

The Curse of Captain Juliet

"Terrible weather. I don't how they expect us to see anything in this fog."

Conroy blew his nose in a handkerchief and sniffled. The older watchman had a cold again. Every night his cold seemed to come back and Avera wasn't sure how much more of Conroy's cold he could take. Still, the rule was that two shipmen stood watch at night. Avera hoped for a promotion to get out of the crow's nest, but he seemed trapped paying his dues to the Navy.

"The fog won't stop anything from coming at us," Avera suggested. "With any luck, Cavalan raiders won't be able to see well in the fog either and will keep close."

"It's not pirates that worry me."

"Rocks? We're a hundred miles from any land mass, so if we run aground, we have bigger problems."

"I couldn't care about rocks when she's out there."

"Oh, don't tell me you believe that old ghost story?"

"Captain Juliet wasn't just a story. She was real! The last true pirate to make a stand against the Pirate Hunters! She cursed the men who burned her ship down with her final breaths! And now—"

"She drifts along the seas in a burning ship," Avera scoffed, smoking his cigarette. "Forever hunting the last of the Pirate Hunters on a charred ship with no crew, still tied to the main mast? Have you ever seen Captain Juliet?"

"She doesn't leave survivors. If we met, I wouldn't be here."

"Then how does anyone know about her? Did she send out a nice letter to tell everyone about her?"

"She doesn't kill innocents," Conroy said. "And she doesn't have time to waste going back to those she missed. A majority is better than none."

"Well, if she does," Avera said, rubbing his hands together, "maybe she'll bring us a little warmth, huh?"

Conroy scowled and turned away, sulking on his side of the crow's nest and looking out into the fog. Avera shook his head and took another inhale from his cigarette. Conroy's nose-blowing was still annoying, but Avera felt somewhat proud knocking him down a peg. The wind somehow managed to find the gaps in his uniform and crept down his spine. Avera held off a shiver and stifled a yawn. The ocean lapped gently against their bow, but the sea was silent otherwise. Avera was only half paying attention when he saw the other light.

"Flame," Avera pointed. Conroy let out a breath and stopped sulking to look at the light. It looked like the tip of a tiny candle fluttering in the distance. When Conroy

confirmed the sight, Avera opened a tube on the crow's nest and spoke into it. "Nest to helm, nest to helm: Looks like a light is coming from off the port bow. Please speak to captain..."

"Helm to nest," a muffled voice rattled up the pipe, "confirmed: port bow light. Consulting with the captain now."

There was a long silence as Avera watched the light. It drifted with the ship, growing in tiny increments until he saw the outline of a ship. Down below the hull pitched and glided towards the glowing ship. Below, Avera could see men preparing the guns on deck as the muzzles of more cannons emerged from the hull. The port side was preparing for an attack. Avera knew it was a precaution, but it felt more foreboding than the usual fanfare that the navy did. The ships closed the distance as the outline of the oncoming ship-shaped in Avera's mind.

It was an ancient, three-mast ship with tattered sails and rope ladders leading up to the rotted rigging. Everything looked like the ship shouldn't be floating, but the hull still glided along the water. Avera didn't see any men moving on the deck.

"It's cursed," Conroy said, looking through a telescope. "There's no one on deck..."

"It's abandoned," Avera said. "They left the lamp burning to keep other boats from—"

"That's a lot of lamps for one boat," Conroy shook his head. "Where is she?"

"She's not there," Avera said, though he wasn't sure if he was affirming his own belief or admonishing Conroy's superstition. Conroy didn't give any sign of acknowledgment. He stared through the telescope with equal amounts of fear and anticipation. His eager grin faded and the end of his telescope started to tremble.

"Look..."

Avera took the offered telescope and followed Conroy's shaking finger. The middle mast wasn't rotted, but charred. The wood flaked away in little black flecks as they drifted off in the wind. Avera followed the length of the mast and saw a shape tied to the mast. The form was human, but there was something sinister about it. Chains wrapped around the form and locks bound the links together around the person's chest. Shaggy, blonde hair whipped around in the wind, waving like the ship's tattered colors. The face was partly decayed, but the remaining skin was burnt and cracked. Her cheeks were burnt away in a permanent snarl as the glossy, white eyes turned towards Avera's telescope.

"That's impossible," Avera said, lowering the telescope. His voice seemed to fade as the first boom of the cannon exploded from the ghost ship's deck. The crew below scrambled as the captain barked orders. An alarm went up as the first cannons down

below fired. The ghost ship groaned and Avera brought the scope up to his eye again.

Captain Juliet tilted her head, her mouth keeping shut as chains and ropes coiled and twisted around her. The cannons on deck moved on their own and fired without a crew loading them. The helm spun on its own, turning the ship to face the naval vessel.

"They're going to flank us!" Avera yelled, opening the speaking tube to talk to the helm.

"No," Conroy shook his head with a terrified expression, "she's going to ram us."

The ship plowed through the surf, breaking through the waves without any resistance. The masts sported shredded sails but the ship moved as if the wind was behind it tenfold. More cannon fire came from the deck and Avera saw the muzzle flares turn into black spheres that soared through the air with a terrifying whistle.

Cannonballs broke through the railing and Avera heard a loud crack as the first of the masts shattered like a tree struck by lightning. Men yelled out and wailed as the first mast toppled over. Avera braced as another cannonball hit the mast beneath the crow's nest. The wood splintered and the mast groaned as the timber buckled under the weight of the sail. The mast tilted and Avera gripped the wood instinctively as if a tight enough grip would spare him from the drop. Conroy jumped first, dropping into the water below. As the mast was about to impact against the waves, Avera jumped into the water as well, the cold ocean surging through his clothes and weighing him down.

Sounds were muffled under the water, but Avera could hear more screaming and booms of cannon fire. More men jumped into the water and there was more screaming as the ancient pirate ship plowed through the naval vessel. There was a groan and the wood splintered as Avera swam as hard as he could to the surface. He took a greedy breath of air in as the burning ship broke through one of the most powerful vessels in the navy.

Men screamed as ropes from the attack ship lashed out, striking into the water and snatching up bodies. Other sailors swam as fast as they could, but the ropes managed to grab them all, lashing out like deadly vipers striking at their prey. He heard their bones snap and the final screams as the ship's rigging tore them apart. Avera clung to a piece of wood and noticed that the ropes only attacked those who fled. The dead, still bodies in the water remained undisturbed. Laying flat on his back, Avera spread his arms out over a piece of wood and stayed motionless as the men's screams died around him.

A rope moved above him, coiling and twisting in the air as the fibers circled the

air. Avera didn't blink or even breathe as the rope hung above him. He could feel his heart pounding and his body felt cold. The rope hesitated over him, almost looking him over for signs of life. Avera stayed as still as he dared. The ship of Captain Juliet groaned as it moved by him, so close that Avera's fingertips scrapped the edge of the hull. Uninterested, the rope coiled back up into the ship. It was only then that Avera realized that there was no more screaming.

Captain Juliet's ship passed through a predatory shark that had eaten its fill. Avera saw a few shark fins in the water behind Captain Juliet's ship, but even the largest Imperial Grey was only a scavenger in Juliet's wake. Avera swam away. He didn't know which way was land, but the only direction he needed was away from the ghost ship.