



Crossbones (An Omega Days Novel)

By John L. Campbell

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As the safe-haven of the *Nimitz* is besieged by vicious marauders and terrifying Hobgoblins, they come up against the most deadly obstacle they’ve faced yet, one they have no chance of defeating—the cruel whims of nature itself...

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Omega Days novels

“Absolutely a no-holds barred, teeth-gritting, white-knuckle experience.” —SF Revu

“Chilling.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“Plenty of mayhem and drama.” —Monsters and Critics

“Nobody writes an urban battle scene quite like [Campbell] does...Hands down, one of the shining stars of the zombie genre.” —Joe McKinney, Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *The Savage Dead* and *Dead City*

About the Author

John L. Campbell, author of the Omega Days novels, including *Omega Days*, *Ship of the Dead*, and *Drifters*, was born in Chicago and attended college in North Carolina and New York. His short fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies, literary magazines, and e-zines, as well as in two of the author’s own collections. He lives with his family in the New York area, where he is at work on his next novel.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A CRUEL SEA

ONE

August 13—Seattle, Washington

Elizabeth drained the last sip of her coffee and quickly washed the mug, drying it with a dish towel and placing it carefully back among the ordered rows in the cabinet beside the sink. The kitchen clock read 6:45 A.M.

“Ready, shipmate?” she called.

A *meow* answered her from the living room.

Liz was dressed for work: a dark blue shirt and matching pants with the cuffs tucked into black boots. The name over her shirt pocket read *KIDD* in black letters. At fifty, she was trim and lean, a runner who worked to keep herself fit, something she was finding more difficult as the years rolled on. Still, she didn’t suffer

from the loose skin at the throat—*turkey neck*, people called it—many women her age developed. She was toned, her skin weathered by sun and elements, with deepening crow’s-feet at the corners of her eyes. Those eyes were dark and clear and, other than reading glasses, required no correction. Liz looked forward to passing her annual physical fitness qualifications with ease.

She pulled a dark blue baseball cap down over a bristle of short hair the color of steel. Most people, she knew, assumed that she didn’t care for having men in her personal life. The hair, her profession, the absence of a husband, and even the cat contributed to the stereotype. Those people were wrong, and she had even been married briefly, it just hadn’t worked. She had a spouse nonetheless, an incredibly demanding one, and to which she was utterly devoted.

“Okay,” she said, crouching in front of a pet carrier and sticking her fingers through the grille. “Ready to go for a ride? You need to be a good boy while Mommy’s gone.”

A black-and-gray-striped cat pushed its head against the fingers and meowed.

Liz slung a black nylon laptop bag across her chest, then picked up a heavy blue sea bag in one hand and the cat carrier in the other. Outside, she set her load down long enough to lock the front door, and then put her gear into a dark gray Camry. The cat carrier went onto the passenger seat, where she strapped it in tightly with the seat belt’s shoulder harness.

She loved this town, and had lived here three different times in nearly thirty years, and it would be where she retired. Her tidy little house with its immaculate lawn sat in the suburbs of Rainier Valley, south of Seattle. Bright blue skies and clouds still tinged pink from the sunrise soared overhead. Though she didn’t yet know it, the world was already ending this glorious summer morning, and she would never see her little house again.

Liz backed into the street and in her side mirror saw one of her neighbors, a young woman, out for a morning jog along the sidewalk. At the house next door, Mr. Fulton, in pajamas, a robe, and bare feet, lurched down his driveway toward his morning paper. The man suffered from both gout and a heart condition, and the way he moved told Liz he was having a particularly difficult morning. Liz threw them both a wave—the jogger returned it, Mr. Fulton did not, as he was a consummate grump—and pulled away, headed to work.

She had already turned the corner and so couldn’t see the jogger and Mr. Fulton reach the end of the old man’s driveway at the same time. She also didn’t see Mr. Fulton wrestle the jogger to the ground, rip out her throat with fingernails and teeth, and begin to feed.

• • •

As the Camry made its way west, winding out of residential neighborhoods and heading toward the more built-up section of the city near the water, the cat in the carrier beside her settled in and quieted. He was used to this routine. Liz wished she could take him with her, but that just wasn’t possible.

She would have preferred leaving him home where he was comfortable, but that wasn’t possible either. Chick, who lived in the small basement apartment of her little house, wouldn’t feed him. He wouldn’t water plants or do yard work, either, and she had to employ a landscaping company to keep her lawn and shrubs squared away during her prolonged absences.

No, Charlie “Chick” Kidd wasn’t one for domestic responsibility. But he was her brother, her only sibling, and despite his many flaws she loved him and was happy he had accepted her offer to share the house. Chick was coming home today after being out for three weeks, and though her own job would keep her extremely

busy, she hoped they could make time to see each other for dinner before she had to leave.

The lights and blare of a siren came on fast as an ambulance raced toward her. Liz pulled quickly to the shoulder, and as the vehicle passed, a string of unhappy yowls came from the cat carrier.

“Steady,” Liz said, “it’s just a medic.”

Before she could pull back into the road, a squad car appeared, screaming after the emergency medical vehicle. The cat was not pleased, and let her know it. Liz reached across and put her fingers through the grille of the cat carrier. “It’s okay, kitty, Mommy’s right here.” The cat ignored the fingers and made a noise that was more groan than meow.

The quickest way to work at this early hour would have taken her up onto I-5 near Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. As she approached, however, she saw the flashing blue and red lights of police and fire vehicles, so many that it indicated a major accident. A river of stopped motorists was stacked up behind it with car doors standing open and people moving slowly through the traffic jam. Liz bypassed the on-ramp before she could become stuck herself and took an alternate route. She cut left, then right, and passed under the freeway, traveling across the industrial district before turning north on Route 99, also called Alaskan Way. She could follow it all the way to work, and the many traffic lights were still preferable to sitting still for who knew how long while the accident was cleared.

The day was bright and clear, a contradiction to what most people believed about Seattle: that it poured every day. The heaviest precipitation ran from November to January, and although it was usually cloudy and did experience frequent mist and light rain, August was typically warm and dry, just like today. In her rearview mirror, Mount Rainier—simply called The Mountain by locals—dominated the southeastern horizon. Through her windshield, Seattle’s skyline rose with the iconic Space Needle standing against a bright blue background. It was a beautiful day to be a Seattleite.

She continued north, passing the Pacific Maritime Institute on her left. A block farther on, she slowed and came to a stop behind several cars lined up behind a tractor-trailer standing in the road. Its emergency flashers were blinking, and the cab’s driver door stood open. After a few moments the cars ahead of her eased around it and continued on their way. Liz did the same, and as she passed she saw the cab was empty, the driver nowhere in sight.

“Hell of a place to break down,” she said.

The cat meowed its agreement.

She arrived at her turn and made a left. The view ahead made her catch her breath and smile. There it was, *Joshua James*, its snowy white hull brilliant in the morning light, black masts and antennae towering above. Although it had yet to receive its markings and have the big 754 painted on its bow, the vessel was more beautiful than any she had ever seen. It would be her last sea command, and what a way to finish a nearly thirty-year career of serving aboard cutters. There was still some debate about whether the ship would remain here in Seattle after commissioning or report to a new home in Charleston, South Carolina. Certainly Liz preferred it remain here, but she wouldn’t complain about relocating to Charleston for a few years. She wasn’t part of the decision-making process; the Coast Guard would cut her orders, and she would report wherever they sent her without complaint.

Liz slowed as she reached the base gate and a young man armed and wearing camouflage stepped out of the gatehouse with a clipboard. The striped barrier was down and a red and white sign set in the clipped grass off to the right read *MARSEC LEVEL 1*—out of three—with the words *SIGNIFICANT RISK* beneath it. The sign

had displayed this message for some time as a response to recent threats from foreign terrorist groups. Guarding against those threats was, to a great extent, Liz's responsibility, and the reason *Joshua James* and her sister ships had been built.

As Liz brought the Camry to a stop and rolled down her window, the sentry looked at the base pass in the windshield, checked his clipboard, then snapped off a crisp salute. "Good morning, Captain."

"Petty Officer," she said, giving him a nod. When the sentry stooped to look inside the vehicle, Liz patted the pet carrier. "House cat, one each," she said.

The sentry allowed a trace of a smile and looked again at his clipboard. "Ma'am, I have orders to direct you to the base commander's office immediately upon your arrival."

"Very well," she said, and the sentry saluted again as the barrier rose and the Camry pulled through. He watched her car for a moment, then stepped back into the guardhouse and picked up the phone.

Half an hour later, the young sentry squinted at something out in the road in front of the guardhouse. He lifted a pair of binoculars for a closer look.

"Holy shit," he whispered, reaching for the phone again.

Every line was already lit.

• • •

Liz parked the Camry in a visitor's space in front of the base administration building, then grabbed the cat carrier from the front seat. On the way up the steps, she returned the salutes of two enlisted men exiting the building. Once inside, she immediately tucked her ball cap into a cargo pocket and headed up the main corridor, boots thumping the tile in a measured cadence, the pet carrier hanging in her left hand.

Down another corridor she stopped before a door with *James Whelan, Rear Admiral* stenciled in black letters on frosted glass. She smoothed her uniform blouse and went in. Beverly, the base commander's secretary, was at her desk in the outer office.

"Good morning, Liz," the woman said brightly. She was a few years younger than Liz, thicker and wearing a yellow dress, eyeglasses hung around her neck on a chain. "I see you brought a friend."

Liz set the pet carrier down on a chair. "I'm going to leave Blackbeard with Dottie Carr over at the Base Exchange to watch him while I'm out. Is it okay if I leave him with you while I talk to the skipper?" She jerked a thumb at the door to the inner office.

The secretary smiled. "He's no trouble at all," she said, coming around the desk and crouching in front of the pet carrier. "Are you, Blackbeard?"

The cat began to purr and rub his head against the grille. He knew Beverly.

"They're waiting for you," Beverly said, rising.

Liz frowned. "Who is *they*? It's not just Whelan?"

Beverly shook her head. "You didn't know there was a meeting?" She seemed flustered. "I just assumed . . ."

Liz gave her a smile. "Not to worry, Bev." She rapped hard on the door frame twice, then let herself in.

The office of Base Seattle's ranking officer was carpeted and done in rich, dark wood paneling and bookcases. The admiral's desk sat before blinds that were mostly closed and was flanked by the American flag on one side and the Coast Guard colors, known as the Service Mark, on the other. Photos, awards, and framed certificates covered the walls. A conference table lined with padded leather chairs dominated the room. Liz caught the scent of the admiral's aftershave at once. *Too much Old Spice.* His grandchildren insisted on giving it to him every Christmas, he had once told her.

The admiral rose from his desk as she entered. He was thickening around the middle, wearing a light blue tropical uniform shirt, the breast heavy with ribbons, and he smiled when he saw her, but Liz noticed at once that it was forced. Standing near the conference table, a stack of manila file folders on the polished surface before them, were a male Coast Guard officer and a thirty-something woman in a tailored gray business suit.

Liz came to attention. "Captain Elizabeth Kidd, reporting as ordered."

The admiral came from behind the desk and shook her hand. His grip and his eyes were warm, but he looked tired. "Good to see you, Liz." He put a hand on her shoulder and gently turned her to face the two others, who had stopped talking and now stared at her.

"This is Lieutenant Commander Chamberlain of Coast Guard Investigation Services," the admiral said, "and this is Special Agent Ramsey of the FBI's Seattle field office."

The visitors did not offer to shake hands.

Liz's radar was up, and the lines around her mouth deepened. The two investigators appeared to be waiting for Liz to ask, *What's this all about?* She hadn't risen to command by being predictable, and remained quiet.

"Let's take a seat." Admiral Whelan took the chair at the head of the table and gestured for Liz to sit beside him. The two investigators sat down across from her.

Whelan cleared his throat. "Liz, Lieutenant Commander Chamberlain and Agent Ramsey are here because of a situation involving Charlie. This is going to be difficult, but I trust in your professionalism and will expect your cooperation."

"Chick?" Liz said, looking at her superior officer. "What happened? Is he all right?"

Whelan nodded, and then the Coast Guard investigator started. "Captain Kidd . . ." He smiled and shook his head. "Captain, is it true you're a blood descendant of the famous pirate?"

Elizabeth knew this was simply the young man's attempt to break the ice and establish rapport. She had no shame about her ancestor, quite the opposite, actually, but it was the smirk she didn't care for. It put an edge on her voice. "You didn't really come here to discuss my lineage, did you, Mr. Chamberlain? Do you have some official business?"

The young man reddened.

Agent Ramsey took over, her voice clipped and businesslike. "Captain, I'm going to explain some details to you that might help move this conversation forward. At first, they will seem quite sensitive. The facts are not in dispute, however, and the case is bulletproof. We would not have come to you at this point were that not the case." She folded her hands on the table. "I'm going to be candid with you out of respect for your service to this country, and in the hope you will in turn provide full disclosure."

The FBI agent rested her hand on a file as she spoke, not opening it. She knew the case well. “Your brother, Senior Chief Charles Kidd, is the suspect in a joint FBI, DEA, and Coast Guard investigation involving drug trafficking and multiple homicides. His ship just arrived at the base, and he is being taken into custody as we speak.”

Elizabeth stared at the female agent, stunned by the allegations and unable to speak. Admiral Whelan reached out and gripped her arm for reassurance.

“Our evidence,” the agent continued, “establishes that on June twenty-seventh of this year, Mr. Kidd was involved in a narcotics transaction just off the Washington coast, using his own boat. He murdered three foreign nationals during that transaction. A fourth survived, a witness to the homicides. As it turns out, that man was a DEA informant.”

Liz processed the words as the CGIS officer and her commander watched her. There was no notable change of expression on Liz’s face, but inside was a storm of scattered thoughts and emotions. Chick, a murderer? Drug deals? Yes, he had his own boat, and when he wasn’t at sea with the Coast Guard, he often went away for days at a time by himself to go fishing and camping. He had a temper, to which anyone who knew him could attest, and he wasn’t the most polished person in the world. He’d barely hung on to his Chief’s rate, drawing the occasional disciplinary action for conduct. There were other issues as well, troubles during his childhood, but these had never seemed to manifest as more serious issues in his adulthood. Not really. A murderer, though? Not a chance.

“Captain,” the FBI agent said, “Senior Chief Kidd resides with you in your home in Rainier Valley.” It was a statement, not a question.

Liz nodded. “He lives downstairs.”

Now the agent did open her file, and read off the address. “We’ll be executing a search warrant there this morning. For both residences.”

Both residences, Liz thought. She pictured men in black tactical gear and others in Windbreakers with yellow FBI and DEA letters on the back, storming her home as if Osama bin Laden himself might be inside. It would be a circus, the media would show up, and Elizabeth Kidd’s name—and profession—would be spoken on the air in the same sentences as *drug trafficking* and *murder*.

Oh, Chick, what have you done to me? Whether it was true or not, regardless of the fact that she had known nothing about it, Liz had no illusions about what this would mean for her career, her command. The look on both investigators’ faces said they believed she was in this thing up to her eyes. And what if they found something in Chick’s apartment? Upstairs or downstairs, it would remove any doubts about her complicity.

There was a long silence then, except for a ringing phone in the outer office.

“James,” Liz said, turning to her commanding officer, “I can’t believe this about Charlie, and *you* can’t believe I had anything to do with murder, or *anything* illegal.”

The admiral’s eyes were guarded. “Elizabeth, I don’t know what to believe.”

Her heart broke as he said the words.

“The best thing for everyone is for you to cooperate and tell the truth,” the admiral said.

The officer from Investigation Services slid a legal pad and pen toward her across the desk. “Ma’am, we’ll

require a detailed statement from you, to get your initial position on record.”

Her initial position on record so they could pick it apart for comparison once the real questioning began. She wondered if she should ask for a lawyer. *Probably.* But then what could possibly make her look more guilty than asking for one and staying quiet?

The phone kept ringing outside, followed by a thump against the wall. No one seemed to notice. All eyes were on Liz.

The female agent pulled a phone from a jacket pocket, looking at a text. “The senior chief has been taken into custody without incident,” she said without looking up. “They have him at the dock right now.” Then she rose, already dialing and moving toward the office door. “Excuse me,” she said, stepping out.

The secretary’s phone was still ringing. *Answer the damn thing already, Beverly,* Liz thought. She looked at the pad and pen before her, at the impassive face of the Coast Guard investigator, then at her commander.

“Admiral, what is this going to mean for me?” She already knew the answer but needed to hear the man say it.

Whelan frowned. “Captain, you’ll be beached and placed on administrative duty until this matter is resolved.”

Liz’s heart fell even further at the man’s official tone. “My ship . . .”

“Your XO will take command for now.” The admiral looked away.

Until you find a new captain to replace me permanently. Her Coast Guard career was finished. A loud bang from the secretary’s office made Whelan look up in annoyance. “Mr. Chamberlain, go see what that’s about.”

“Aye-aye, sir.” The investigator crossed the room and opened the door.

Special Agent Ramsey was waiting on the other side.

Her charcoal suit was darkened and wet, both hands were bloody, and her once-neat hair looked pulled and disheveled. Red smears covered her mouth and cheeks, and her head hung low and forward. The FBI agent’s eyes were a milky yellow.

With a snarl, she caught the Coast Guard investigator by the shoulders and sank her teeth into his Adam’s apple, ripping it out in a red spray. Chamberlain let out a gurgling cry and went down with the agent on top of him. The woman held the man’s head in both hands as she tore back into his neck.

Liz bolted to her feet, knocking over her chair, but the admiral just sat there, hands splayed across the table’s polished surface. His mouth was working, but no sound was coming out. In the distance, beyond the frosted-glass door that led from Beverly’s office to the corridor, came a high-pitched screaming.

The admiral stood abruptly then, and Agent Ramsey’s head snapped up at the sudden movement. She let out a low growl and bared her teeth, rising in a crouch over the dead Coast Guard investigator. Blood was soaking into the carpet around his body. The admiral seemed to be trying to anticipate which way the woman would go around the table, left or right, so he could move in the opposite direction and keep the barrier between them. By now, Elizabeth had backed into the room near her commander’s desk, ripping aside the blinds to get at the catches that secured the tip-out windows.

The creature that had been Agent Ramsey didn't go left or right. Instead, she scrambled right up onto the conference table and scuttled forward on hands and knees, making a throaty, croaking sound. Admiral Whelan wasn't quick enough, and was standing there with his hands raised when the dead FBI agent lunged off the table and took the older man to the floor.

Still tugging on a window latch that would not give, Liz heard the attack behind her, heard James Whelan choking on his own blood. She turned to see Agent Ramsey straddling a man who had been not only her commanding officer, but her friend for more than a decade. Even as the woman savaged him, those dead, yellow eyes stared up and locked on the only remaining living thing in the room.

The creature—Liz could think of no other word for it—was between her and the door. She would never get by it. She also sensed that should she try to get out in the other direction, the thing would pull her down before she got halfway out the window. If she could open it at all.

Liz clenched her teeth. It was time to take the battle to the enemy.

On the wall among the admiral's many commendations and framed certificates was a chrome-plated anchor about the size of a hammer, affixed to a polished walnut plaque. Liz snatched it off the wall and put all her lean muscle into prying the object off the wood. It came away with a ripping sound, just as Agent Ramsey scrambled to her feet and attacked.

Liz had no thoughts of how what she was seeing could even be possible; she only saw a combat problem that needed resolution, something that required the cool precision that had put her in command of the USCG's finest boat, and she moved on instinct.

In the span of a second she judged the distance and swung, the chrome anchor heavy in her hand, arcing overhead in a flash. One bladed end hit the woman's head right at the crown and sank up to the anchor's central shaft with a crunch of bone and a burst of red. The thing that had been Ramsey shuddered and dropped immediately to the carpeted floor, Liz ripping the hammer-sized anchor free as the woman fell.

She looked down at James Whelan and saw that he was beyond help, just as another croak came from across the room. It sounded almost as if there were a question mark at the end of the sound. Lieutenant Commander Chamberlain was sitting up, legs stretched out before him, his uniform soaked red. He was facing away from her and croaked again, turning his head right and left.

Back from the dead? This went beyond bio attacks and into the realm of horror movies. Without hesitation, Liz strode to the sitting officer and buried the anchor in the top of his head. He sagged and was still, and as Liz wrenched her weapon free, she realized she had found the enemy's vulnerability. She would be sure to exploit it.

Special Agent Ramsey was carrying a nine-millimeter Sig Sauer in a hip holster under her jacket, with two full magazines in leather pouches beside it. Liz took it all, shoving the spare mags in her pants pocket.

A moan came from the outer office, followed by a metallic rattle and the terrified hissing and screeching of a cat. Liz ran out to see Beverly, her yellow dress torn and bloody, down on all fours shaking the pet carrier and trying to pry open the grilled door.

"Leave him alone!" Liz snarled, pressing Agent Ramsey's Sig against the back of Beverly's head and blowing brains and skull fragments across the office wall. She picked up the carrier, holding it so Blackbeard could see her face. "Mommy's here, handsome."

Blackbeard made an unhappy wail but pressed his head against the grille. She gave him a scratch.

“Time to go,” she whispered.

A groan came from behind her, and as she spun she saw James Whelan standing, his throat torn out, his face and uniform red. The man’s once-warm, brown eyes were glazed and malignant, and he reached for her.

Liz put a bullet between his eyes.

Then she cracked open the outer door, checked the hallway, and ran. The blood-sprayed cat carrier was in one hand, the Sig in the other, and the chrome anchor was tucked into her back waistband. Screaming echoed in the hallways, and thrashing shapes could be glimpsed beyond open office doors, but her only objective was the building’s front doors and the parking lot beyond. As she burst into the morning sunlight, a single word repeated silently in her head.

Charlie.

TWO

Elizabeth Kidd’s gray Camry raced through the streets of Base Seattle, hitting speed bumps too fast and jarring both woman and cat. Blackbeard’s carrier sat on the passenger seat again, this time sharing it with a bloody chrome anchor that was staining the upholstery. Liz wanted to turn on the news, gather information, but she would soon be at her destination and needed her full attention on the road.

A Humvee with a flashing light bar on its roof blasted across an intersection ahead of her, quickly disappearing up a street to her left, its siren rebounding off warehouses. As she passed another admin building on her right, she saw a pair of bloody guardsmen lurching across a lawn toward the entrance, while in a second-floor window above them a woman in civilian clothes leaned out, screaming for help. The beat of helicopter rotors came from somewhere above, and the base siren was going off.

Liz had to slam on the brakes as a civilian worker in gray coveralls, hair matted to his head by blood, staggered into the road in front of the Camry. The man slapped wet, red palms onto the hood and glared at her through the windshield. Then he began pawing his way up the side of the car toward the driver’s door. Liz didn’t wait for him. She accelerated and left the thing behind.

A turn took her between a large machine shop and a yard of storage containers, and she swerved to avoid two men in camouflage running with rifles. At the next intersection she hauled the Camry right, then tensed and cried out as the front bumper smacked into a woman crouching on all fours in the road. The impact sent the woman’s body into a chain-link fence, limp as a rag doll, and the Camry bounced over the shape she had been feeding on with a sickening crunch.

There were masts ahead, black antennae and radar panels rising behind the roofline of a building. The docks were close, and she gunned the engine.

As the Camry burst from between two buildings and raced onto an open expanse of concrete, Liz saw a pillar of smoke rising over the base to her right, followed by the sight of an orange flash screaming low over the rooftops, a Coast Guard Dolphin helicopter. Ahead, *Joshua James* stood tied to the docks, several figures running on deck. Berthed just beyond it was another cutter, older and much smaller than her own, the *Klondike*.

Charlie's ship.

Midway between the vessels, parked on the concrete that led to the dock, another Humvee sat with its light bar flashing on the roof. The Coast Guard emblem was on the driver's door, and at the back, black lettering read *PORT SECURITY* and *K9*. A pair of uniformed bodies were facedown on the pavement near the hood, and two others, men in green camouflage wearing pistol belts, were hammering at the Humvee's side windows, leaving bloody smears.

Liz drove right at the Humvee and slid to a stop only yards away. The two law enforcement guardsmen turned at the sound of screeching tires and limped toward the new arrival as Liz jumped out with the FBI agent's handgun. Liz could see at once that their faces were slack and dead, horrific wounds visible through torn uniforms.

"Charlie, get your head down!" she yelled toward the Humvee, then opened fire. The Sig barked five times before both creatures went down with shots to the head, one stray bullet sparking off the Hummer's front rim, another punching a hole in the driver's door. Liz ran to the vehicle and jerked open the rear door. "Chick?"

Charlie Kidd, wearing his blue uniform without the ball cap, slumped in the backseat with his hands cuffed behind his back. "Jesus, Sis, you trying to kill me? Get these damn things off."

"Shut up and get out," Liz said, unclipping keys from one of the men she had just dropped, opening Chick's handcuffs as he slid out. An enraged German shepherd barked incessantly in the back of the Hummer.

"What the fuck is going on?" Chick demanded, rubbing his wrists and looking at the dead men on the ground. "Those guys got jumped by two of their own, went down firing, then a couple minutes later were back up and trying to get at me. What the hell?"

Liz didn't answer. She was looking at what could only be described as a brawl on the gangplank of *Klondike*, half a dozen coasties fighting each other hand-to-hand. Other men and women in bloody uniforms were staggering away from the older cutter and making their way toward *Joshua James*. Off to the right, a dozen more figures were shuffling across the pavement, heading toward the dock.

"Gather weapons," she told Charlie, staring at the approaching dead, simultaneously repulsed and yet curious at their broken, relentless gait. They were people—monsters—some kind of abomination that fed on the living. It wasn't possible, but here it was all around her.

Charlie Kidd, eight years his sister's junior, began relieving his former captors of their weapons belts. He was not a tall man, but he compensated with a broad chest, a thick neck, and powerful forearms a strangler would envy. Chick's face was broad like the rest of him, his nose crooked from a tavern fight that had once cost him a stripe. He retrieved an M16 rifle from the front of the Hummer, along with a bandolier of magazines.

Liz was at her Camry, grabbing Blackbeard's carrier, shoving the bloody chrome anchor into her sea bag, and then throwing the duffel's strap across her chest. Behind her, the cries and barking of the German shepherd wouldn't stop.

"Let that dog out," she shouted to her brother.

"Fuck that, it was there when they busted me." He belted on one of the pistols, a Sig Sauer forty-caliber with a twelve-round magazine, the standard sidearm of the Coast Guard and a weapon with which he was more

than proficient. "He'd go right for my balls."

"Asshole," Liz muttered, slamming the Camry's door and hustling across the pavement. "Move it, Chief!"

Charlie gripped the rifle and hurried after her.

An electrician's van was parked on the dock near the gangplank to *Joshua James*, a civilian in his forties standing nearby, looking confused and trying to use his cell phone. On the deck at the top of the gangplank, a pair of Coast Guardsmen stood gripping the rail, watching their captain run toward the ship, followed by a man she had just set free by shooting two other men.

Liz knew the electrician, one of the civilian contractors working to move her ship closer to commissioning. "Mr. Leary," she said as she passed him, "get aboard, if you please."

When the man didn't move, Chick yelled, "Assholes and elbows, mister!"

The electrician jumped, then hurried up the gangplank behind the captain, the senior chief following. On deck, the two enlisted men snapped off salutes, eyes wide. Liz handed the cat carrier and her sea bag to one of them. "Take these to my quarters." To the other she said, "Is the XO aboard?"

"No, ma'am. Ensign Liggett is the watch officer."

Liz looked down at the concrete expanse beyond the dock, where trucks would line up to move equipment and supplies aboard the cutter before sailing. There were no trucks, only a Humvee ringed with fallen bodies, and beyond, figures shifting toward them with that sickening, lifeless gait.

To her brother she said, "Raise the gangplank and prepare to cast off."

Charlie Kidd grinned. "Aye-aye, Sis, and thanks—"

Elizabeth was on him in an instant, grabbing his shirt in both hands and hauling him in nose to nose. "Do not *think*," she said tightly, "that being related gets you a break. You sank my life and my career. Now you will snap to, or I'll put you back on the beach personally." She gave him a shake, her voice low and coming through clenched teeth. "Do you read me, *Chief*?"

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

She shoved him away from her. "Prepare to get under way." Then she ran across the deck and disappeared through a hatch. At the gangplank, Charlie Kidd stared after her for a moment, then looked at the young seaman standing nearby.

"You heard the captain, deck ape! Raise the gangplank. Unless you want them aboard." He waved at the slumping figures closing on *Joshua James*.

The seaman leaped to his task as Charlie Kidd went in search of crewmen to untie the ship from Base Seattle's dock.

• • •

Liz quickly went up a steel ladderway, through a floor hatch, and onto the bridge of her cutter. The only person in here was a twenty-year-old, two-stripe seaman. He stiffened immediately, startled at her appearance.

“Captain on the bridge!” he shouted to no one.

Liz slammed a fist on a large red button, setting off the ship’s general quarters alarm. She picked up a microphone handset, stretching out the cord as she went to the port windows. Down on the dock, dozens of figures in Coast Guard uniforms had nearly reached the ship’s hull where it pressed against the wharf. Out beyond, an orange helicopter hovered slowly over the base, stirring the smoke of a burning building. Liz’s eyes were drawn to the flashing lights of a fire truck, its crew turning a high-pressure hose not on the flames, but on a mass of people stumbling out through the building’s front door. The people were smoking, and a few had hair that was on fire.

She keyed the mic. “This is the captain speaking. All stations, make ready to get under way. Ensign Liggett, report to the bridge.”

Out on the forward deck, she saw her brother and two other seamen hurrying along the port side, casting off the heavy ropes that tethered *Joshua James* to the dock. Looking left, she saw with satisfaction that the gangplank had been raised and secured.

The dead reached them at last, pushing themselves against the white hull and hammering at it with their fists.

A vibration in the deck plates traveled up through her boots as the twin 7,400-kilowatt diesel engines fired and began warming up. Two young men ran up the ladderway and onto the bridge, a helmsman and a quartermaster second class who went immediately to the navigation gear.

“Mr. Waite,” Liz said to the QM2, “let me know as soon as we’re under power.”

The quartermaster acknowledged, ordered the helmsman to stand by, and then called the engine room for information. Liz removed her cap from its cargo pocket and pulled it squarely onto her head, the bill low and at the perfect regulation distance above the bridge of her nose.

A woman of twenty-two entered the bridge next. Amy Liggett was fair and smooth-skinned, her dark hair pulled into a tight bun under her blue ball cap, her uniform stiff and new. *Joshua James* was her first assignment after graduating with honors from the Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut. She had a bachelor’s degree in engineering, a commission as a Coast Guard ensign, and next to zero operational experience.

“Captain,” she said, moving to her commanding officer.

“Who and how many aboard?” Liz asked.

The young officer flipped to a page on her clipboard. “Twenty-two, ma’am. Third shift. Plus yourself and two others.” Amy had already heard about the shooting on the dock, and about the man her captain had freed from Coast Guard custody.

Third shift, Liz thought. *The smallest, and for the most part, most inexperienced crew.* Not too much happened in port overnight, so the bare minimum of personnel was scheduled. It would include six civilian contractors, four engine room personnel, three watch standers for the bridge, and a scattering of others, mostly technical ratings. Less than a quarter of the cutter’s full crew of ninety-nine enlisted and fourteen officers.

“Any other officers?” Liz asked without much hope. The third shift schedule called for only one—an officer had to be aboard at all times—and the overnight duty, at least in port, went to the most junior.

“Yes, ma’am,” Liggett said, making Liz turn. “Lieutenant Commander Coseboom slept aboard last night.”

The captain nodded. Boomer was having marital troubles, a small blessing for *Joshua James*. “Is the master chief aboard?” Again, hopeful.

“Negative.”

“Who is senior enlisted man?”

The young woman hesitated, seemed unsure of how to answer at first, then looked at her sheet. “Chief Newman.”

Newman, Liz thought. Maritime enforcement specialist and a boarding team officer. Solid. But Charlie still outranks him. Damn.

“Captain,” said the quartermaster, “all crew are at battle stations. Engine room reports we are at full power and ready to get under way.”

“Very well, Mr. Waite. Stand us off from the pier. I’ll conn us out.”

Base Seattle’s main pier held only two cutters at the moment, *Klondike* and *Joshua James*, along with a cluster of much smaller patrol boats. The cutter was nose-in and would have to back down the man-made channel, past *Klondike* and out into the Duwamish Waterway before it could turn and put its bow toward Puget Sound. The quartermaster gave commands to both the engine room and the helmsman, and the big ship eased away from the pier. As it moved off, corpses that had been hammering against its hull toppled into the water.

“Mr. Coseboom to the bridge,” Liz said into the microphone. Boomer was an experienced officer, and she would need him, especially since there was barely enough crew to get under way. She stepped to the communication gear and switched on the Guard channel, a restricted, military-only radio frequency. Rapid chatter poured from the bridge speakers at once.

“Miss Liggett,” she said to the young woman waiting beside her, “I want a report on the following: fuel status, fresh water levels, name and specialty of every civilian on board, magazine levels and weapon systems readiness, a full inventory of light arms and galley stores.”

The younger woman scribbled furiously on her clipboard, her hand shaking. “I . . . I think . . .”

Liz took her by the shoulder, and in a low voice said, “Steady, Amy. A lot of that information will be in your watch orders.” She tapped the clipboard. “I already know that most of those things will be either low or nonexistent, but we need an accurate accounting.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Her voice was quavering, and she fought to control it.

Liz softened her voice even further, so that no one else on the bridge would hear her. “Maintain your bearing. Be a role model for the crew. They’re going to be scared and confused, and they need to see calm, confident officers. You know my expectations.”

The younger woman took a deep breath and nodded, and Liz gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze before sending her off. *Joshua James* had moved slowly into the center of the channel, and Liz gave the command to reverse at four knots. A new vibration in the deck signaled the change, and the cutter began to back up, slowly coming alongside *Klondike* on the port side, still tied to its berth. Liz returned to the bridge windows

to inspect the other ship.

The dead were swarming across the cutter's decks, hunting the living.

Liz keyed the microphone. "This is the captain. Stand by to commence rescue operations."

THREE

One of two Short Range Prosecutors—SRPs—aboard *Joshua James* launched at speed from the stern ramp of the cutter, its water jets throwing up a fan of spray. Seven meters long, the rigid, inflatable boat hooked around the vessel and blasted back up the channel toward *Klondike*, LCDR Coseboom at the helm with three other men aboard. In the bow, a Coast Guardsman crouched with the M16 Charlie Kidd had taken from the port security Hummer.

There were people in the water ahead and more leaping from *Klondike*'s deck or simply toppling over the rails with reaching arms. The men in the SRP saw a female petty officer try to scramble over the railing, only to be pulled back by dead shipmates before she could make the leap to the water.

Boomer slowed as he neared the other cutter, taking a moment to think. Some of the figures were swimming away from the ship; others were struggling to stay afloat, splashing and waving their arms. A few sank almost immediately, not even attempting or unable to swim. These had ashy faces and snapping teeth.

"Be careful what you pull out of the water," he said to the two men standing at the SRP's edge. "Only the living, understand?" He was a little surprised at himself, at how easily he had accepted that the dead were rising. But that brought on thoughts about his wife in their little apartment, and the stupid argument that had caused him to storm out and spend the night on *Joshua James*. He should have been with her.

The young crewmen aboard weren't so accepting, their faces revealing their overall shock, but they nodded at the order. Boomer angled the SRP to bring them closer to the swimmers, careful not to get too close to the cutter's hull. He didn't want one of those things dropping into his boat.

The guardsmen cast out their lines and started pulling survivors from the water.

• • •

Joshua James, still reversing at an agonizing four knots, had nearly reached the mouth of the channel, where it would back briefly into the Duwamish Waterway, then steam almost immediately into the sound. Elizabeth was impatient to engage forward propulsion, aching for open water where she would have some maneuvering options. This was like backing slowly down an alley, and she felt vulnerable. She used a pair of binoculars to watch the rescue operation taking place off the bow. Boomer seemed to have it under control.

On the radio, the Guard channel was crowded with impossible horrors and unthinkable events, monotone voices mixing with panicked cries for help and even screaming. Mass riots were tearing Seattle apart, the police were being overwhelmed, and civilian casualties were staggering. Chaos, confusion, and miscommunication reigned, but the commonly repeated fact was that people were returning from the dead and killing the living.

Sea-Tac airport had been closed to nonmilitary traffic, and any airborne civilian flights were being diverted. National Guard units were being mobilized to defend hospitals. Fires were erupting throughout the city and suburbs, and the population was being ordered to evacuate, though to where was unclear. North of her

position, the naval base in Everett, where *Nimitz* berthed when it was home, was locked down and reporting attacks by ground forces.

What ground forces? Liz wondered.

A lone destroyer had managed to sortie from Everett an hour earlier and was now cruising just offshore of the city, raking the waterfront with its five-inch gun in an attempt to “suppress aggressors.”

Liz stared at the radio. *The Navy is shelling Seattle.* She shook her head.

An order came down from National Command Authority. It was transmitted in the clear, but it had a genuine authenticity code, as Liz confirmed with a plastic snap-card from a small safe below the communication gear. NCA announced that the United States had been placed under martial law and all military units were to consider their country under attack by foreign aggressors. Biohazard protocols were to be observed, though *Joshua James* was currently unequipped for such measures, and every unit was to prepare for strike operations. *Joshua James* had just become a ship at war.

Liz switched over to the Coast Guard channel, bringing up the microphone. Before she could speak, the airwave buzzed with an official-sounding voice.

“*Joshua James*, this is Base Seattle Command. Acknowledge.”

“This is USCGC seven-five-four,” Liz said, “Captain Elizabeth Kidd, commanding.”

“*Joshua James*, you are ordered to return to port immediately.”

Liz made a face. “Base Seattle, our pier has been overrun, and we are engaged in rescue operations for *Klondike*. I am preparing to maneuver my ship.” There were going to be a lot of civilians in need of help, she thought. Why would Command order her back during a crisis?

The voice came again. “Negative, seven-five-four. Return to port immediately.”

The bridge crew looked at their commanding officer, then at each other. Out the thick front windows, Liz saw LCDR Coseboom’s small craft racing back toward *Joshua James*. She couldn’t see any more figures in the water near *Klondike*. There was plenty of movement on the decks of the smaller ship and the docks beyond, however, staggering figures, none of them living. Did Command think she was going to return her ship to *that*? She had a responsibility to her crew.

“I cannot comply with that order, Seattle Command,” she said, shocked to hear herself utter words she had never before even considered. But then nothing like this had ever happened in her nearly three-decade-long career. “We are at wartime conditions, and I will preserve this ship.” The voice on the radio began to repeat its demand, but Liz snapped over to the Guard channel again, cutting it off.

The close, heavy thump of rotors approached above the ship, making the deck thrum. A black helicopter dropped into view twenty-five yards off the cutter’s bow, its cockpit level with the bridge windows. A yellow star and the letters *DEA* were stenciled on the fuselage, and a man in body armor holding a sniper rifle could be seen at an open side door, clipped into a harness.

A loudspeaker mounted to the helicopter’s belly blared over the chop of rotors. “This is DEA flight zero-three. *Joshua James*, heave to and prepare to be boarded.”

• • •

Ensign Amy Liggett hurried down a passageway, clipboard in hand. Earlier, nearing the end of her overnight watch, she thought she'd been tired. No longer. Adrenaline and the sudden appearance of her commanding officer had erased all traces of sleepiness, but those weren't the only reasons.

The crew was using the word *zombie*. People were attacking and *eating* one another, and the crew was looking to her for answers she didn't have.

Having the captain aboard made things better. The woman was a career veteran who knew her business, and she was gifted with a cool decisiveness Amy could only envy. But then, what of the captain? Crew members had told her they'd seen port security take a man off *Klondike* in handcuffs and put him in the back of a Humvee, someone a petty officer said he recognized as the captain's brother. Then the captain had shown up, shot down two guardsmen, and brought the man aboard. Now he was loose on the ship and barking orders.

It couldn't be true, could it? Just scuttlebutt, people misunderstanding things amid the chaos. And what was really happening? Zombies? Please! Her little brother back in Virginia was a zombie freak, devouring anything that had to do with the walking dead: books, movies, and video games. It was kid stuff, fun, yes, but not real.

Now they were at battle stations, leaving Base Seattle with less than a quarter-strength crew. They were unprepared for a cruise of any length in a ship not yet commissioned. They were just now transitioning from builder's trials to acceptance trials, and the cutter hadn't yet received its Coast Guard markings. Many of the ship's systems either hadn't been fully tested or weren't working at all. Actual readiness was many months away.

Amid all the questions and unknowns, there was only one certainty, and that was her fear. Amy had never been so scared in her life.

"Steady," she chastised herself. An officer had to be locked down and in control, even when all she wanted to do was cry. "There'll be none of that," she growled at the empty corridor, turning a corner toward the armory.

The door was open.

She slowed, suddenly wary, and looked inside. The lights were on, illuminating a room that was, as it should have been, mostly empty. To the right stood vacant rifle racks, where the M4s, M14s, and shotguns would be, once they were delivered. Beneath these were numerous empty slots for handguns, the forty-caliber Sigs. Regulations at this point of the trial process authorized only three: one each for the captain, XO, and chief of the boat. There they were, snug in their slots. Spaces for rifle and pistol ammunition were all but empty, again as they should be.

She looked around. The M240 medium machine guns weren't due to arrive until just before commissioning, and ammo for the ship's heavier weapons—what was aboard, anyway—would be secured in the magazine one deck below. Four rail-mounted fifty-caliber heavy machine guns had arrived ahead of schedule, along with their crates of belted ammo, and stood against the far bulkhead.

Why didn't things look right? She started counting. *One . . . two . . . three . . .*

"Uh-oh," she whispered.

• • •

Liz moved to the front of the bridge, holding the radio handset and still on the Guard channel. “DEA flight zero-three, this is *Joshua James*. That is a negative, do not attempt to board. We are on a war footing per National Command Authority, and we *will* enter Puget Sound.”

The response from the loudspeaker came as if those aboard the helicopter weren’t monitoring the military traffic channel. “Coast Guard Cutter, heave to at once.” The sniper in the helicopter’s door raised his rifle and sighted on the bridge. “Captain Elizabeth Kidd,” the speaker boomed, “you have unlawfully seized a vessel of the United States and are harboring a federal fugitive. Surrender your vessel immediately.”

Liz gripped the handset so tightly she thought the plastic might crack. “Flight zero-three, do you even *know* what’s happening at Seattle Base?” *It was insane. Everything was coming apart, they were in the middle of a national security crisis, and the DEA was worried about Charlie and Elizabeth Kidd?* “Flight zero-three, we are—”

The sniper fired, the bullet sparking off the steel just above the bridge windows with a loud ping. Liz and the crewmen ducked.

“This is your last warning,” the loudspeaker blared. “Stop your vessel now.”

“Cease fire!” Liz shouted into the mic. “Do not—”

The chopper banked left and roared over the ship toward its stern, flying over Coseboom’s SRP as the officer prepared to come around to the cutter’s boat ramp for recovery. The DEA bird hung in the air, then pivoted to face the ship’s stern, and then four men in black with assault rifles rappelled from its doors, two on each side. All four descended an even twenty-five feet on their lines and hung there in the air.

On the water, Boomer completed his turn around a ship that was backing toward him. He couldn’t think about helicopters now, or about what the loudspeaker had said about his captain, though all other eyes on the small boat were looking up. He had to concentrate on lining his boat up with the narrow, alleylike gap that was the cutter’s boat ramp.

Above, the DEA helicopter moved forward, the four men beneath it swinging backward as a group. Seconds later the chopper flared and hovered, a maneuver that now swung the four men forward and low over the flat, eight-by-fifty-foot flight deck, where they would unclip and drop onto the vessel.

• • •

Liz dropped the mic and headed for the ladderway on the run. “Mr. Waite has the conn,” she yelled as she disappeared down the metal stairs, leaving command of a vessel nearly as big as a Navy frigate to a midlevel enlisted man. Her boots pounded the steel decking as she ran aft down the passageway. The DEA would board at the flight deck, she knew. Liz had worked enough joint operations with them to know their tactics.

She had to get there before they boarded, had to reason with them when they arrived, before any of her people could be hurt. Two-thirds of the way along the passage, Amy Liggett charged up a ladderway to the left and started running behind her captain.

A moment later they both heard the thunder of a heavy machine gun.

• • •

At a range of one hundred feet, a storm of fifty-caliber bullets shredded the helicopter’s cockpit, both pilots and the sniper in back. More bullets raked across the fuselage, rotor blades, and engine cowling. The

weapon, designed to go up against armored vehicles, knocked the thin-skinned aircraft out of the sky. It crashed into the channel and went down fast. As it fell, the four men still attached to it by rappelling lines were snatched away, their bodies slamming hard against rails and steel protrusions before being dragged beneath the surface by their tethers.

Still reversing, *Joshua James* crept past the point where the helicopter had gone under, the surface boiling with bubbles and oil. LCDR Coseboom's SRP roared up the boat ramp a moment later, and the officer and his small crew immediately began helping the handful of *Klondike* survivors up onto the deck.

Elizabeth Kidd and Amy Liggett burst through a hatch and onto the aft deck that sat atop the ship's twin helicopter hangars, overlooking the flight deck and boat ramp below. Directly ahead of them, Senior Chief Charlie Kidd stood behind an M2 heavy machine gun set in a pintle mount, the deck around him littered with fifty-caliber shell casings. Liz slowed as she reached him, her face revealing her horror.

"You *did* do it," she whispered. She didn't mean the helicopter.

Chick turned to his sister, giving her a salute and a lazy smile. "Captain, boarders have been repelled."

Liz glared at him, then looked over the side to where pieces of honeycomb rotor blades and other debris were floating to the surface amid a spreading oil slick. "Secure that weapon," she hissed.

On the lower deck, Lieutenant Commander Coseboom, half carrying a *Klondike* survivor, was calling for a medic. "See to that," Liz said, directing the order at the young ensign beside her, but still staring at a point in the water where seven men had just lost their lives.

• • •

The bridge was quiet when she returned, QM2 Waite calmly giving orders to the helmsman as *Joshua James* finished backing into the Duwamish Waterway, preparing to engage forward propulsion. The enlisted man glanced at his commanding officer, who was standing off to the side, hands on her hips and looking up at the bulkhead above the bridge's front windows. Despite her presence on the bridge, his command of the conn had not yet been relieved, so he ordered a course that would take them northwest into Puget Sound, calling for seven knots.

Liz stared at the bold, black letters stenciled above the windows, stark against the white bulkhead. *Honor. Respect. Devotion to Duty.* The Coast Guard's core values. Then she looked out the starboard side, thinking about what she had seen and done in Admiral Whelan's office, about the DEA helicopter and its loudspeaker, and once again seeing her brother leaning on a smoking machine gun.

Her entire adult life had been dedicated to her country, her crew, and saving lives. Now, in the course of a morning, Captain Elizabeth Kidd had broken out a federal prisoner, fired upon and killed agents of a sovereign nation, and unlawfully seized an American military vessel: all acts of aggression against her own country.

The word for that was *traitor*.

"Mr. Waite, advance to flank speed and keep us clear of that destroyer to the north," she ordered. As she looked out at the gray surface beyond the bow of her cutter, she thought about how quickly things and people could change, and wondered at what new changes lay ahead.

FOUR

January 12—San Francisco Bay

Father Xavier Church worked the heavy bag, slowly circling on the balls of his feet, throwing punches in combinations. He had already skipped rope until sweat plastered his shirt to his broad back, and twenty minutes on the speed bag had the muscles in his arms and shoulders burning. Soon he would begin running laps around *Nimitz*'s flight deck.

He worked the bag harder than usual, fists slamming into the leather and dense padding with thumps that could be heard all the way across the gym. He was worried, and feared for the friends who had lifted off from the flight deck in Vladimir's Black Hawk only yesterday: Angie, Skye, and Carney. He prayed for their safe return from Chico, prayed they would find Angie's family safe and whole. Yet he couldn't help but think that their chances would have been better had he gone with them.

In his middle forties, Xavier's dark brown face was a graphic example of man's capacity for violence. A scar split his visage down the center, from hairline to chin, and a trio of pale claw marks gouged one cheek. Behind the damage were dark eyes that were both watchful and weary with responsibility. Taking *Nimitz* from the dead had come at a substantial cost; friends had been lost and children orphaned. Xavier felt the absence of every life.

His fists hammered the bag, and he blinked away sweat as he struck, still dancing in a circle. He threw a powerful combination to the center and then a roundhouse high on the bag, hits that would have put a heavyweight on the canvas. Xavier winced as the grenade fragment deep in his thigh twitched, but he gritted his teeth and worked through the pain. Doc had managed to remove all of the other pieces of metal, and now only the one remained, too deep to reach without risking nerve and tissue damage. She hoped movement and time would work the piece closer to the surface, where she could get at it with a simple incision. Doc said it would be a painful process, and she had been right.

Users Review

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Alfredo Dunn:

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