

It was on day six when Roberta, Rebecca and Michael Constantine, a young waiter, were coming back to the Mermaid Lounge with carts of sandwiches, when they spotted one of the crew members at the other end of the hall of staterooms. It sounded like he had made some sort of groan, which made them notice his shuffle up the hallway towards them.

“Hey,” Michael called. “You okay?”

“Isn’t that Fred Drummond?” Rebecca asked. “He wasn’t with the rest of us when I made the list.”

“Hey.” Michael called again. “Fred, you okay?”

It was Roberta who got the first impression that something was very wrong. She left her cart to go stand next to Rebecca and she reached out for her arm.

Michael had left his cart as well, but was moving towards Fred.

“Michael, don’t.” Rebecca said, but he continued.

“Fred, are you sick?” he asked. “There’s some kind of bug going around. We can try and make you more comfortable in the parlor if you want. You feeling okay?”

It was still hard to see Fred at this distance, but he was walking odd and using the wall to brace himself with his shoulder on each step towards them.”

Michael was now right in front of him. They both stopped. “You don’t look so good, man.” he said as he reached out his arm to steady the other man.

Fred grabbed Michael’s arm and swung it hard to the wall. Before Michael could say anything else, Fred sniffed twice like he smelled food, turned towards the arm and bit into it, right through the shirt sleeve.

Michael screamed in pain and his knees buckled, but Fred held him up by the arm and bit into it again.

Fred released the arm and Michael slumped to the floor. Fred turned towards the women at the end of the hall who were frozen in shock. This time, he let out a yell unlike anything the two women had ever heard before, which became louder and louder until it was at full volume in the hall. The very first howl anyone on the Swan would hear.

“Go!” Rebecca screamed, pushing Roberta towards the metal door that would lead to another deck. Somewhere on a different deck, another howl answered back.

“Go, go, go!” Rebecca yelled again.

They made it through the door as Fred picked up speed and began running in a shuffle, banging into stateroom doors and walls before turning the corner towards them. They took to the stairs to the main deck without thinking of slamming the door on Fred, and it didn't close fast enough before Fred caught it with his shoulder.

The two women burst onto the main deck just behind the bridge tower and didn't stop. Roberta didn't know where she was leading Rebecca, just away and down the deck, when she saw a woman in a yellow tank-top and white shorts coming up towards them from the back of the ship. Her long, blonde hair was down over her face and she was walking with a limp and her shoulders were hunched. Roberta stopped immediately and Rebecca stumbled right into her.

Just then, Fred Drummond made his way out onto the deck as well. The only direction the women could move was toward the railing, and the open ocean.

The blonde woman finally tilted her head which moved her hair, she had blood stains around her mouth, as did Fred, and both of them were pale white. They moved towards the women with shuffling steps just as the women hit the railing of the deck.

Captain Lewis came out of the door from the bridge tower brandishing a pistol in all directions. He quickly took stock of the situation and moved between the women and the two people closing in on them.

"Stop!" he ordered, and pointed the gun from the blonde and then to Fred. "Stop now or I'll fire." Fred howled again, a painful sound. The blonde woman answered, but Roberta would always swear she heard others when she spoke about the day, which she rarely did.

When they were quiet again, they were still moving towards the captain and the women.

"Stop now," Lewis said again, but it did no good. First, he shot Fred in the head, as he had been much closer. He turned to see if that would frighten the woman. It did not; it had no effect on her whatsoever. She continued as if she didn't even know Fred was there, bleeding out on the deck. He shot the woman in the chest as both women behind him screamed in surprise and horror. Rebecca fell to her knees squeezing Roberta's hand for support.

This was not the time to collapse though. Captain Lewis walked over and deftly moved Rebecca to her feet again and pulled her toward the tower door with Roberta right behind them. He closed the metal door behind them, but it had no lock. He checked the porthole in the door twice and then stood in front of it like a sentinel. Rebecca collapsed on the floor in tears. Roberta was clearly in shock. She would cry later. She wouldn't get a good night's sleep for some time to come. She would re-live these moments over and over for years. She would not cry now.

Rick Thomas and Dave Reynolds and several more crew were there at the door. The ship had been creeping slowly toward California since their second night, but it was stopped now.

"The first order is to get down to the lounge and secure the other survivors," Captain Lewis said, looking at each of them. "We have no way of knowing if those were the only two..."

“Zombies,” Rebecca said quietly from the floor. She looked up with tears staining her face.

“What?” Lewis asked.

“They were zombies,” she said quietly.

“Well...” Captain Lewis said as he looked at the crew members around him again, “we’re not sure what’s going on yet.” He wasn’t willing to give into outlandish speculation. “We’ll make sure the other survivors are safe in the lounge. Mister Reynolds, if you’d do that. Make an accurate count and see if you can secure the door somehow.”

Reynolds nodded, and took the fire axe from the wall.

“Captain there are people down in the engine room with Crowley and Ortiz,” Rick Thomas said.

“Right,” the Captain answered. “We’ll head there and bring everyone back.” He checked his pistol’s ammunition, already knowing he had only four shots left.

“Take them with you, Mister Reynolds,” Captain Lewis said, referring to the women and the other crew who were on the bridge. Reynolds helped Rebecca to her feet as she stood next to Roberta. She had stopped crying but was still wobbly. “I’m counting on you to keep the others calm,” he said to the three of them, but especially to Rebecca.

“Michael,” Roberta said, suddenly remembering. “Michael Constantine, one of the waiters; he was with us. Fred bit him. We were down on eleven in the hallway.”

“Stop and pick him up. Take him back to the lounge. If he’s wounded, take care of it in the lounge not in the corridor,” Lewis said.

With that he opened the door and looked all around before stepping out. The others followed. As they separated, Frank Wells and Tim Porter offered to give Lewis and Thomas backup on their way to the engine room. On their way past the pool area, Wells took a shuffleboard stick and then handed one to Thomas and then to Porter.

Roberta, Rebecca and Dave went back down the stairs the women had run up and Dave checked inside the door before going all the way through it, his portly frame guarding the door with the fire ax in front of him as sweat formed at the line of his spiked, black hair. He took a step, and then two more, before motioning for the women to follow.

The lunch carts they had been bringing to the lounge were over-turned, the sandwiches and bags of chips strewn over the floor. Dave looked around the corner to the long hallway of staterooms. Michael Constantine wasn’t there.

Rebecca righted one of the carts as her eyes darted all around her and began to re-stack as much as she could onto the cart when Dave looked down at her confused.

“People will still be hungry,” she said quietly. “The food might keep them calm.”

Rebecca agreed and hurried to help her stack as much food on one cart as they could as Dave stood guard. It only took a few moments and Rebecca pushed as Roberta kept the balance of at least a cart and a half of food.

When they got back to the Mermaid Lounge, people were milling about talking about the weird, chilling screams. Dave pulled the wooden doors shut and placed the fire ax between the two handles, securing the door, and then went up two or three steps towards the sound booth that over-looked the floor.

Roberta and Rebecca maneuvered the cart to the center of the dance floor and several people had begun to move toward them before Dave clapped his hands together loudly.

“Can I have everyone’s attention please,” he bellowed.

Some people stopped, others continued with what they were doing or went on with their conversations.

Dave clapped his hands hard again. “Please. Everyone?” The room finally went quiet.

“We’ve had a problem,” he started. “Some people have turned...” He didn’t know what to say. “Violent.”

With a low murmur of surprise, the conversation started again and Dave quieted them.

“Please. It’s very important that everyone stay where they are for the time being. We’re going to take a count and see who’s not here. So please grab something to eat and stay put.”

With that, he left the stairs. Roberta and Rebecca passed out smaller portions of food. People either got half a sandwich or a bag of chips, but not both. Mike Everstein, a bartender on board, began to pour a line of sodas from the fountain gun. Once everyone had a little something and a soda, they found a comfortable space and followed orders not to move.

There were fifteen in the lounge. Minus the two who had been killed and the four who went to the engine room, that left fourteen unaccounted for, until Rebecca mentioned the four who had been moved to the bingo parlor, which left ten. It was Dave who said the sick in the parlor were going to have to fend for themselves until the captain got back. Their orders were to secure the lounge, and that’s what he intended to do.

Forty-five minutes later, there was another howl from somewhere outside the doors of the lounge. From the volume of the scream coming from beyond those heavy doors, Roberta knew it had to be very close. It was followed quickly by another and then there was a loud bang on the doors. Someone was trying to force their way in. As Dave moved closer to the door and carefully looked through the long narrow window next to it, he saw that it was Lewis and whoever he could save from below decks. They were yelling frantically to open the door.

As the doors were flung open, and then immediately closed and sealed with the axe, it was Captain Lewis, David Ortiz, Rick Thomas, Ed Crowley and Frank Wells who were the only survivors from the engine room. Apparently, one of the men, not a crew member, had left the engine room to check on his wife in the parlor, once there he encountered two of the sick, violent men and ran back towards the engine room, only to be ambushed and bitten by his wife.

Unfortunately, he had led the three in close enough proximity to the others that they were taken unaware as well. The man was attacked from behind. It did not look like he could have survived.

It was unclear if any of the others in the engine room or close by had survived, surely some of them had, but there was no time to search. Crowley and Ortiz had killed two others using a large wrench and a hammer, both of which they still carried. The captain's gun was empty.

It would be just over a year later, with the arrival of Doctor Nichols, that anyone would put the illness together with the Howlers. It was generally assumed at the time that whatever they were, something had attacked the sick in the parlor and that's how they were changed. At the time, the *how* didn't matter as much as stopping what was happening.