

East of the Azores, circa 1200 BCE

Whatever was beneath the soft mist, only sounds escaped. The rhythm of decking, each swell working the boards, producing a pleasing, regular creak. The straining wet ropes added another section to the orchestra. They whipped, sharp enough to pierce the ambient roar of the ocean. Captain Euriphanes stood at his bridge, watching Menandros crawl along the prow to give his hawk eyes advantage over the fog. Euriphanes watched his navigators hand signals, passing orders along.

“Thrasides, to port with your oar-hands. Quickly now.” The first mate addressed his oarsmen, and the ship twisted West. “Hold,” cried his captain. Thrasides expertly parsed orders from officers through to the galley. “Menandros, how do we lay?” The young officer continued along the prow, feeling the waves amplified as the long beam moved. He saw nothing but the bright mist. “I see nothing Mr. Thrasides. I hear something.” Menandros struggled for a description. “It’s a song.” Thrasides suppressed a laugh. “Songs, you say? Perhaps there’s a banquet with pig and wine a mile to port!” Xanthios held tight to a rope, his face white. He was the most junior officer, acting as Bosun’s Mate. Staring into the unknown, he appeared frightened. Thrasides noticed Xanthios’s expression. “What’s wrong Xan? What do you fear?” The boy spoke as if haunted. “My Dad told me about this. Men die here. When they hear the singing.” The first mate felt a flush of paternalism. “Kid, I sailed with your father. He was a good man, as far as sailing men go. We had some real adventures together. But we didn’t hear a lot of choirs. He was telling you old sea stories lad!” before slapping Xanthios on the back and returning to his station.

He called again “How do we lay?” Menandros was almost at the head. Perhaps he didn’t hear. Thrasides yelled his question again. In answer, Menandros began to hum, low at first, but rising quickly. Its cadence overpowered the movement of the ocean, its rhythms were now straining the planks and plucking the ropes. As the men stood still, the ship sailed on.

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Three miles East of Norfolk, Virginia, eight days ago

Same old faces, same old smells. Uniformed bodies and propane powered forklifts were loading rations and materiel aboard the USS Nyxian Viper. As the narrow corridors and stairwells ran with workers, Captain Elliot Merkle stood at the bridge of the sub with his executive officer, Commander Bryan Halliday. “Popping your 1k cherry this week, Commander?” “Yep. Brought my Xanax and rosary beads.” Merkle smiled. “I’ve got some Pepto-Bismol if you need it. Also, I have rum.”

The USS Nyxian Viper was designed for stealth and terrible violence. The first Nyx class hunter-killer came equipped with innovative sonar capabilities and nuclear torpedoes. The deeper it went, the larger its listening sphere. And this boat ran way down there. Traditional attack subs couldn’t handle the pressure beneath 500 meters. Beyond that the groaning metal would burst and send all hands to oblivion. The new Nyx class was rated for 4000 meters. Many aboard were hand-picked for their experience in extreme depth research vessels. As Merkle turned to enter a booth where his secure communications were received, Halliday rounded the bridge, checking in with operators on their systems.

Back in the aft listening bay Lieutenant Joshua Vincent and Petty officer Stephanie Hathaway were surveying their office space for the next few weeks. Both were expert in ultramodern vibrational detection, with advanced degrees in mathematics and physics. Steph cast her eyes around the compartment. "Doesn't smell too good already."

"Shall I bust out the Draco Noir?"

"Yeah, let's go full-on college dorm with the fucking place."

Josh feigned panic. "Then we'll need Doritos and shitty beer." They broke off, Josh punching in codes to a terminal while Steph slipped on some earphones. Josh pulled his from their holster and the two conducted their initial comms test. "So, what you heard Josh?" He shook his head. "Same as you. We're running ultra-deep, detecting targets placed strategically at the range limits." Steph slipped a headphone up and tapped her ear. "I mean, what have you heard? Because I know you're not going for this bullshit test run."

"I know this. We don't want to know." The sonar bay came online as the behemoth submarine slipped below and disappeared.

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New York, November 7th 1872

As the capstan turned, the wet rope spread the seaweed smell around the deck. "Bo, get to a handle, anchor's getting some slip." Of the two men at the rope, the smallest began to struggle. "It'll take Ari off his feet, if Lieb doesn't do it first."

"Verdammt!" Gottlieb Goodschad lapsed to his native German as Arian Martens lost footing, stepping outside the rough mat and slipping on the wet deck. Lieb called this time. "Bo, get over here, this boy can't stand." Bojan Gottlieb grabbed a handle. The three men gained purchase, and the weight began to move. The work was lighter with each turn as 3-inch hemp rope shifted from water to ship. Once the steel weight was hauled aboard, Second Mate Andrew Gilling awaited his captain's orders before executing.

"Mr. Gilling, raise quarter sail." The second mate had the sailors configure the ship for leaving harbor. Other ships were plying trade, and there was some navigating to be done before the crew had the ship out on open water. From the bridge the captain was ordering "Half sail Mr. Gilling." The ship began tacking to the reliable Mid-Atlantic winds. Gilling stood at his post and watched Captain Briggs on the bridge, his back now turned. Beside the captain stood his wife, who held the hand of her 2-year-old daughter. Bo saw the junior officer shaking his head at the scene. "Grieves me too Mr. Gilling. Why we're taking women and children aboard I don't know." Gilling turned to the sailor. "Only Captain Briggs could tell you that Bo, and I'm not about to ask him."

The cargo was made fast in the hold. Casks of methyl alcohol bound for Genoa were roped tightly in stacks four barrels high. After 3 miles of Easting, the order for full sail was handed down. The men hauled and the heavy cloth locked into place. And the Mary Celeste sailed on.

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Norfolk Virginia, May 16th 1968

The USS Viperfish slipped below periscope depth. Chief Sonarman Deke Cordon and Petty Officer Arial Hennessey were getting some rest after readying all sonar equipment. The gear was in better condition than the boat. The sonar operating compartment was tiny, the men out lying in their bunks while they could. “Least it’s an easy patrol Deke. They wouldn’t let this hammer-drill out of Norfolk to do any work.” Deke lay flat on his back as they went to 100m, listening to the metallic stress sounds as the pressure built. “We’ll be pinging. No Russians around for a thousand clicks in any direction. I doubt we’ll even go as far as Gibraltar.”

Arial, bored already, drew deep on his cigarette. Deke had quit and stayed in the bottom bunk to avoid the drifting smoke. Though younger by a decade, Arial had made more cruises than Deke. The senior sonar operator was most versed in technology, but Ari had come through the ranks and gained his specialty on the job. Despite his relative inexperience, Deke was no more excited than Ari as his sixth operational cruise began. “We won’t even be resupplying; this is just politics. The Commies are up north under the ice, we’re on a quick out-and-back for busywork. They can hit us from Archangel, why would they dick around here?” “Maybe they have busywork too.” offered Arial, as the walls moaned softly.

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East of the Azores, circa 1200BCE

Thrasides again called to the navigator. “Menandros, stop singing and report, damn you.” There was nothing to hear but the boy singing a wordless song. The music faded as Menandros slipped into the cold Atlantic water. “Man over” screamed Thrasides, as all officers aboard save for Xanthios rushed toward foredeck, staring into the mist, trying to find the missing sailor with a sight line less than 30 feet. The crew called out again, Captain Euriphanes finally heard the alarm in his good ear. He too ran toward the prow, but there was nothing but the slap of the sea against the hull. No, wait. Among the beats was a sound. The sound had colors, and a pleasant smell. It was an invitation. The melody grew louder and was revealed. Angelic female voices held promise, expectation, joy. Xanthios disappeared to the hold, emerging with a bag of gold coins, with no attempt at concealment. “Xian, never mind your father and me--he’d be ashamed. Stealing undercover of a brother officer overboard. I’ll brand your fucking forehead. Drop that and throw out a line for Dros, he’s still out there.

Xanthios didn’t heed anything but the song. He dropped as many coins as he could into his pockets, walked slowly to the stern, hopped up to the rail and stepped off, as serene as a man going to the Elysian Fields. Thrasides ran to the rear. “Dump the gold! Dump it! There’ll be no branding, drop it and grab the line.” But the boy didn’t drop the coins. He rode them down. As Thrasides bent over the rail, appealing to his friend’s son, his face became slack, and his eyes clouded.

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Eastern Mid Atlantic, November 14th 1872

Captain Briggs took his gaze from the clouds on the horizon to his wife, who held on to the bridge rail with both hands. “You can relax your grip Sarah. If the lord is willing, those clouds indicate warm currents, not a storm. I feel no stirring beyond what is usual. These waters have safely bourn me a dozen times. Neither you nor Sophia would be aboard if I felt even slight unease. Now, please fetch my eyeglasses. The charts don’t get clearer as my eyes age.

Sarah seated Sophia on the wooden deck as she picked up her husband's eyeglasses. She was careful not to put her fingers on the lenses. "Shouldn't we at least have a ship's cat, Benjamin?" He smiled kindly at his wife. "There is no misfortune beyond which almighty God sets for us. No animal can help. Pray faithfully, behave modestly and contain pride, and there is no reason for concern. We are held safe."

He went from reassurance back to practicalities. "Please set the table after evening prayers." Sarah did as was bidden, taking Sophie below to pray. Once she'd sat the little girl in a chair, she took out a soft mat she used to protect her knees from the hard wood, resting her forehead on the bulkhead. "Our Father, who art in Heaven" she began, her faith in the words already restoring her confidence in her husband and the trade winds. "Hallowed be Thy name." She felt a vague vibration against her forehead, higher in frequency than the slower forces beating at the ship. The sound was sweet. "Thy will be done, on Earth as in Heaven." The vibrations became a soft song and then became louder than the waves. Sarah could not recall the Lord's prayer as the singing wrapped around her like a golden fleece.

Sophia had climbed down from her chair. Unused to the movement of the ship, she dropped to all fours and crawled toward her mother. Rather than cling to Sarah she crawled past to the bulkhead and pressed her head against the wood. She laughed like a delicate bell as she found the sound that had possessed her mother.

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Eastern Mid Atlantic, May 22nd 1968

"Can't we have any secrets?" Deke wanted to know where Arial kept his illicit ketchup supply, "I see you do it, you pour that shit in everything. Saw you with that corned beef," Arial didn't break stride. "Saw you with your Momma."

They'd been pinging at 0.1 Hz for over a day. They hadn't worn headphones in hours. The speakers were torn up and could barely play anything but the torturous ping. Arial turned them off. When the pings returned from their odyssey, the only witness was a strip of data logging paper. Arial saw the pen ticking up. "Deke"-- he nodded toward the logger. Both sonarmen moved close, analyzing the peaks. "What kind of a return is that Ari? You ever see that?" The upticks on the paper were sharp. Way too sharp. And the frequency was oscillating. The spikes were not uniform in any way. Sometimes they returned in reverse order from transmission.

Deke's brow furrowed. "There's something big and deep and weird down there. And I swear, if the next words out of your mouth are 'Like your Mama' I'll kill you with a fucking spoon." But Ari wasn't cracking wise. He was staring at the tape as though reading the most beautiful calligraphy. "Ari!" Deke snapped his colleague back to life. "Deke, I don't have any idea what this is." That couldn't go unpunished. "That's what your Mamma said."

Ariel mouthed "go fuck yourself" as Deke slipped on his headphones and patched them in.

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East of the Mid Atlantic Ridge, Four days ago

Captain Merkle Stepped out of the secure booth. He looked 10 years older than the man who entered. He slumped into his seat.. His initial orders were rescinded and his new patrol detailed. He was to record nothing of the mission, to write nothing down. The orders were strange to begin with. They ended downright scary. Captain Merkle looked around his bridge. Young, talented submariners, with faith in their chain of command.

Here at the nerve center of the ship there was no time for anything but competence. Having changed their course, they began their steady descent to a place three miles under position 32°54'N 33°08'W. He wrote down the orders anyway. What were they going to do, court martial him?

In the aft bay Steph and Josh were fervently agreeing with each other. Steph turned to Josh. "I fucking told you we were going to do something."

They snapped back to professionalism. There was only one real computer in the chamber, Josh went to the keyboard while Steph made calculations at a tablet terminal. "What's the new dive gradient? Salinity? Sphere?" She confirmed the calculations and Josh hit enter. With the immediate word done they lapsed back into their casual personas. Steph eased her expression. "Any of this scaring you?" Josh shook his head. "I'm fucking terrified." "Yeah, me too. We don't even have a ship's cat." Josh nodded slowly. "Should have brought a cat."

The external cameras showed the bright flashes as the distant undersea volcanoes of The Mid Atlantic Ridge threw off molten rock and metal like fireworks. The sonar specialists didn't like to listen too hard around there, way too zingy to trust a signal. The superheated material cooled, making whooshing sounds as the solidified metal and rock crisscrossed the ocean floor. And the Nyxian Viper sailed on.

###

East of the Azores, circa 1200BCE

"Thras, what are you doing man? Have you gone insane too?" Thrasides could be a taciturn man at the best of times, and this wasn't the best of times. Get off that rail, get back here man, I need you!" The second in command only paused as he stood on the rail, carefully filling his pockets with equal weights of gold. Then he stepped off. "NO! Thras! Not you!" The captain turned his good ear to the sea and felt it right away. He didn't want to be on the ship. He wanted to be in the water. Deep in the water. He fell to his knees, singling along. Some damaged wet sailcloth sat in the rudder house awaiting repair. He tore off a sodden piece and stuffed it into his ear. Still the vibrations touched him, and a man without such steel down the spine may not have gotten down below in time. He had to free the oarsmen. No sailor should drown in chains, however low their station.

The captain reached the wave-level deck to find bedlam. The oarsmen had not torn off their chains, but their oars. They broke and split them as they stabbed at the hull. Euriphanes looked them up and down. There was not a clear eye aboard. Back up the ladders, all the while haunted by the memory of the infernal tune, he unleashed a pilot boat and pushed out into the mist. He rowed with all his considerable strength and stamina as far east as he could before slumping forward, exhausted. He'd made enough distance to safely watch the Gold of Atlantis slip under the waves. If he could have heard he'd have been haunted by the song of the drowning, singing as they sank. The City Beyond the Pillars was a lie. Even as his hearing was

protected, he still saw the lights. They flicked back and forth, too deep to see anything but that they were light. It was enough to guide him to the African coast, where he could find rescue and head back into the Mediterranean. You couldn't buy eternal life with gold in Atlantis. It was Poseidon's gold now.

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Eastern Mid Atlantic, November 14th 1872

Sarah stood, slowly but steady on her feet. She scooped up her daughter in one arm and hefted up two silver candlesticks with her other. She climbed the stairs with no need for railings, so steady she felt. If she'd cared to look she'd have seen Benjamin on his Knees. He was screaming against the sound, as if his god would hear him over the din.

"Eternal Father strong to save." Sarah passed him with Sophia and the candlesticks.

"Whose arm doth bind the restless wave."

Sarah lifted Sophia to the rail and pressed a candlestick into the little girl's hand. Sophia looked giddy with excitement.

"Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep" Sarah held tight to her weight and tipped herself backward over the rail down into the wine dark sea. No one could have heard her hit the water. The singing was too intense.

"Its own appointed limits keep" His last coherent image was of Sophia, so pure of heart, a face full of joy, crawling over the side with her candlestick in her grasp.

"O hear us when we cry to Thee" Sang Benjamin. He'd now seen nine hands into the water. His eyes began to cloud.

"For those in peril on the sea"

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Eastern Mid Atlantic, May 20th 1968

"Deke, cut it out man, it's not funny." Arial had been looking at Deke's blank expression for a full 20 seconds. Since he donned the headphones, he hadn't spoken a word. He just started to hum. The tune made Arial's mind spin. "You're being freaky man. Hey, I'm talking to you." Arial tore the headset away from Deke. His demeanor didn't change, and he began to sing with no words, accompanying the tinny melody streaming from the headphones. The song would envelop anyone within Deke's earshot.

Arial ran away while he could, racing down the corridors, dipping through the bulkheads and knocking someone's lunch on the deck. "Fuck you doing man?" Arial was moving so quick that he heard a doppler shift as the hungry submariner complained. "That was a fucking burrito."

Arial continued to put distance between him and the deadly music. Finally at the bridge, he pounded on the metal hatch screaming "Emergency, emergency" He saw his commander, Andre Demchak through the porthole to the bridge. Demchak cracked the door span the latch and Arial pushed the hatch door open. "Sir, emergency to report." His breathing was more controlled now, and there was some comfort in passing off the problem to a senior officer. Demchak

followed Ariel toward the aft bay, but Deke was already walking down the corridor toward them. “Stop what you’re doing and put your hands on your head.” There was no tolerance for insubordination when any wrong move could take down a hundred souls. But Deke didn’t stop singing. He walked on, and Ariel once again ran for his life. Once he was, at the bridge he reported directly to the captain, who ordered the hatch closed once more.

“Petty Officer Hennessy, what’s the deal back there? What did the senior operator do?” “He was acting weird looking at the logger. We were getting a real weird signal sir.” “Weird how?” “We were at 0.1 Hz. The signals we were getting were sharp, way too sharp. Some pulses returned before the previous ping. There’s no sound channel I’ve ever heard of do that Sir. The peaks represent objects at over 24 miles. We have to use long ping intervals to get there. And the return signal should have been fuzzy. This isn’t right. There is something close sir. And it’s messing with us.”

Deke, the Commander and other men were at the hatch now. The sounds whispered through the thick door, reaching everyone. Ariel began to sing, and the others picked up the harmonies perfectly, each voice weaving and layering. Once infiltrated, the mindless automatons at the controls put the ship into a vertical dive, Ariel was still present enough to hear the first sounds of the hull giving. Creaking first, then buckling, moaning, splitting, the crush. He knew and didn’t care. The music had him. All hundred souls were crushed in the violence of the implosion. The wreck of the Viperfish slipped down to the deep, as the lights began to dance around it.

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Three miles beneath 32°54’N 33°08’W, Yesterday

The Nyxian Viper had passed -3000 meters and was now diving to -4000. The orders at the bridge were cautions, descending a little at a time now, checking sensors and determining hull integrity. The mighty ship was performing as advertised. Some creak was evident, but there was give in the interior walls by design to accommodate pressure fluctuations. The air pressure in the ship was 1.3 atmospheres. Normal for deep sea work. Back in the listening bay, the two operators conferred.

“Steph, can you come listen to this? I think we’ve got a malfunction.” “Great, give me a paper clip and I’ll fix it.” She listened. There was just an oscillating continuous hum around 1200 kHz. It began to resolve into a melody. The sound was short lived as Captain Merkle activated the klaxon warning system. He did so precisely when his orders told him to. The speakers all through the ship screamed, agonizingly pitched. “Jesus fucking Christ. Steph had her fingers in her ears. As did Josh. As did everyone else aboard. It reduced the noise to a tolerable level. The sound could not be deactivated by anyone but Merkle himself. There was no further way to receive orders or to ask operational questions.

As if angry at being cheated, the ocean floor spat up viciously spinning magma. The mission objective was now clear. Merkle ordered the ship to make ready torpedo tubes 2 and 7. Commander Halliday stood with the captain. “You were serious about the rum, right?” “Why yes. Yes I was.” The captain rummaged through the cabinet and produced a small bottle of spiced rum. Both men took hearty swills. The captain’s stomach felt twisted. “As configured” he screamed over the noise, “fire tubes 2 and 7.”

“Aye aye Sir” came the reply from the ordinance officer, the titanium nuclear fish began to swim down. “OK, climb away as fast as we can. Don’t care about pressure equalization, don’t care about nitrogen, don’t care about my mother’s fucking birthday, just get us vertical.

The Nyxian Viper angled up and spun up its motors. The torpedoes were descending faster than the ship could climb. It wasn’t even going to be close. Halliday addressed Merkle, moving his lips exaggeratedly as if the captain could lipread. “T-4 minutes, give or take Sir. Wanna cook an egg? Because we have time to do that.” Merkle’s eyes smiled. “I think I have a better idea.” Merkle returned to the control panel and used his override to kill the screaming from the speakers.

Almost at once the song began to echo on the walls of the ship. As the music resonated around the Nyxian Viper, all aboard were singing when the sea glowed nuclear white. The singers were silenced

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Northern Marianas, Now

The lights were deep, and bright blue. On this moonless night they seemed the only way to navigate. The GPS wouldn’t lock on a signal in the storm, and they were helpless without the lights to follow. As they sailed on, the fishermen began to sing.