

CHAPTER 1

It was a number of unfortunate things, but primarily a mouse—a damn mouse. It was relatively well known that a certain species of Russian mice had a particularly well-developed appreciation for a certain type of rubber. Unfortunately, the rubber of its desire was used as insulation around Russian-made electrical wiring found in aged commercial vessels, including oil tankers, and the chewing through of this insulation often caused electrical malfunctions as well as the sudden demise of the unfortunate rodent.

The *Zenus* was not exactly the pride of the small Russian fleet of oil tankers. Built while Khrushchev was still in power, it was once a prototype of the tankers to come. Unfortunately, there were precious few oil profits to justify covering much maintenance expense. The *Zenus* was old, and since Russia had always been lacking in funds, it stayed old.

Also unfortunate was the mouse's wire of choice: a lead from the antique LORAN antenna to the display in the navigator's station, which was little more than a dent in the wall of the cramped bridge. Without causing any alarms, the wire expired at the same instant as did the mouse, causing part of the old data from the antenna to be stuck from lack of new data. If the tanker were to stay on the same course for a while, it probably wouldn't have mattered—someone would eventually have noticed. But the tanker should have been starting to slow down and line up to negotiate the tricky Bosphorus channel, the only way out for the trickle of oil that flowed from Azerbaijan and Georgia. It would be critical to handle the twists and turns in the next thirty miles accurately.

Even more unfortunate was the fact that both the captain and helmsman were young and relatively inexperienced, both joining the ship barely three trips ago. It was the first unassisted trip for the captain, who wanted to start his career by setting a record for the fastest time to the refineries in Italy. It didn't make things any better that they both had enjoyed way too much vodka the night before on the arrow-straight run across the Black Sea. Barely functioning, both were concentrating more on their well-being than the task at hand.

First Officer Viktor Salkov was an old salt, however, sailing these seas for many years. He functioned as the navigator and watched the numbers on the screen, interpreting the data as best he could and prepared to call headings and timings and speeds out to the helmsman; but since the LORAN didn't update, he hadn't been calling many corrections.

Captain Malkovich watched his crew, hoping they felt far better than he did. Something nagged at his stomach though; he couldn't put his finger on it. Perhaps the First Officer was right, he thought; maybe they should have taken a slower track across the Black Sea. The morning light wasn't supposed to come for another fifteen minutes; it wouldn't hurt his quest very much if they slowed. In the pitch black of the moonless night in early April, there was light fog and not a whisper of wind, sounds, or lights.

The first clue—one that should have been noticed by the captain earlier—was a small but growing patch of sky directly ahead that lit that part of the fog slightly lighter than the rest.

He leaned forward and squinted. *Curious*. They shouldn't be able to see the lights of a town quite yet, so he decided to be cautious and trust his somewhat impaired instincts. "Helmsman, you can decrease your speed now. And come five degrees to port. We should have about fifteen miles to slow down for the next turn to enter the Straits."

That doesn't give us much room, the First Officer grunted to himself, glancing at the captain and helmsman. *Kids with power*, he thought. *Who are they trying to impress?* But he kept his thoughts private

and called for three-quarter throttle. Captain Malkovich turned his head slowly toward the navigator: something nagged at that part of his brain that was still focusing on business.

“Doesn’t it feel like we should have started the turn already?”

Salkov looked at his instruments again and made his calculations again. “No, Captain. We are making good time, but not great time. According to the instruments, it is correct.”

Captain Malkovich grunted and turned back to the dark night, studying the strange, but oddly fascinating cloud of lighter sky in the distance peeking occasionally through the patches of fog, a little larger than it had been only minutes ago. The vibration of the engines felt good under his feet and the slight deceleration he sensed quickened his pulse. *Slowing down means coming home.* He took a deep drag of the sea air. *I love the sea.* That thought was short-lived as another slight but irritating wave of nausea rose and his head seemed to swell under the pressure of his agony. *I’ll live,* he thought. *But I’ll never drink again.*

Over the next six minutes the *Zenus* reduced speed, but was still sliding through the dark mirror-water at 22 knots. The fog thickened again suddenly and visibility was now less than a half-mile. Even at 22 knots, the bulk of the fully loaded oil tanker was still carrying an almost unimaginable amount of inertia and momentum. First Officer Salkov studied his instruments, starting to wonder why the readings did not seem to make sense to him. Nonetheless, he made his calculations, the words of his instructors ringing in his ears: *Trust the instruments.*

They were still going far too fast for his comfort. *But how could this position be correct?* he wondered. “Helmsman. Reduce speed to idle. Something is wrong.”

“Roger,” grunted the big man. He was young, but was an ex-air force sergeant, not quite willing to give in completely to the Navy way; but since they had taken him in after that unfortunate incident with pilots in Afghanistan, he had been willing to learn *port* and *starboard*. He did, however, still have to translate it back to *left* and *right* before he could execute commands. Salkov scratched his head and started to rise from his cramped station. *The captain must feel that something is wrong,* he thought.

Captain Malkovich turned to study the helmsman, wondering why he was burdened with such a troubled crew member. But who was he to complain? He finally had his command—it felt good even if he had to endure an oddball or two. At least his First Officer was steady. After a few minutes’ study of the charts, the captain turned back to the black night—black except for that glow of light sky—now significantly larger than it had been.

The coffee burned his hand as he returned to his perch on the catwalk next to the bridge, and he swore as he looked out over the bow. He blinked. The light had suddenly grown in the last few minutes as the fog dissipated. The light now extended from one side of his vision to another. His heart stopped. The fog was now almost gone, and the visibility was almost clear.

He couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

The First Officer had just come unto the bridge to discuss his concerns, but stopped at the door, staring straight ahead. “*Blin!*” he swore. Within seconds the fog was gone completely and there, before them clearly, not a mile away, were the lights of a fishing village.

The captain blinked and rubbed his eyes and looked again, hoping that it was the remnants of the vodka. What he saw was real, however. Suddenly his body turned cold and his blood started pumping wildly. “Reverse engines!” he screamed.

The helmsman had already seen what they had seen and was lunging at the power staff, throwing it into Full Reverse. The First Officer grabbed the radio/intercom. “All hands prepare for collision!” He flipped the switch to radio, unclear as to whom he should inform of the impending disaster.

There was nothing more they could do, of course, except watch the town quickly become larger. The captain stared at the scene as if it were a movie. The vibration of the engines pulsed under his feet, feeling not unlike they had when they were pushed to the red line to see how fast his ship could go; however, they weren't straining to take him toward glory now. They were trying, vainly, to survive. He wished it wasn't real, but the unforgiving laws of physics would, once again, not be changed by wishes.

The stillness of the night was only broken by the desperate engines whining 300 feet behind him and a radio in the distance playing American music. Someone's window was open, Captain Malkovich thought, or perhaps it was a young man coming home from his first long date. He remembered his first date, but it was a flicker as reality suddenly crashed back into him.

The First Officer had moved over to stand next to the captain and gripped the rail, his knuckles white. They silently studied the quaint village, with its European-style balconied houses and shops. Life, unchanged for hundreds of years, was about to change dramatically.

"Mikhail?" the captain said, almost calmly.

"Yes," answered the First Officer without emotion.

"How close will we get to the town?"

"As I recall, this is Rumeli Kavogi, which means the water is 70 feet until it gets almost to the docks and seawall."

They were silent for a few more seconds, eyes wide, staring, mouths still slack in disbelief.

The Captain said: "Mikhail, I'm sorry we couldn't have sailed together longer."

"So am I, sir."

The immense oil tanker was traveling at 18 knots when its bulbous cutter crashed into the sliver of shallow water barely forty feet wide that separated the seawall from the waters of the Bosphorus Straits. It shattered the sandstone barrier like it was hard candy and slammed into the docks directly in the center of downtown Rumeli Kavogi, driving the cutter into the shops on the other side of the street. The superstructure of the ship absorbed the shock, collapsing upon itself like an accordion, but the momentum of the oil was freed to follow the natural way of things. Easily breaking through the weak deck, it carried the bridge and the crew on an immense black tidal wave, sloshing viciously forward with the pointed power of an avalanche. The black liquid mountain was moving at 16 knots as it exited the broken ship, leaving its former container behind like an angry panther leaping from its hiding place upon an unsuspecting prey. As the panther hit its target, it first broke an electric street light, which ignited the mass almost instantly. Just before the captain impacted upon the wall of the town hall, he saw the panther become an inferno.

His last thought was that history would show it was only a small, obscure town that was destroyed. He was responsible, to be sure, but it would barely even be a footnote in the long story of human endeavor.

He was wrong. Very wrong.