the crunching of bone and body. He fell back toward Farhill and the rest of the group. They were edging backward along the passageway, toward a dark hole – a stairwell, leading down.

"Hold your fire!" Golding called. Flashlights trembled. Shuffling and snorting came around the corner, filling the corridor with rank odour. The young commander looked around, panicked. "There's no way out."

"We have to go down," Bennet coughed. "We have to sink the ship. Then we might have a chance."

"We can't go down," one of the other marines jabbered, pulling his SMG out. He gave a brief burst of fire. The creatures that approached seemed only mildly miffed by the hits.

"I don't see any other option..." Farhill said, her voice trembling. "We're fish food otherwise... oh god!"

She looked past the three creatures that lumbered down the corridor toward them. She heard what sounded like a human voice, gulping and gasping for air, bones breaking. Then a fourth shuffle. The creatures lolled and she could see a new creature behind, the remnants of Keith's marine combat jacket falling noiselessly to the floor. Her flashlight caught the final moments of transformation as his skin, pallid and raw, puffed and swelled. Finally, with a slick whack, his scalp fell off, hitting the hard floor.

Through grotesque protuberances, what was left of Keith's wet eyes met with Golding's. The four figures shuffled, unsure, taking a first step forward. The young commander pushed back, toward the stairwell, holding a flashlight to the sight before him.

"Quickly," Bennet hissed, urging the remaining rescuers into the hatch. He pulled a door closed, sealing the companionway into total darkness.

Outside the door, murmurings reverberated through the steel. Then thuds came, hammering on the metalwork. Farhill, the last down the stairs, kept watch on the door. It held, as did the final glance she'd had from Keith as he'd been consumed.

She blinked. The image was imprinted onto her eyelids. Following the group down the stairs, she whipped her hair. Maybe she'd never sleep again.

Growing Storm by Richard Holliday

"Come on!" Golding called, pulling Farhill away from her demons.

The stairwell opened out on the keel of the ship, the coldness of the sea taut in the air. Emergency lights hung high in the maze of pipework and metal plumbing above their heads.

"I wonder," Bennet began musing. "Where's Carlow?"

"Who's that?" Golding asked. "You reckon he might be alive?"

"Depends," Bennet said, ducking below some of the machinery, running a hand along the cold metal. He stopped. Golding bumped into the engineer. "Flashlight," Bennet hissed again, reaching with his free hand. Golding gave it over. Bennet ran the light along the pipe. Chipped paint redefected back, until the light reached the limit of Bennet's reach. The pipe glistened, the worn cream paint taking on an ochre hue.

Golding's eyes widened. "I've seen that before..." he gasped quietly. Beneath his padding, his stomach dropped. It was the same ochre that had plastered the walls of the chart room and the crew quarters.

And it was down here.

A scabbling noise came from the ceiling. Very close. It moved quickly through the pipework. The flashlights followed it, highlighting a trail of ochre gel obscured by the pipework, glinting fleetingly. The shadow that preceded disappeared with a slap of wet flesh.

"Lights out," Golding whispered. He nodded his head forward. Bennet looked past the machinery toward bright lights of the engine room that kept on running. Beyond it, emanating from the glow, was the hectoring roar of the diesel engine. Beneath their very feet the metal floor rolled with each rhythmic motion from the sea outside. It hammered against the side of the ship, the plates quivering against their rusty frames.

"It's getting worse outside," Bennet mused to himself. A hand met the steel, but quickly withdrew. He turned to the others he was with, his gaze focussing on Golding. "Get to the engine room and we'll be safe, for now," Bennet whispered in response.

Bennet stepped forward, slowly. He raised his hands in a cooing gesture, urging the others to proceed slowly. Gingerly he stepped forward, past the bulkhead door into the next compartment. The group took a dozen paces, flashlights out.

The lights of the engine room, and presumed safety for now, beckoned with a warmth tinged with languid fumes.

The four survivors crept forward.

Pipes behind them clanged irregularly, the intestines of the ship quivering throughout the invasion. The echo led forward. The group kept heading aft.

"Keep going..." Golding urged. He muscled past the two marines, coming up behind Farhill. Gingerly he placed a hand on her shoulder. She tensed.

"Don't do that!" she hissed, startled.

"Sorry," Golding murmured.

A few paces ahead, Bennet stopped and turned.

Growing Storm by Richard Holliday

"Quiet. Just round here," he beckoned. "Go with them," he cooed to Marta. Shivering, she did so. The rescue group filed around. Golding brushed past. The engineer was looking past, into the pipework of the machinery room. The waves echoed in the hollow metal box this deep in the hull. A disc of flashlight beam danced around the pipes.

The shadows were moving again, running from the light.

"It's too quiet," Bennet mused aloud. "Too quiet..."

Golding shouldered past. Around the corner he saw the warm, almost welcoming glow of the illuminated engine room, and the growl of rattling machinery. He turned back to Bennet. "Come on."

The structures and pipes that formed a warren above clanged like old church bells. Bennet turned, lowering the flashlight.

Behind him, just at that moment, a wet *thwack* hit the floor.

Bennet spun. His flashlight ducked upward, illuminating what was left of a face, poking out from underneath waxy, purple skin

"Carlow?!" the engineer mouthed.

"Nope!" Golding yelled, pulling Bennet backward. The engineer toppled backward in surprise. What was once Carlow sprang forward. With his other arm, Golding heaved the companionway door. The metal door swung serenely, falling into its frame with a deep, hollow *clonngggnnng*. A latch clicked precisely.

The creature thudded into the barrier, and shrieked, loud enough it seemed to overpower the harsh, constant rhythm of the twin diesel engines that lay like huge, growling beasts set into the very foundation of the hull.

"Make it stop!" Marta, the cook, cried. She held her hands to her ears. Tears streamed down her ruined cheeks. "Please make it stop, it's awful!"

Golding stood back, catching his breath. The two marines stepped valiantly forward, pulling the circular lock on the door closed. The door trembled against the metal members but held. After a moment the noise stopped, receding away.

Bennet picked himself from the floor. He was bruised from the fall but otherwise unhurt; he rubbed his back, wincing slightly. Marta came over, helping him to his feet.

"Oh, God, they got Carlow..." Bennet moaned. His face went stony with anger. "Goddamn. He was only a young lad."

"Like the helmsman," Farhill noted. "Young and inexperienced."

"That's right. Cheap, too," Bennet said, with the trace amount of bitterness in his cadence coming through. "I only hope they didn't know what was about to hit them."

"Are we the only survivors?" Marta asked meekly.

Golding strode forward. "That's the assumption I'm now making. Mr Bennet, I think I'd like to take up your suggestion."

Growing Storm by Richard Holliday

Bennet looked forward. Golding continued: "Of sinking this ship. None of this," the young commander gestured around, past the ceiling and walls back into the oblivion outside, "gets to land. *None of it.*"

"Agreed, Jon" Farhill said, smiling ever so slightly at him. "You did well."

"Congratulate me later," Golding cautioned, his nose twisting. He moved over to inspect the engine room. The main engine room was down a flight of metal steps from this balcony that overlooked the space, which was dominated by the two huge engines, two storeys tall. Pipes fed them like arteries and veins, coming in from all over the ship. Bennet paced quickly down. Golding was the next down.

"Stop those engines please, Bennet."

"Already on it," Bennet called. Between the engines on the lower floor was a control console festooned with dancing gauges and twinkling lights of red and amber. Bennet's greasy hand found the master switch. With a click imperceptible to the group still upstairs, it moved to *off*.

Nothing happened.

Bennet moved the switch a few more times. Sensing a problem, Golding followed.

"You can *stop* the engines, yes?" Golding asked, his tone almost patronising.

"Ordinarily, yes. But this ain't ordinary," Bennet admitted. "And the engines ain't stopping."

Golding turned back to Farhill and the others on the balcony. He simply shrugged.

"Things just got doubly hard."

The group assembled at the base of the engine room, glimpsing furtively. The two engines either side rumbled on, the pitch of the ship creaking the hull.

Around them, movement clanked around, past the ceiling festooned with pipes and conduits.

Golding, Farhill and the others felt in the way as Bennet bustled around the engine room, twiddling levers and making quick, sporadic movements on the controls. Eventually the commander stopped Bennet with a shove.

"Can this wait, I'm trying to –"

"Trying to *what*, exactly?" Golding harrumphed loudly over the ever-present din of the engines. "You said the engines can't be stopped."

"Yes, but they can't run on thin air, can they?" Bennet snapped back. "I'm trying to dump what leftover fuel we have."

"And how long is that likely to take?"

Bennet looked around. "Tanks are pretty empty so not long. Fifteen, twenty minutes?"

"Then we leave?" Marta said, breaking away from the group. She held onto Bennet. "We leave after this, go home and everything'll be better?"

Growing Storm by Richard Holliday

Bennet's icy gaze cracked just a little. His greasy, dirty hand took one of hers. "I hope so." However, the ice reformed. His eyes narrowing, Bennet turned around. "Someone's missing, and we didn't even notice."

"What are you ta-" Golding began to say incredulously, but the mental headcount was right. Damon, one of the marines, was missing. "Farhill," Golding said curtly, "with me. Let's take a look."

She joined Golding with a lean canter across the engine room floor. Golding led the way around the machinery. He nudged her. She turned, addressing Eddy, the last marine left standing: "Stay here, protect the civilians. Watch them."

Eddy nodded in acknowledgement, grasping his gun just slightly more firmly.

Golding stepped forward, around the plant. His nose wrinkled, and he dared't blink. One hand reached toward his hip, for his holstered weapon. He moved his head to the side, quickly, to beckon Farhill in the narrow space. "What're you thinking?" he asked her.

"Seriously?" she said, shining her flashlight into the crannies and nooks around the angular engine pieces.

He replied. "Wouldn't ask otherwise."

"I think we're dead. Just a matter of time."

Golding took a breath. "Thanks. I appreciate your honest assessment."

Yelping chatter rumbled above. Something was moving, down through the very bowels of the ship. High pitched scraping followed.

Golding stopped, directing his flashlight up. The reinforced ceiling appeared to move, bowing ever so slightly. He traced the movement with a finger until it crossed a bulkhead. The passage stopped. Golding turned. The ship heaved again, this time heavily canting to one side. A sharp metallic scrape came across the floor nearby. Golding and Farhill reacted in unison, as they were trained to, following the sound with their lights.

The scrape came from a hatch behind the engine block, one that was almost imperceptible in the gloom of the machine space.

Farhill went to investigate first but Golding stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "You know the protocol. Me first. Cover me."

Getting down onto one knee, Golding gingerly reached toward the hatch cover. It was loose on the floor, flapping with the motion of the ship in the heavy seas. He grabbed it with one hand, supporting the weight of his body with the other. He pulled on the hatch. It opened but only slightly. "Can you give me a boost?" he gestured to Farhill. She came over, kneeling herself. "One one," Golding counted. "Three. Two. One..."

They both heaved, the metal wailing. The hatch resisted, before finally falling back onto the engine room floor with a loud, booming thud.

"What was that?!" Bennet called from the other side of the engine room.

Growing Storm by Richard Holliday

"Stay back," Golding returned. He glanced down into the open hatch. Something in there glistened. He examined the hatch, the backside of which was also glistening. Golding gestured for a light. Farhill flapped, finding her flashlight. She cast it down onto the hatch cover.

"What is... that?" she said almost noiselessly, gasping. "Wait, what? No, Jon!"

Golding poked a hand toward the backside of the hatch. Viscous threads of gloop started to settle on the open back of the hatch, fronds of bituminous fluid pirouetting against gravity almost in slow-motion. Inside the hatch, a pool of this viscous ooze gurgled, sending a great bubble forming on the surface. It burst, with Golding and Farhill both holding their hands to their faces, blocking out an evil stench.

"That isn't fuel oil..." Farhill exclaimed, her words muffled behind her gloved hand. "No way..." She saw Golding had frozen. Then she looked at his shoulder, casting her flashlight that way. It... glistened, in a way the synthetic material shouldn't. Slowly himself, Golding put two fingers gingerly into the large droplet of goo on his shoulder. Pulling his fingers away, the light from the flashlight passed through the fluid.

It was deep ochre, with pieces of *something* suspended within. The same as the fluid that had coated the chartroom and had followed them around this ship.

Another drop fell, again in what seemed like slow-motion. It hit the surface of the fluid in the hatch, rippling the surface.

Both looked up. Both saw the figure. Both saw it drop into the darkness.

"Quick!" Golding barked, falling backwards a couple of feet from his prone position. He reached for his weapon, dangling on a strap around his body. It found his hand, and his hand found the trigger.

The gunfire's *dakka-dakka-dakka* roared, echoing in the claustrophobic space. Flashes of light erupted from Golding's weapon, and then Farhill's, strobing the area as the literally fell backwards. Sharp explosions from the guns were followed by the metallic clang of ricochets but also the wet, deep thud of impacts with flesh. Following those wet, fleshy impacts were the sprays of the viscous, thick gloop from underneath the rotted, distended flesh.

After a few seconds that felt like eternities, both Golding and Farhill fell backwards from the darkness into the uneven gloom of the engine room.

Following them into that gloom was the figure that had dropped from the catenary above. The remains of a uniform peeked through where the flesh had begun to turn waxy, stretched and distended.

"Shit," Bennet yelled, "that's the Captain!"

"What happened to Damon?!" Farhill yelled. Golding gasped first. The figure lumbered forward, out of the gloom of the machine space, revealing itself. It was tall, built firmly, unlike the handful of others they'd encountered. This one was bulkier, wider, with what looked like muscles bulging with what amounted to a pulse. The tattered remnants of the captain's uniform hung off them. A leathery, withered limb raided above its head.

From its maw it dropped what was left of Damon.

Growing Storm by Richard Holliday

"Get back!" Farhill squealed. She grabbed Golding's splayed arms, dragging him forward. With a *wsssh* of air, the limb batted the deck, coming down with a resolute thud that made the floor plates quiver. The limb raised, leaving a dent in the panel.

Golding wrenched himself up. His pistol came out with a whip of his hand. His arm trembled with the rush of adrenalin. The firearm quivered too. A gloved finger shivered in the trigger guard. Golding squeezed. The bullet hit the figure square in the shoulder, the round sending shards of waxy, hard flesh followed by trails of putrid, pus-like ooze that was once blood.

The teetering figure emerged into the engine room proper, wrenching at fittings to gain purchase on its lumbering, drunk-like gait. Tendrils under the hardened flesh rippled, the flesh squeaking with strain. Under the claw-like hands the metal pipes buckled and bowed, crumpling like soggy cardboard tubes.

White eyes focussed on those claws. Golding knew that one grip and he was toast. He looked back, over his shoulder. The other survivors huddled against the corner of the room against the bulkhead. Steam and gas erupted from the crumpled pipes behind the creature that loomed forward.

He aimed for another shot, taking a deep breath. The injured limb rose again, tearing pipes in its unheavenly grip. The captain's head, now grossly deformed and shedding its once-human appearance with every lumbering step into the engine room's sterile lighting. The maw opened, as if to yell...

"Christ almighty..." Bennet gasped, glancing at the approaching figure as it tore its way into the light. He held Marta close, feeling her heat on his skin. "Don't worry," he soothed. "It'll all be over soon."

"Please god..." the terrified woman sobbed gently into Bennet's flank, her eyes clenched tight, as if not to see the horror that came closer with every reverberation.

Golding continued back, lining up his shot.

"For god's sake," Farhill yelled, "hurry up and *shoot* the fucking thing!"

"A little help!" Golding barked, coughing in some of the acrid fumes and vapours that were filling the engine room from ruined pipework. Swallowing, he brought the pistol to his face. His breath held. The pistol clapped hard, his hand pivoting with the recoil. In front, the grotesque figure fell backwards, just catching itself in the explosion of ooze from the hole in its chest. It trembled, not quite falling,

Fragments of waxy, hard, corrupted flesh were held together with the gelatinous ooze, but the plates of organic exoskeleton moved loose with every fumbling footstep. The gaping maw that comprised a mouth fell open, a deafening, whining squeal exulting from the orifice. The limbs grabbed at the pipework that almost caged the beast in, pulling at the metal as if it were soggy paper. The inhuman exultations were now joined by a cacophony of rending, tearing metal and hissing vapour.

"Oh please, let it take me quickly..." Marta sobbed, her gentle wails no match for the noise that filled every space of the engine room that seemed destined to become a coffin.

Growing Storm by Richard Holliday

"Shh, almost there," Bennet sighed, closing his eyes. He didn't want to see the moment come.

The figure lumbered forward, pouncing. Golding tried to turn but tripped as the hull made a sickening lurch. The monster fell atop of him. Golding struggled against the mass of the monster, the stench of its corrupted body, now devoid of all its previous humanity. He felt the claw-like hands dig into his armoured shoulders. The pain soared from each claw like firebursts. With a renewed sense of triumph the beast stood, pulling Golding with it. Golding's face clenched, feeling the bone in his shoulders compressing. Soon would come the sickening crack as the brittle bone gave in to this alien strength.

The monster exulted once more, acrid breath flying into Golding's face. The smell of raw corruption, of something that should never have existed but did so, invaded his nostrils. Deep down in his belly he felt the contents curdle. He closed his eyes, resigning himself to failure...

Blam!

Bennet's head bolted up toward that sharp noise.

For a split moment the only sound was the rushing of gas from ruined pipes. Then a wet thwack as lumps of gory, corrupted flesh hit the deck, the walls and the ceiling. Then a firmer, sounder thud.

Golding opened his eyes. He turned. Farhill stood a couple of feet behind him, pistol still raised. She lowered it slowly, walking forward toward the monstrous being. It fell backwards, back into the engine space from where it had emerged.

"What the..." she began, examining the fetid ruins of the mutated body. She kicked the limp body with her boot. It gave a sick, thick squelch. Her foot retreated, pulling a trail of viscous ooze with it. Her face lit up with disgust and contempt.

The brief moment of reflective silence was shattered by a heaving wallop against the very structure of the hull, the pounding from below and around louder than it ever had been.

The rumble came closer than it ever had before, right beneath the engine room. The flashlights followed the sound intensely, toward the murky ooze under the hatch. The metal puffed up, deforming right in front of their transfixed eyes.

The hatch wobbled, then burst with a crash.

Instinctively, everyone fell back into the light.

From the ruined core of the hatch an slimy, cylindrical tentacle, two feet wide, writhed, flapping wildly with pulsating motions against the heavy machinery that contained the space. Deep beneath, and in the forward part of the ship, a heavy squeal emanated, reverberating down to the engine room. Through the hatch. The tentacle, glistening, found the body of the Captain and dragged it with a great scream through the ruined hatch into the belly of whatever lurked at the front of the ship.

The whole space rocked with irregular, massive motions. "I think we'd better move!" Bennet barked between hoarse coughs. Farhill and Golding, collecting themselves, turned in the smoky atmosphere. The engineer was already peeling up a narrow, tubular steel ladder, behind Marta and Eddy, whose hulking form made a crude human shield.

Growing Storm by Richard Holliday

"What about sinking the ship?" Golding cried out, coughing too.

"All we need is a spark," Bennet called back, pointing toward a jury-rigged set of pipes splayed open around the main engine. Golding's eyes followed, confused. "The compartment's filling with fuel fumes. All it needs is a spark..."

Farhill met Golding's confused gaze. The thought made a circuit around her mind. Then she looked back up. "How long have we got?"

"Ten minutes until the engine tries to restart. The glowplugs will blow the fumes, and with it the bottom of the ship out," Bennet explained coolly. "So, if you two don't mind, shall we get the hell off this ship?"

Wordlessly, Farhill and Golding agreed, scampering to the ladder. Another low, looming boom erupted deep below. Air rushed past the group on the ladder, forcing its way up, followed by lapping ripples of rushing water.

"We're near the end..." Bennet grimaced, looking up.

"Don't look!" Farhill barked. The sound of splashes came from below. Then the ethereal jabbering of the corrupted creatures. Their footsteps in the puddle of seawater stopped. Farhill didn't need to look – she could sense their beady gaze. Another sudden exultation of jabbering followed by the manic splashing of crazed footsteps confirmed that they'd been spotted. Like the others, she climbed, through the hatch and hefted it shut. It hit the dimly lit deck with a hefty clang.

"Which way?" Golding asked, gathering his breath with exertion.

"No time for that," Bennet said. He strode around a corner of the corridor. There was a door with a grimy, round porthole. Bennet looked through it, then turned. "Main deck. Where'd you say your ship was?"

The rest of the group followed Bennet's words, joining him at the doorway.

Golding rasped. "We cast alongside on the starboard stern, there was a stairwell."

Bennet looked at his wristwatch. "Okay. Once we're through that door, it's plain sailing." He smiled. No-one else did. "Sorry." He took a hand to the handle. His face contorted with effort but the handle didn't move.

"Are you kidding me?!" Golding gasped with exasperation. "Let's all have a go..."

He joined Bennet and gripped onto the crusty handle, feeling the loose paint slide off in his hand. It moved slightly, a sharp scaping noise reverberating down the passageway.

"Almost, nearly..." both men exerted. The metal handle wailed and squealed, as if in agony itself. Golding and Bennet took a deep breath of festering air. They nodded at each other, as if to mentally count down. *Three, two, one...*

The handle finally relented and, with a crash, the door was caught by a stiff gust and blew onto the deck, the hinges shearing clean off.

Bennet gestured to Golding. "After you, please." Golding didn't hesitate, stepping forth onto the outer deck.

Growing Storm by Richard Holliday

"How much time left?" Golding called over the unabating wind. "Bennet?"

"Four minutes or so," the engineer replied. Then he glanced forward. "Oh, good lord."

"What's the score?" Farhill trilled, proceeding to the railing. Her mouth, like Bennet's, fell agape. "Shit. Christ."

In the hazy sky, against the backdrop of an angry, restless sea, the group saw the entire foredeck of the *Star of Rio* had been perforated and punctured by sprouting bodies – tentacles, among other shapeless growths - that glistened and writhed, like a massive animal trying to escape its metal bounds. Metal decking was torn around the wriggling limbs that reached out, as if to pull the carcass of the cargo ship aground, to escape onto land.

Deep in the ruined belly of the ship came mighty wails, shrieks from another world. The metal rippled some more, turning white with fatigue as it moved rhythmically under the strain.

The survivors – the last humans on the ship – were transfixed, even as the waves beat the ship into a twisted hulk more and more. The metal heaved and groaned, almost in agony itself.

The rotten heart of the *Star of Rio* resonated again, sending a trembling energy through the metalwork. Sparks flew across the deck. Those holding onto the railing leapt back in surprise.

"Bastard thing!" Farhill cursed.

"I think," Golding commanded, "that it's time we got the hell off this ship!" His sweat-laden brow turned. He met Bennet's gaze. The engineer's face was ashen in agreement. Taking a last look across to the horrific sight that was eating up the proud freighter.

A burst of flame erupted from the ruined funnel. It blasted the survivors against the railing with a shower of orange sparks. From the splayed metal remnants, a slimy great tentacle slithered out, its huge circumference smashing the windows of the pilothouse. It was coming toward the deck, homing in on the survivors.

"Ruuuuun!" Golding bellowed, feeling the deck shift and bend. Sparks sheared down from the exploding funnel, onto the mass that contaminated the foredeck. He pulled Farhill up, feeling her weight shift.

She tripped, scuffing the deck. Bennet and Marta stopped, turning to see her. They reached out, only to be scooped up by the last marine.

"Get the civilians off first!" Golding yelled toward Eddy. Then he came over, finding a footing on the undulating deck.

"I...I..." she started to say. Golding held her. Her face was glistening with blood and dirt.

"Don't say anything Lena, we'll..." he began. Bennet and Marta struggled by. "That way," Golding called, "down there. Down the ladder." He turned back to Farhill. "Come on."

A gust of salty spray hit Farhill in the face as she moved toward the ladder. From the forward part of the ship, the sound of metal rending, and an ethereal, terrible shrieking wail pierced the wind-swept scene.

Growing Storm by Richard Holliday

The deck gave a faltering wobble. Debris rained down into the turgid sea. Soon the gap in the bulwark, the ribbon of steel flapping about at the freighter's very frame was twisted into scrap, beckoned, the bucking horizon out to sea calling her forward.

He passed Eddy, nodding. The colour in the marine's face fell, and he grappled desperately for his gun. Golding turned, almost in slow motion. He saw the tentacle whiplashing toward them. Time seemed to dilate, Eddy giving Golding a great shove, and he fell toward the ladder. The tentacle whipped into the space Golding had occupied but grabbed Eddy in a hail of bullets. It dragged the marine, stoic and wrestling, into its gaping heart in the centre of the ship.

Golding picked himself up. Nearby Farhill was pulling herself to her feet. They both looked around, confused and disoriented, for an overlong moment.

Eddy was gone.

"You're last Lena!" Golding called, reaching out to her. She reached his gloved hand, feeling the puffy digits. He tugged, pulling her around and down the trembling stairway down. Her eyes opened in the spray, only partially, forming an imperfect barrier against the saltwater mist. Golding guided her down the steps.

They crashed with every motion against the side of the ship. The motion was irregular, trying to buck the pair off into the frothing, maddened ocean. There was one great lurch and Lena fell forward, onto something solid. Her ears, filled with foam, made out indistinct noises. Shouting. A door closing. Then the muted rumble of a powerful engine. The sensation of quick movement budged her into action.

She picked herself up. "What did I miss?"

She saw Golding at the controls of the *Royal David City*. He didn't turn his head. "Nothing. Yet."

A gentle wail took her attention away from Golding. Out on the open space, Bennet and Marta stood, holding the rail and each other. Ducking, Farhill saw under the ceiling what captivated them. She took a step forward toward the rainswept glass.

"Go. You might not get a chance otherwise."

Her motion toward the door was her answer. With a click the door opened and once again the sound of the howling wind dominated the scene. A few hundred yard away she saw the hulk of the *Star of Rio* writhing, great tentacles draped across it, pulling at what was left of the superstructure. The metal bent like wet cardboard, tearing into shredded pieces. The entire hull rippled with the motion as whatever *thing* was contained sought to burst out.

She cast a fleeting glimpse to Bennet. "How long?"

"Any time now..." he shouted over the weather.

Farhill turned back just to see the entirety of the hulk erupt, the explosion starting from the stern and working its way progressively forward in the space of a second. The *thing* the ship could not hold wilted, writhing as the explosion shattered whatever was left of the *Star of Rio* and slithered, motionless, away from the shore and into the sea.

Growing Storm by Richard Holliday

Farhill, Bennet and Marta ducked feeling the shockwave of the explosion race across the galling seascape. Shrapnel and debris lurched past, the flames lingering with pools of fuel floating on the toxic surface. But within a moment or two, with the motion of the waves, the fires surrendered. Darkness fell, claiming the grave of the *Star of Rio*.

For a moment the three of them stood silent, taking in what they'd witnessed.

"Let's get inside," Farhill directed to Bennet and Marta, after a moment of reflection. The wind carried on whipping up a frenzied sea as distance was made away from the gravesite of that monstrosity.

With a click, the door to the wheelhouse closed. A muted clatter brought a sombre clarity.

"Didn't you see?"

Golding said nothing for a pregnant moment. "I saw. Come on, let's get home, back to base. Dry land for you two," he said, looking at Bennet and Marta. Both shivered. Wordlessly, Farhill led them away to wrap up under foil-like blankets.

She re-emerged a moment later.

"Nearest base?"

"Portsmouth. Forty minutes."

Farhill nodded, and looked silently ahead. The weather hadn't been this bad in as long as she remembered.

Ahead, forty minutes away, lay what they thought was a safe haven.

Not a light, however, was on in the town, and the sea crept forward, bringing darkness ashore.

THE END