

# HARPER

I'm not sure what woke me—the screams or the betrayal of gravity as the ship aggressively turns. At first, I assumed Cap was trying to avoid something, but the commotion I hear from the deck tells me that something is seriously wrong. Pinned against the wall with the heaviness of the air holding me back, I turn toward the steps and begin to crawl. I hear my bunk mate, Charles, yelling from above.

“Get to the bow!” His voice sends a chill down my spine and motivates me to- “Move!” he calls out, his words mirroring my last thought.

I have almost reached the bottom step when my pack falls from the closet, the force of the ship's turn causes it to fly my direction. Not able to avoid it, I feel blood dripping down my forehead after it collides, noticing my bare ring finger as I wipe it away. My wedding band calls to me, not being able to wear it since leaving base—the salt in the air made it nearly impossible to take off four long months ago. The dog tags they're attached to catch the reflection of the mounted light, which tells me I need to go back, but when I see Charles at the top of the stairs—with

panic in his eyes like I've never known—I start to fight the force of the turning ship to make my way toward him.

Still yelling for the rest of the crew, he reaches out when I get close. As I take his hand, the vein in his forehead reveals itself for the first time. We go along with the ship's turn and grab hold of the rail. The rest of my unit's demeanor matches Charles' and when I see it, I understand their terror. The whirlpool that has sucked us in is massive. Spinning us clockwise, we would need a miracle to make it out. I lean over the rail to see the vortex that leads into a pit of darkness. Metal begins to break free; the shrieking brings my palms to my ears, but I still hear his scream over the sound of tearing metal.

Lieutenant Miller attempts to make his way to us while from the middle of the vortex, a ten-foot creature comes into view.

I can get to him...

I can help him.

But my actions don't match my thoughts. I stay completely frozen as I watch the monster break the water's surface. Its claws drag behind as massive teeth are revealed. As quickly as it appeared, it descends back into the ocean, taking a screaming Miller along with it.

I turn to see Charles, knowing he'll regret his lack of action as much as I will.

If he had our support...

We could have fought the gravity that sent him to the rail. We could have pulled him back, out of the monster's reach.

"We have to go," Charles informs me, knowing there's no time to think about the lieutenant's repeating jokes or his two children at home. "We need to get everyone to the bow."

Without any optimism, I follow his lead. More ripping metal sounds from under our feet. More screams come from my shipmates that only a few hours ago, I'd lost to in a game of poker.

Even if we make it to the bow, to the safety boat that's attached to the side of it, then what?

We sink further down, still aggressively turning with the pull of the seemingly draining sea.

Those claws...

The look in the creature's eyes.

A hunter.

A killer.

We're not going to make it out of here alive.

Mia...

What will she think when I don't call tomorrow? Our biweekly communication is already hard enough on her. She'll be constantly worried.

She'll be destroyed.

The speed of the pull increases as we near the bottom of the tornado that sucked us in. Cap leaves the bridge and joins us, telling me that he has also given up and is ready to abandon ship. He nods at me. Being the only girl, he's always taken it upon himself to look after me. His eyes seem to be appreciative of my silence.

Saying goodbye.

## *Mia*

It's been a week and now an hour past our scheduled call time. I'm starting to get a little irritated. My sister told me not to get involved with someone in the military, but I never expected to have the anxiety I do or worry this much about another human being. My spiraling thoughts take me to a dark place I never wanted to return to. All night long I toss from the nightmares, and all day long I panic. Where is she? What could have happened? It's not like they're at war or anything. Hell, I hardly understand their mission at all. She didn't really tell me much, my wife and partner for the last three years, just that they would be at sea and that contact would be hard for a while.

All the information I got before we had to say goodbye, four excruciating months ago.

And now after worrying all week, when she finally calls, we'll have to have the same conversation we always do. Her reassuring me that she's okay, me begging her for an answer on when they'll be home, then her telling me that she doesn't know. And they're not even on their way back

yet. I don't know if I can make it another four months. But what choice do I have?

It wasn't really love at first sight, more confusion than anything. The attraction I felt for Harper surprised me, never being one to stray from the tall, built, men that treated me like shit. But when she started a conversation at the bar, the day Harper arrived at base, I felt something different.

Annoyance mostly.

This... *woman* who walked up so confidently, who wouldn't leave me alone. Not really saying more than a quick hello, but not giving me the space I wanted that night either. Another breakup. Another let down that chose his addiction over me. I had been so looking forward to a quiet night alone with Jim Bean. There was something about her, though, that had me looking out of the corner of my eye. Her tight ponytail that held her dark black hair, the tattoos that covered her strong arm, the assertive posture she held after I had told her to *back off*, only for her to stay in the seat next me. It made me curious. Curious enough that I went back to the same bar three nights after that, finally running into her again on that third night. I saw her from a distance, standing outside with a very beautiful blonde, and when a sinking jealousy filled my gut, I knew this was something different. Harper knew her type—the dud that had come up to her asking for a cigarette. She wasn't

interested. She still had her mind on the sassy brunette from a few nights before, so when she saw me again and noticed I was looking her direction, she didn't want to play it cool.

“You'll have to excuse me,” she said mid conversation, locking eyes with me through the glass door.

# HARPER

Everything is in a haze; my eyelids struggle as I try to open them. I reach up to notice dried blood caked onto my lashes. I can't see anyone, but I can hear them, which gives me hope that the whirlpool that was sucking us in somehow let up. Cap's voice is calling out for me from a distance, which doesn't make sense—last thing I remember he was right next to me as we watched Charles fly over the ship's edge.

Charles...

There's no way he survived. Not with that... *thing* that was lurking in the water. With its scaled slick-black skin, limbs that stretch out too far, with clawed arms dragging behind. Its dark, evil face was almost...

Human.

It's not Mia I think of next, but Charles' wife, Elena. My best friend. Even with her, *I won't take shit from nobody* attitude, she'll be a mess when she finds out. I will need to be the one to tell her.

With eyes still blurry and head throbbing, I try to yell for Cap, but my voice escapes me when I look up.

The ocean...

The sea life...

The roof of water that is suspended above me.

The vortex didn't subside...

It swallowed us whole.

I notice I'm no longer on the ship, but in some kind of meadow with plants that sway five feet above. The golden stalks look like wheat but sparkle unnaturally. I yell again for Cap, who is calling more than just my name.

"Lieutenant! Charles!"

Confirmation that Charles is gone, too.

"Over here!" I manage to get out.

The way my voice echoes in one direction—opposite them—like it's being pulled to the...

I spot the sun through the sea water above.

Something inside fears gravity will release the hold it has on the water and the force of the ocean will come crashing down. But the surrounding plants tell me a different story: that they've been here all along. The sun's location confirms that my voice carries north.

"Over here!" I shout again, louder this time, which stirs up a commotion from behind. A dog-like creature, with silver scales along its back, moves slowly toward me through stalks of mystical wheat.

My body tightens.

My heart rate picks up.

I hold my stance before beginning to slowly back away. It hesitates, then retreats through the towering plants.

I waste no time.

Head, and now heart pounding, I run in the direction of Cap—opposite the dog and the echo trail my voice left.

“Harper!” Cap calls out again. They’re getting closer. Being the girl of the group, I’m the only person he uses a first name with. It bothered me at first, but right now, nothing sounds sweeter than getting to him and the M240s that are ready to go on deck.

“Harper!” More than just Cap is shouting for me now.

I don’t dare return their call. They must not be aware of the creatures lurking around us.

The way the dog’s scales reflected the light...

The claws the sea monster didn’t even need to use...

Continuing to run, I stumble when I reach the clearing—taken aback that I’ve been transported into a whole new world. I see the crew. It seems everyone except Charles and Lieutenant are accounted for. Even Williams, our cook, is armed and in formation, standing next to the fallen ship. All unaware of my arrival.

It’s a graveyard in here...

There are boats everywhere, surrounded by bones and decaying clothes. Some look to be military, but most are civilian. All damaged beyond repair after the hundred-or-so foot fall from the spiraling water above. When a school of fish swims by overhead, I get shivers thinking about the monster that got Miller.

That must've gotten Charles...

"Cap!" I yell.

Heads spin around but guns stay pointed down as relief washes over my platoon's faces. I motion. Making an X with my arms, both palms move opposite each other and come down in unison, telling them that we need to be silent. They quietly make their way toward me as I do the same, anxious to get my hand on the spare gun Reeves is carrying.

It's good to see them alive...

But my mind again goes to Elena.

# Elena

My heart is beating so fast it feels like it could fly from my chest at any moment. Cardio. My enemy. But if I want to have the piece of cake that's been calling my name since Emmitt's birthday party last night... I'd better do another lap. I increase the speed a couple of notches, but leave the incline where it's at.

I've always been big, but at least when Charles was home, I had more motivation to work out. I hate that I'm getting used to not having him around, this being his third deployment. So I eat. The stress eating has gotten bad, so bad that I have to resist the Milky Way that stares at me from the checkout line every other day. The bites of leftovers I take from the fridge bring me back to earth, and keep my thoughts from taking control. Between gymnastics, soccer practice, and PTO, I don't have much time to think, but when I do...

It's best that I have some snacks on hand.

I take the vibration in my legging pocket as a quitting sign from God, and hit the stop button on the treadmill.

It's Mia.

Noticing the time, I know what to expect when I answer.

“Still no word from them?” I ask. Blonde hairs are lost when I pull the hair tie from my thick ponytail.

“No. You either?”

“Nothing. I’m wrapping up at the gym. Want to grab some lunch?”

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“I’m telling you—something is wrong. I can feel it in my bones,” Mia says as she takes another drink from her beer. Mascara smears down her face. I knew I’d have some calming down to do when I invited her out, but I’ve never seen her this upset. Her short brown hair is a mess. Grease forces chunks of it into opposing directions on each side of her part.

“I’m sure everything’s fine,” I try to assure her. “I talked to Charles a week ago and it was the same old, boring stuff. Something is probably wrong with the phone line, and you’ll hear from her soon.” I’ve gotten so used to calling him Charles over the years, that his first name, Nathan, has started sounding strange.

“No. Even Lieutenant Miller’s wife sounded like something was off.”

“You called his wife?” I ask, somewhat shocked. I would never embarrass Charles like that.

“Yes. And she said she’s been waiting for communication as well. She said she normally hears from him multiple times a week and hasn’t since Tuesday. Which is total bullshit if you ask me. I knew the higher ups didn’t have to follow the stupid ass every-other-week rule.”

Doesn’t surprise me. I figured the calls from my husband were purposefully limited. I always feel somewhat guilty that Charles and I tend to run out of things to talk about, even with our two kids taking up much of the conversation. After twelve years together, we know how to get through our life updates pretty quickly.

“All I know is that panicking won’t solve anything. We don’t need to worry unless someone gives us something to worry about.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. I just wish I knew more. Where they are... What they’re doing.”

“Me too,” I respond. “Searching for the missing crew is much too vague.”

Mia’s eyes go wide.

Shit, I said too much.

“The *missing crew*? How do you know that?!”

Harper must have kept Mia in the dark to keep her from worrying. I can’t help but look at the corner of Mia’s

mouth where a buildup of saliva has formed. She must've been drinking prior to this.

“Charles told me before they left, I'm sorry. I thought you knew.”

“They're searching for a lost crew! And you're not even a little concerned?”

“Of course I'm concerned, but again, we don't know that we have anything to be concerned about.”

“Yet.” Mia's eyes, still open wide, begin to water.

## *Mia*

More secrets. That's all we've had since Harper found out about this... *mission*. And now to find out Elena knew what they were doing this whole time while I was kept in the dark. Intentionally, I'm sure.

Another shot before I head home.

I don't know how Elena does it—keeps her cool while the father of her children is *missing*.

Of course I had already thought of the scenarios she came up with. The phones are down, they are docked somewhere and are away from communication, she *forgot*.

She would never.

She knows how hard this has been on me.

On our relationship.

Something is wrong.

The Lieutenant's wife didn't say much, just that they hadn't talked when they normally do, but I could hear it in the way her voice trembled that there was more to the story. We've been there once, to their fancy five-bedroom house on base. I order another drink before I go. If she won't tell me more over the phone, then maybe she'll give something away in person.



# Elena

It's weird how it didn't feel weird—our first time together. A drunken night led to a drunken kiss that led to a fluttering in my chest. I had never seen him like that: his face calm and at peace while he slept, with slightly messy thick dark hair. It made me realize how handsome I found him. Being the loud, funny guy of the group, I never thought to look. Let alone give him a chance. The night Charles finally decided to make his move, admitting that he had always been attracted to me, something told me to go for it.

Like any new relationship, we were inseparable at first, so when he told me the recruiting office had his attention... I was shocked. We were young, broke, had dreams of starting a family and buying a house, so he convinced me a free college tuition after four short years would be a good idea.

But then he reenlisted.

And reenlisted again.

It made sense for our family.

It was comfortable. Safe.

Or so I thought.

I usually don't let Mia's worry get to me, but today, for some reason, I haven't been able to get her comments out of my mind.

*"Even Lieutenant Miller's wife sounded like something was off."*

The pit in my stomach grows. I know that all we can do is wait, but curiosity gets the best of me.

I turn the car around and head to the other side of base.

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Several cars line the street of the suburban neighborhood in front of Stacey and Lieutenant Miller's home. Some of which I recognize, like Emma's red Corolla. I smile when I see the car seat in the back, knowing she must be getting close to delivery. We got lucky with the timing: Charles was home for both of our kid's births. I can't imagine having to do it alone, especially with the added stress of the communications being down or whatever the hell is going on. I guess her being here means she hasn't heard from her husband, Suggs either.

Mia's car is one of the many...

I shouldn't have let her drive after seeing her at lunch.

"Hey, boys!" I shout to the kids in the garage. "I could have guessed you'd be out here playing Magic."

"Hi, Mrs. Charles." Miller's eldest son is the only one to look away from the card game longer than a second. I'm pleased he remembers me.

"Hi, Scout. Where's your sister?"

"At the neighbors, playing Barbie's or something girly like that."

I'm happy to hear the kids won't be around for this conversation, knowing Mia is in a panic.

"Ah, I see. Tell her I said hello, and good luck in your match."

"Thanks, but I don't need luck—I've got firepower!" He throws a card down on the foldable table. "Lightning bolt! Direct damage!"

I smile. They're such good kids.

...The sinking returns.

Of course, I've been concerned for my husband and Harper, who I consider my closest friend, but the other men and their families had only briefly come to mind.

*Don't play out worst case scenarios*, I remind myself while shutting down my thoughts.

I remember the first time we were invited here—it was a casual dinner before Charles' first deployment. This

beautiful three-story house with concrete pillars and wooden floors might've been part of the inspiration when we discussed our first reenlistment. Which I am now regretting after seeing who answers the door.

"You're here too?" I ask Monique after leaning in for a hug.

"Unfortunately, I am."

"Why?"

Even though they outrank us, I've always considered Cap and his wife, Monique to be friends. Knowing them all the way back to our previous station. I would have expected a phone call if she knew something I didn't.

"We've only known a couple of days. We had our suspicions, but even Stacey was kept in the dark. They didn't want to start a panic—not after what happened last time." A swarm of angry wives and family members come to mind, from six long months ago. "Oh Elena, I wish I could have told you. But... orders."

I find that statement to be bullshit. As a navy wife, Monique took no oath, but I opt to keep that to myself.

"Told me what, exactly?"

"That the crew has been officially declared missing."

“When was the last time anyone heard from them?”

“Where are they? Was there a distress call?”

“Have we sent planes out?”

“Are they in enemy territory?”

“Is anyone even looking for them?”

“Monique, grab me a piece of paper, will ya?” I whisper, as questions continue on. I dig through my purse, past pink ponytails and fruit snacks, only to find a lidless marker. “And a pen!” I call out.

“Slow down everyone. I can only tell you what I know,” Stacey pleads, as the group of worried wives quit talking over one other. “I talked to Steve on Tuesday. I’m sure the base received some kind of communication after that, but of course, they’re keeping us in the dark.”

“Why would they do that? We have a right to know everything they know!” Mia snaps.

“I agree,” Stacey says in a calming manner. “And I’m sure we will in time, but for now, they don’t want a base-wide frenzy full of rumors like they had last time.”

“What else do you know?” Emma asks. Despite the circumstances, I can’t help but smile at her grown belly, but it’s quickly replaced with sadness thinking about Suggs.

“That’s all I know. And that they officially declared them missing two days ago.”

I can't hold back my frustration.

"You also know they intentionally left the rest of us in the dark. Rumors only start when facts are hidden," I offer up as Monique returns. "Alright ladies. It's clear we're asking the wrong person. Stacey, I apologize for the position you're in, I know you didn't plan on six of us showing up uninvited. Let's hear those questions again."

Voices overwhelm me as I begin to write.

...Distress call.

...Enemy territory.

They continue on until the room goes silent. My paper is covered with concerns I hadn't even thought of—because I wouldn't let my brain go there. But it's going there now. Two days of wasted time, that's how I see it. Two days of hours cleaning or spent at the gym, when I could have been brainstorming how to bring my husband home.

"I'm going to headquarters. If they didn't want an angry mob, then they should have informed us our people were missing. Mia, I'll drive. Who else is coming with?"

## *Mia*

I knew it.

I knew it right away.

Elena didn't give me much of a choice, but I know how having a conversation with the higher-ups will go—more of the same.

Lies.

That's what I signed up for when I started dating Harper nearly four years ago. Lies, covered in words like “rank” or “orders.” A “secret mission” that turned out to be only a secret from me.

I do my best to hide my emotions, kindly saying goodbye to Stacey and Monique, who opted not to join the rest of us. I'm glad they can live with themselves—getting to mourn their husbands two days before the rest of us while our phones didn't ring, letting questions and possibilities pile up...

My anger simmers down when I see her. With two Barbies and a plastic pink purse hanging over her shoulder, the Miller's little girl runs home from the neighbors.

I wonder if the kids know...

I can't imagine being a mother and having to have that conversation.

I silently choose to forgive Stacey for not giving me the full truth over the phone. I know that whatever comes next will be hard on all of us.

"*Missing?* They're *missing*," I say to Elena as I position myself in the passenger seat. I lower my tone when she turns from the daughter and I see tears building up. She must've had similar thoughts to mine. "Are you going to tell them? Emmitt and Sophie?"

"I am."

"How?"

She takes a deep breath, which stops her crying.

"I'll be honest with them. Tell them everything I know. They deserve the truth."

"I like what you said in there, about rumors starting when facts are hidden. You're handling this really well," I tell her as I lean the seat back. "Me on the other hand? I think I might be on the verge of a mental breakdown."

"Can I tell you a secret?" she asks. "I think I might be too."

# HARPER

After describing the beast that approached me in the fields—its dog-like face, the silvery scales down its back, the way it ran when it saw my movements—Cap decided the best route was to head north. Away from the graveyard and failed communications. Graham confirmed a ship in the wreckage was one of ours—the ship that carried our thirty-five crew members who went missing seven long months ago. I had never seen a dead body before today. My stomach churned, but I held back the tears when we found nineteen fallen soldiers, lacking their dog tags. I asked if I could go back, to dig through the rubble to retrieve my own tags and wedding ring, but my request was denied.

“Look around, we have to get moving.” Cap’s reply. His command.

His face didn’t change when I told him about Miller—the certain death he faced when the sharp teeth sank into his skin or when I let everyone know that Charles flew off deck and landed in the treacherous water. Now first in command, he doesn’t have time for emotion—just the overwhelming pressure to keep the rest of us alive. With my hands shaking, I take one last look at the ship and wonder if we’ll ever come back here.

Wonder what’s ahead of us...

If there's any way out.