



The Albatros

AND THE PIRATES OF
GALGUDUUD

Federico Supervielle Bergés



A story of a Letter of Marque in the 21st century

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«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Federico S.

The Albatros And The Pirates Of Galguduud / S. Federico —
«Tektime S.r.l.s.»,

Imagine if Western countries lost control of sea lines of communication. What would a businessman be willing to do to protect his interests? The pirate camps that pepper the coast of Somalia threaten to hijack any ship that comes near their waters and the developed countries don't seem to be able to take a stand against the problem. The world's energy industry is on the brink of collapse. Can a businessman battle with the pirates? Could the failed Somali State control its own coast? A young seaman from Cadiz running away from his own personal nightmares is chosen to do away with the magnate's enemies, but he is not far enough away from his own past. As the events develop there is a much more complex plot behind the attacks. Without realizing it, Pablo finds himself being dragged into the midst of an international conspiracy in which he will have to rely solely on his crew and his ship, Albatros.

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Chapter One

Friedrich Gotthelf hung up the phone defeated. At times like these, the fact that his phone was the latest model or that his contact list was packed with the phone numbers of the most influential and successful businessmen in the world - especially in the oil business – full of famous people and celebrities, even a few politicians, meant absolutely nothing. His fancy office, if you could call a room bigger than most apartments an office, offered him no satisfaction. Not even his ergonomic chair that had cost him twenty-five thousand Euros seemed comfortable. After what he had just done all his accomplishments disappeared behind a cloud that only allowed him to see his failure. This was the third time in twenty months! With this last phone call Gotthelf had just authorized the payment of the ransom for the release of the supertanker Dufourspitze, one of the twelve belonging to Alps Tankers; his main source of income. Translating the name to English had been the suggestion of one of those business consultants that receives an astronomical salary for doing a job that in the magnate's opinion didn't really generate any profits, but it was a necessary evil. In any case, the damn Somali pirates didn't seem to care about the name of the company anyway, or its nationality, flag, cargo, destination or anything else for that matter. They would hijack any ship on the water whether close or not so close to Somalia if they deemed it feasible, and then they would demand the ransom. Dufourspitze, together with Finsteraarhorn, Nordend, Aletschhorn, Zumsteinspitze and the rest of the ships had to go by Somalia and pass through the Gulf of Aden if they didn't want to go around so far out of the way that it made the trip not even less than half as profitable. In business everything is about profits. Although, after paying this last ransom Gotthelf was sure that in the last twenty months he would have been better off sending his fleet the long way around the Cape of Good Hope. It hadn't been long since they had begun the extraction of oil in Tanzania and his company had acquired the contract to transport crude to European ports but that meant crossing the entire area swarming with Somali pirates.

“Dammit!”

From his office in the commercial district of Zurich everything seemed so simple. If only the civilized countries would get together and do something. But there was no way to get those politicians to take a risk. They would not do anything to compromise hundreds of thousands of votes in the upcoming elections, and that was the case in all the Western countries. This was one of the reasons that at sixty-one years of age he had declined numerous offers by the Helvetic Republic to be at the head of the Portfolio of Economy. His experience and connections were well known but politics was not for him. Businesses were much simpler; procure more money spending less and you'll be doing fine and there's always the option to improve. Not so in politics, one day you're on top, the next on the bottom, that's as sure as death and taxes.

Almost all the western countries with interests in the area had one or a few warships patrolling the zone catching a skiff here or there but that wasn't enough. The pirates weren't stupid and with their experience and the money from the paid ransoms they had been able to double their efforts and improve their techniques. Anyone who was familiar with this topic affirmed that the only way to address the problem was to nip it in the bud and attack the pirates at their home base on land. However, it seemed that no government or international organization was aware of this. The problem stemmed from Somalia being a failed state, and obviously to carry out these attacks you would need to enter Somali waters and be in Somali territory. And without a visible head of state to obtain permission from, no government was going to face a possible contrary public opinion. Gotthelf

couldn't understand what people had against attacking the pirates except maybe the possible collateral damage to civilians. But therein was the key. They were too used to peace, there in Switzerland most of all, to accept a few foreign civilians as the only possible victims of a military operation; aside from the soldiers of course. One gets used to thinking that those in the military die because it's part of their job, but we also have to take them into account, right?

In any case, it was clear that nothing was going to be accomplished with the aid of only the western governments. The vice-president of the emergent Somali government, who didn't even control half the country, had talked to him several times. He seemed like a man suitable enough for his position and he had good ideas and initiative but nothing with which to carry them out. The Somali proposed many things, from an army that could take the country by force to naval or air raids. But no one seemed to listen to him. The western countries were too busy sustaining their ailing democracies to pay attention to the petitions of a government that was barely governing. And in this day and age besides governments, what is there? It had been a long time since the age of mercenaries even though some considered the glorious Vatican Swiss Guard as such. In the naval war they had also existed, what were they called? Corsairs. That's it. But it had been centuries since any corsair traversed the oceans. They were nothing more than memories of times gone by.

And suddenly everything was clear to him. It was a crazy idea but, why not? In any case, if he wanted to carry it out he needed someone well versed on the topic. But who? It was obvious no one in Switzerland would have that kind of expertise. He himself had never set foot on any of his ships. It had to be a foreigner. Gotthelf racked his brains, mentally searching through all those meetings, banquets, receptions and other events he had attended, and after a few minutes, "Marianne!" he yelled through the door at his secretary.

Marianne knew that when her boss forgot to use the intercom he had on his desk to call her he was either in a hurry or nervous so she quickly went into his office wondering what it was this time.

"Do you remember that reception a couple of months ago at the Hotel Alden?" he asked.

The young woman nodded. It had been the most important social event of the year and her boss, even though he wouldn't admit it, gave it much importance. It was one of the best places for doing business.

"I was talking to a Spaniard. I don't remember his name but I need you to find him. It shouldn't be too hard. He was one of the few Spaniards present and he didn't have a very important position. He was some sort of consultant."

Marianne nodded again and assuming her boss needed nothing else turned and headed for her desk.

She knew at that moment Gotthelf's eyes would leave his papers and turn to look at her, but she didn't care. Her boss was happily married, had two children, and all the right in the world to look lustfully at his young and sexy secretary who knew very well he would never cross that line. Besides, she only had eyes for her fiancé Jean-Paul, captain of the Swiss Guard and no need to have an affair with a magnate. Gotthelf was a good boss, he paid well and Marianne knew that as good looking as she was if she didn't do her job well he wouldn't have hired her.

And now to find the Spaniard. The task her boss had given her was a peculiar one, but that was exactly the kind of work that would break the monotony and she was always grateful for that. Marianne sat at her desk unaware that at that moment Gotthelf was thinking about how even her name exuded sensuality. Not that he'd do anything about it, of course.

#

"Good afternoon monsieur Reyes."

"Good afternoon Pierre."

The Hotel Rocco Forte in Brussels was the best in the city and Pierre was an old acquaintance.

"Something for me?" he asked as he handed him his key.

“Oui monsieur, you got a call from ... Alps Tankers,” Pierre said after looking at his note. “They didn’t leave a message, just this number.”

“Very well, thank you,” Reyes answered taking the piece of paper and heading for the elevator while he searched his memory. Alps Tankers ... The name was so obvious he didn’t need to think too much; the top Swiss crude supertanker company. The owner’s name was Golfhead or something like that. He had met him recently at a reception in Zurich. Friedrich Gotthelf was his name. About sixty, tall, obviously in great shape in his younger years, light-colored eyes, and hair that had once been blonde but was now mostly white. However, he didn’t bother dyeing it as most others did. The Swiss had been gracious and polite as any good businessman, but there was something in his eyes that said loud and clear: I am cold and calculating, good at what I do and yes, ... I’m a nice guy. An “old fashioned” guy was maybe a better way to put it. They had talked about nothing in particular for a while and then the magnate had moved on to greet some of the other guests.

What could the great Swiss magnate want from Jaime Reyes Luzón? In his mind Reyes went over the skills that had brought him to that hotel room not caring about the exorbitant prices. He had studied political science and immediately branched out to a Master’s degree in security and defense politics and naval subjects. He had been a consultant in various Spanish governments for both parties – at the precise level where you were considered important but you didn’t have to be affiliated to the party, and he wanted to keep it that way – and also in various international organizations: NATO, the UN, and the European Union. The names were all the same to him as long as the pay was good and he could do what he liked. No strings attached. Hence, his vast experience and reputation. But, what did that have to do with the Swiss shipping company?

Reyes decided that the only way to find out was to call. He had never avoided peculiar situations like this one and it had always gone well for him. Maybe he was getting ahead of himself thinking it was an opportunity. Maybe the call had to do with trying to sell him shares or to ask him where he had bought the tie he wore to the reception. The very, very wealthy have a tendency to be eccentric. But not Gotthelf. Their brief chat had been sufficient to reveal that detail. In that case it could only be a job offer and no doubt a well paid one. Gotthelf was the type of guy who valued a job well done and Reyes wasn’t the best at what he did by chance. But still, his thoughts brought him back to square one, what for?

Reyes’ rare skills were geared towards governments or international organizations not private enterprises. Reyes liked to think of himself as a modern strategist. Without a uniform, but designing the politics that helped the West maintain its control. Was Gotthelf a fan of military history who just wanted to share his visions regarding the world’s geostrategic position with a professional? Too far-fetched. And yet, as much as he searched he couldn’t come up with an adequate answer.

Here it goes, thought Reyes now in his suite and dialing the number Pierre had given him. Whatever it is I’m about to find out.

After a couple of rings someone picked up the phone and answered in a voice that he could only define as “sexy”.

“Mr. Gotthelf’s office, how may I help you?”

English ... an office accustomed to receiving international calls or a phone that had caller ID or any other explanation from a million of possibilities. He decided to respond in the same language, out of education and convenience. It was extremely unlikely that the sexy voice on the other side of the phone spoke Spanish and he was perfectly fluent in English, his neutral accent a result of intense and expensive practice sessions with people of various origins.

“Good morning, my name is Jaime Reyes Luzón, I received a call from you.”

“Oh yes, Mr. Reyes,” answered the sexy voice, “good morning my name is Marianne, Mr. Gotthelf’s secretary. Just a moment please, I’ll transfer your call.”

While Reyes pondered over how in each country his name was pronounced differently - and never entirely well - a few hundred miles southeast Marianne got up from her desk and went to her boss' office. She knew Gotthelf preferred face to face communication rather than the intercom.

"Mr. Gotthelf," she said, "Mr. Reyes is on the phone."

"Transfer him."

"Good morning," Reyes greeted him moments later.

"Good morning, my name is Friedrich Gotthelf from Alps Tankers. We met here in Zurich in the spring."

"Yes Mr. Gotthelf," said Reyes. "I remember very well. How are your wife and your two children?"

Reyes knew the memory exercise had been worth the effort. Everyone loved it when the person they were talking to remembered them, and what better proof of it than to mention the previous meeting or a known fact. Gotthelf must be secretly congratulating himself on his importance. To think that a man with whom he chatted for barely half an hour remembered him including his family even though he had briefly mentioned them. The magnate must be feeling as if he left an impression on Reyes and it was always good when your boss feels important. Even if he was, as of now, only a potential boss or maybe not even that.

"Very well, thank you," answered Gotthelf surprised. "I hope you as well," he said hoping Reyes couldn't tell that he couldn't remember whether he had family or not.

This also put Reyes at a slight advantage since Gotthelf seemed somewhat surprised and clearly would have liked to return such a courteous greeting in kind. And just as Reyes had anticipated and wanted Gotthelf didn't beat around the bush and got straight to the point.

"I have a project in my hands and would like to count on your advice."

"May I know what it's about Mr. Gotthelf?" answered Reyes not bothering to conceal his curiosity. He had not been able to figure out what Gotthelf wanted and frankly, he was dying to know.

"I would rather discuss it in person if you don't mind," Gotthelf replied.

"In order to do that Mr. Gotthelf, I might need certain particulars or papers and it would be impossible for me to get them in time if you don't give me a clue."

"Let's just say, Mr. Reyes, that lately I've been growing tired of the Jolly Roger," Gotthelf said, enjoying puzzling Reyes. "Can we meet?"

"I'll be there tomorrow. Have a good day," Reyes replied realizing Gotthelf had convinced him before even talking to him. After he hung up the phone he lay back on the plush bed in what he defined as the best position for thinking, supine with his arms stretched out at his sides.

So, pirates.

Suddenly everything made sense. Recently the magnate had paid a ransom for one of his oil tankers. Reyes couldn't remember the name but he knew they all had the names of mountains in the Swiss Alps. Anyway, the name was not important. This was not the first time Alps Tankers had paid a ransom to the Somali pirates. Meanwhile, an accusing little voice was telling him he should have remembered. The conscious part of his brain still had no revelation.

It was clear Gotthelf wanted to protect his ships but this wasn't a job for him. There were numerous companies dedicated to this type of problem as well as advisors with human resources and materials. Had Gotthelf mistaken his credentials? Not likely. Gotthelf was the kind of guy who was used to doing things well and not showing all his cards. If Gotthelf wanted to talk to him there was a reason even if he himself couldn't figure it out just yet.

In any case, Reyes decided as he sat in front of his laptop, I need to get up to date on the subject. He knew it wouldn't be hard. He had done this many times when he was with NATO and the European Union. Speaking of NATO, I need to make a few phone calls to let them know I won't be available for a while. Those were the perks of being the best. For Reyes, the ideal contract was one

that didn't tie him up definitively. Being able to come and go as he pleased was part of his personality and opened up opportunities such as this one.

While he purchased the ticket for the direct flight in the morning he couldn't help but remember the secretary's voice. Hopefully he'd get to meet her the next day. His subconscious had come to the conclusion that a voice like that could only be accompanied by a very nice body. And one of the advantages of being single at forty-two was that he could think about any pretty young woman guilt free. Who knows? He could maybe even flirt with her. He smiled remembering his player days.

#

He had always liked Switzerland. There were landscapes that looked like they were straight out of a movie. Either that or maybe half the scenes in movies were shot there. He loved Spain but the valleys surrounded by snow capped mountains, green meadows and blue skies couldn't be found in his Alicante of birth, or anywhere else in the world.

Reyes took advantage of the taxi ride from the airport to Zurich to mentally go over the information he had compiled the previous day. The three Swiss ship hijackings had all been similar. The pirates had attacked by night managing to get close to the sides of the enormous oil tankers with various skiffs which were supposedly launched from a mother vessel that had not yet been identified. It wasn't even known if it had been the same organization that had perpetrated all the attacks.

As soon as they had control of the tanker the pirates had set a course for Somali waters, specifically the south of the country, the zone that the government had no control over. In two of the instances the war ships that patrolled the zone had no time to react before the supertanker reached Somali waters. And in the other instance, the pirates had managed to take the ship without the crew even noticing until the next day when they revealed themselves. Either way, when the pirates took an oil tanker they would send a warning message on channel 16, the international marine emergency channel, threatening to shoot one of the hostages if any other ships approached the tanker.

In the first of the hijackings, which happened almost two years ago, a French frigate had approached the tanker to try to use the special operations team on board. Then the pirates had contacted them by radio and shot a hostage. When the French heard the shot and the screams over the radio they immediately aborted the operation. Luckily, they had shot the hostage in the leg and he was treated the next day without too many complications after the ransom was paid. However, since then no one had attempted to take a captured ship back by force.

The standard pirate procedure was to anchor the ship on some protected beach and wait for the ransom to be paid while they kept the hostages constantly at gunpoint to make sure no one tried to free them by force. In other cases, the pirates had made a mistake, and either an American, English, or French special operations team had taken advantage of it. But not in Mr. Gotthelf's case.

After getting paid, the pirates would flee leaving the hostages on board and threatening to blow up the ship if someone followed them. Shortly after, they would disappear in the chaos of the southern part of the African country. The bomb threats were not always true but no one was about to gamble with the lives of the hostages, and much less after having paid the ransom.

It was clear the pirates knew what they were doing. There had to be someone behind all the planning. He was sure of that. The improvement of their means came from the ransom money. But money means nothing unless you know where and how to spend it. What's more, their techniques were becoming increasingly refined. A few years ago no one would imagine a group of drugged Somalis taking a ship without alerting the crew, as if they were American Navy Seals. It was clear they were receiving more or less specific training, and that at least some of them were leaving their khat behind.

Another detail that the consultant had noticed was the speed with which Gotthelf would pay the ransoms. It was usually the next day. For a split second a crazy idea crossed his mind. Illegal associations between Swiss magnates and pirates to swindle insurance companies? But he quickly rejected the thought. The little he knew about Gotthelf was enough to think he wouldn't make alliances with pirates. Or so he thought.

Gotthelf was a man used to winning, but it was precisely because of that fact that he would also know perfectly well when he had lost and probably preferred to get rid of it immediately thus avoiding bigger troubles. However, three times in twenty months was too many and that's why he had decided to hire a consultant in the field of security and defense even though Reyes still hadn't been able to figure out what for.

Three times in twenty months. That was the other thing that had caught his attention. He had reviewed the rest of the hijackings in Somali waters and no other company had such great losses. In the instance of the only other supertanker that had been captured it had been a combination of the attackers' luck and the crew's incompetence. No one could figure out how the pirates, completely drugged, had managed to board the ship. Then, when they got to the bridge they had found the officer alone and asleep. He had sent the helmsman to bed. Reyes remembered how, completely bewildered, he had asked a friend from the Merchant Marine about the behavior of the officer and he had replied that even though it wasn't common, it wasn't the first time it's been heard of an officer sending his helmsman to bed and then falling asleep himself on the bridge. On that occasion the pirates had been so careless that they had beached the ship before anchoring it. The pirates, fishermen after all, who were used to seeing twenty-something foot long dugout canoes probably never imagined there were supertankers with a sixty-five foot draft.

And there had barely been captures of tankers that size. His curiosity piqued, Reyes had looked up the characteristics of Swiss ships, more than 980 feet in length and a beam of almost 165. He had also verified how the latest work on the Suez Canal allowed for the passage of these giants. It was clear that not everyone can pilot a ship with those characteristics. The pirates had to have someone with at least some basic training.

It was also true that Alps Tankers had the most ships fitting those characteristics in that area but still the ratio didn't quite make sense.

What was it about the Swiss shipping company that attracted efficient pirates? Was it just a fluke?

As he got out of the taxi Reyes was hoping the meeting with Mr. Gotthelf would shed some light on the matter.

#

Two hours later, cleaned up and changed, he was entering the elevator of Alps Tankers building and was pressing the button the receptionist had indicated. He was wearing a dark gray suit made by his tailor in Madrid, blue shirt with a red tie with white stripes and gleaming black Fratelli Rosetti shoes. Had it been a social occasion he would have worn a green tie to go with his eyes. He knew his eyes had charmed many a young woman when he was in his prime and even now they caught the attention of more than a few. As for the rest of his body, he thought dispirited, it had changed much more. Everyone noticed his age and he himself was no exception. Twenty or thirty pounds more made it so he didn't feel as confident at the beach, and wrinkles are not forgiving to anyone. He knew that if he didn't have his mother's eyes he wouldn't attract any attention. Fortyish man belly, medium stature, facial features common in Mediterranean Spain and dark hair. Of course, he took good care of himself, always clean shaven, hair combed and a touch of cologne, but he wasn't the same anymore.

In any case, Reyes thought, I'm not here to pick up girls. I'm here to do what I like and no one does it like I do.

As he exited the elevator there was a young woman waiting for him.

"Good morning Mr. Reyes," she greeted him. "Welcome. This way please."

Twenty-something, tall and thin, although he noticed thankfully as Marianne turned to go, not as thin as some women like to be. Blonde, blue eyes, clear skin and delicate features. She had on cute glasses, the kind that some call "sexy secretary glasses". She could have probably been a model if she had wanted to. She was the stereotypical Nordic woman many Latin men dream about. She was wearing a skirt, blouse and heels that said: I'm working, I'm a professional, but I still like to look good.

Reyes followed her through a wide hallway that was decorated with good taste and class. It was obvious Mr. Gotthelf liked taking care of himself and enjoyed the good things in life. Reyes thought he recognized the style of a famous painter in one of the paintings on the walls.

At the end of the hallway just after a desk with two computers and a number of telephones that must belong to Marianne there was a mahogany door at which the secretary called before entering. She announced in German, "Herr Reyes."

After that she stepped aside and let the Spaniard in. The office had the same style as the hallway. Reyes was sure it was worth more than his entire chalet on the outskirts of Madrid. And he also liked taking good care of himself.

At the back of the room behind an oak desk and sitting on a leather chair Gotthelf watched him collected. When he rose to greet him Reyes noticed the chair was custom made. He had heard about those but had never seen one. They would take the customer's measurements to get the shape of the body and then would make a chair to fit. For the owner it would be the most comfortable chair in the world, whereas for anyone else it would feel as uncomfortable as a torture chair. Reyes initially dismissed how expensive he thought he remembered they were but when he looked around the office he reconsidered. If there was a man who could afford it, it was Gotthelf.

"Welcome to Zurich Mr. Reyes! I hope you had a pleasant flight."

"Yes, it went smoothly," he answered.

Flying first class usually has that advantage.

"First of all, I want to apologize for asking you to get here so suddenly," the magnate said. "But if I'm not mistaken, you won't regret your decision."

"No worries," answered Reyes, "one gets used to traveling." And then he thought, and of course, you don't regret making me come here.

"I'm sure. Have a seat please," Gotthelf said pointing at one of the sofas on one side of the office. "Would you care for a drink?"

"Yes, thank you. Whiskey?"

Gotthelf stared at him for a second but gave him a glass without making any comment. He didn't drink anything.

Reyes was glad Gotthelf had chosen the sofas instead of the chairs with the desk in between. Without the physical obstacle of the desk and in the comfort of the sofas the conversation would be less formal. And with a superb whiskey in his hand it would be an absolute pleasure.

"Let me get to the point then," Gotthelf said. "I guess that after our conversation yesterday you know why you are here. I would like to hear your thoughts on the subject."

"Very well Mr. Gotthelf. Alps Tankers has had to pay three substantial ransoms within the last two years to save a few ships and crews that were captured by Somali pirates. You paid the ransoms promptly to avoid complications as was the case with the sailor in the first one, the Aletschhorn if I remember correctly.

Gotthelf nodded, encouraging him to continue.

"In all three instances the pirates have displayed means and abilities that until now have not been attributed to them and they have made no mistakes that we know of. This indicates that they have specialized training and direction. In addition, they have specific material and human means."

Gotthelf continued nodding while Reyes was getting to the point that both of them knew was baffling them.

"And for whatever reason or chance, your ships seem to be their preferred targets," Reyes finished, looking for some reaction on the face his listener.

But there was none. He would make a great poker player, Reyes thought.

"Up until now," Gotthelf said, "I'm in complete agreement with you. And forgive me if I'm congratulating myself but it's not every day one comes to the same conclusions as the greatest expert on the subject. The only thing I would add is that the prompt payments not only prevents casualties,

but also tons of crude spilled in the ocean and too much negative publicity for my company. I prefer to pay quickly so that those vultures from the news networks don't have time to have a feast at the expense of my tragedy. The oil sheikhs don't want to hear that their transporter has problems," he added. "Most of all, I appreciate that you, even though you haven't said it in so many words, also sense that there's something else besides pirates behind all this."

This time it was Reyes' turn to nod his head, and smile slightly. He liked the way the conversation was going. Gotthelf steered away from ambiguity and analogies, he spoke clearly and directly, wasn't afraid to speak his mind and looked you in the eyes when he did so.

"Well, Mr. Gotthelf," Reyes said. "Now that we have established some context I would like to know, what exactly is it you want from me?" he asked, anxious to finally know the reason for his possible recruitment. Rather, probable, he thought while he smiled inwardly.

Gotthelf smiled from ear to ear. It was funny how his eyes almost disappeared. Then he said, "I'm guessing you're a little lost." And when Reyes tilted his head slightly, he added, "Do you know what Morgan, Drake, Lafitte, Surcouf and your countrymen Íñigo de Artieta and Mateo Mainery have in common?"

Reyes, even more confused now than before had to say no, to which Gotthelf replied, "Neither did I, until just now. The truth is, I've never been a fan of history but when this idea popped in my head I did some research on the internet and found out that many years ago war wasn't limited to regular armies, there were also some men that were dedicated to fighting for money."

During the next few minutes he explained his idea like a child when he proudly shows off a new bike. When he finished he asked, "What do you think?"

"Well Mr. Gotthelf, it's certainly an unusual idea."

Reyes tried to think as quickly as he could.

"The first thing you will need," he continued, "is someone with knowledge of maritime and international law. You'll need to find out whether it can be done and if so, how? Second, you'll need someone who can provide you with a ship and crew, besides a clever mind to organize it all."

Gotthelf smiled.

"I was hoping that could be you," he said.

"Me?" Reyes exclaimed surprised.

He certainly hadn't seen it coming. During the last few minutes he was thinking Gotthelf wanted his opinion and then he would hire people to carry out the project. Reyes wasn't a doer. He was a thinker. He came up with ideas and others carried them out.

"You don't think you're the man for the job?" Gotthelf asked. He seemed to be able to read Reyes' mind. "Nonetheless, I think you're the ideal man. Obviously you've never done anything like this before but with your experience and knowledge on the subject I think you are, without a doubt, the best choice. Besides, as I'm sure you can imagine, my secretary has investigated you and I don't think anyone has more contacts than you do in the field where I need them. You have worked for practically every organization and government that could require your services. And judging from the contract offers you're still getting, you haven't exactly left a bad taste in anyone's mouth."

Reyes couldn't believe that for the second day in a row Gotthelf had convinced him before even speaking a word. Was it because it was Gotthelf, or was it due to the novelty of what he proposed? In any case, Reyes knew that in his search for new adventures and challenges he would never find one as appealing as this one.

"What do you say?" Gotthelf asked.

"I'm in," Reyes replied not missing a beat.

They shook hands smiling and Reyes couldn't help saying, "Mr. Gotthelf, when we talked earlier I said you would need a lawyer and a coordinator. However, you're also going to need a lot of money."

"This is a lot better than having to continue paying all those ransoms," Gotthelf said as he looked him in the eyes.

Reyes had to admit Gotthelf was right. Besides, he thought, money is probably going to be the least of our problems.

“Very well Mr. Reyes, I’ll be busy the rest of the day. How about we see each other again in the morning? That way you’ll have time to think and tomorrow we can make more definite plans. I went ahead and had my secretary give you an advance on your fees. I figured you wouldn’t turn down my offer. I hope you’ll be pleased.”

Reyes had no doubt it would be so and it must have shown in his expression because Gotthelf continued, “Tomorrow then. I hope you have a great day. And, welcome aboard!” he said in a theatrical voice obviously pleased with his pun.

Reyes was already headed for the door when he heard, “By the way Mr. Reyes, your stay here in Switzerland is on me. I hope you enjoy it.”

Reyes smiled and tilted his head slightly in acknowledgment. This was going to be fun.

#

The next morning, Reyes arrived on time at Gotthelf’s office wearing the same gleaming shoes but a different suit, shirt, and tie. He was on time, and full of uncertainties and questions. The day before, he had spent the afternoon thinking about Gotthelf’s plan. Admittedly, the plan was innovative, clever, and bold, but it was going to require a lot of work and improvisation. Worst of all, there were a lot of things he was going to need and he didn’t know how or even if they could be obtained. He was also aware of the fact that there were more things to do that he hadn’t thought about.

One of the conveniences of his job was that he didn’t need to spend the day in front of the computer. He had taken advantage of this to walk around the historic quarter. Streets like Bahnhofstrasse were proof of why the city’s third source of income was tourism. He also walked by the Grossmünster cathedral commissioned by Charlemagne a thousand years ago.

His first concern was the possible legal complications. Reyes hoped Gotthelf wasn’t expecting him to deal with legal matters as well. Of course, he had studied some law and knew more than was necessary to carry out his work. But what Gotthelf was proposing was so innovative that any government, organization or court would initially be reluctant.

They would need someone not only well versed in law but also bold and with the ability to do research on the laws of various countries. They might also need someone with the skills to negotiate with more than one government.

From the start, these had been the things that were outside of his field of expertise. The rest of the plan would be his responsibility. He had spent the remainder of the previous afternoon thinking about what would be his first and most important steps.

Obviously, the first thing would be the ship. It hadn’t taken him long to decide that probably the most adequate ship would be the type the navy used. Evidently they would have no need for the type of equipment used in high intensity conflicts such as 3D radars, missiles, and anti-submarine warfare systems. They needed an off-shore patrol vessel designed specifically for fighting piracy. A vessel with high cruising speed, good surface radar, lightweight and portable weaponry, a helicopter, and smaller fast boats with the capacity to transport a good boarding team.

Maybe he was being too ambitious but that was the only way to get anywhere. Like Joe Namath once said, “If you aren’t going all the way, why go at all?”

In addition to all that, they were going to need a shipyard to make the necessary modifications to the ship. This would be especially necessary if he was forced to go to plan B: convert a fishing or merchant ship. Initially, he had discarded that option because he knew it wouldn’t work. Complex things such as ships only perform well when they are used for the purpose that they were designed for. Besides, it would be nearly impossible for him to find a ship that met all the requirements he needed. It wasn’t as easy as mounting some sensors and weapons on a deck.

The last resort, an idea he almost dismissed, was to start from scratch. Design and commission the ship themselves. He knew that would take at least a few years and he was sure Mr. Gotthelf was not willing to wait that long.

Reyes knew he had come to a dead end. Both of the secondary options were impractical at best. As for the main idea, anyone with half a brain knew that Western navies don't go around selling their ships to private enterprises, much less their modern ships.

And that, thought Reyes as he entered the sumptuous office, was just the first of their problems. He hadn't even started thinking about the crew or supplies.

Gotthelf was waiting for him. He quickly introduced his companion.

"This is Ronnie Egger, my lawyer," he said. "I've been telling him about our idea and he thinks it can be done."

Egger was about five or six years younger than Gotthelf, short, chubby, and with a baker's face. The wrinkles on his face denoted he was a person who laughed easily, and something behind his glasses said, I'm friendly, likable; I like peace and quiet.

"Ronnie has been with me since I started my businesses," Gotthelf said. He's gotten me out of trouble more than once and even though he's never wanted to belong to a law firm, he has won all the lawsuits we've had. Maybe his loyalty has to do with how much I pay him," Gotthelf smiled. "Though I think it may have more to do with stability."

Reyes shook hands with the shyster, relieved to find out Gotthelf had been having the same thoughts. They needed a law professional. And if Gotthelf thought Egger was the man for the job, then he was probably right. After all, for the rest of the work Gotthelf had chosen him.

"I thought it would be appropriate that Ronnie was present. He'll need to know exactly what we plan to do. In addition, he can answer our legal questions."

I couldn't agree more, Reyes thought. No doubt he'll be a great help.

"So, you don't think we're crazy?" Reyes asked the lawyer. "You really think we can do this?"

"Obviously, it won't be easy," Egger answered. "We're going to have to do some digging around, maybe even some wheeling and dealing. And why not? Even nowadays there are companies like Blackwater and its successors that are dedicated to providing the type of services that could be defined as mercenary. Why not at sea? The first thing that came to mind when Mr. Gotthelf explained the plan to me was probably the same thing you thought about. We're going to need permission to work in Somali territory. And we'll also need a letter of marque."

Reyes smiled inwardly. He knew that if he hadn't had the foresight to look up the term he would have been caught unawares. But just the day before he had looked up how to say *patente de corso* in English.

"As you can imagine," the lawyer continued, "the European countries refused to hire corsairs, in the Paris Declaration of 1856 to be exact. And other countries also refused, such as the United States in the Hague Conferences in 1899 and 1907. Therefore, we can rule out any Western country's support of our proposed measures. If they were in favor of our ideas they would just carry them out by their own means."

Egger paused. It seemed he wanted to make sure they understood how complicated the situation was.

"It seems we've come to a dead end," the lawyer smiled. "However, we may be able to kill two birds with one stone."

Another pause.

"The Somali government is the only one that's able to give us not only the go-ahead to work within their territory, but also the letter of marque."

Once again Egger paused in a way that Reyes now understood as his way of making the subject more dramatic.

“No doubt gentlemen,” Egger continued once his audience had assimilated his proposal, “you may be asking yourselves if I’m forgetting that Somalia is, after all, a failed State and that the government barely has any power. Be that as it may, the new government is starting to be recognized by the Western countries. This, together with a little bit of positive publicity, will put the Westerners on our side and we won’t have any opposition at all. We need to show them that after all, Somalia is not doing anything other than protecting its own interests.”

Reyes was beginning to like Egger’s plan. But there was still a problem.

“Do we have the means to get in contact with and negotiate with the Somali government?” he asked Gotthelf.

Gotthelf smiled and said, “Leave that to me.”

And for the second time that morning, a feeling of relief. They had their law man and a negotiator for the upper echelons. It looks like now it’s my turn to put my hand to the plow, he thought.

Once the legal matter was resolved Reyes knew it was his turn.

“As far as I’m concerned Mr. Gotthelf,” he said, “I think I have a first draft of what we’re going to need.”

He went on to explain what type of ship he thought was ideal and the different options he was considering. To conclude he said, “I think my work here is done so, if it’s okay with you, I’ll return to Spain where I have the appropriate contacts for the work I’m about to do.”

Chapter Two

One week later, at his home in Las Rozas, Reyes closed his Mac Book exhausted. As soon as he had arrived in Madrid he had called all his contacts in the small world of naval construction. They weren’t few and until now he had not received one positive response. Some had given him the runaround as soon as they heard what he wanted. Others had promised to look into it and then had called him a few days later to tell him that what he wanted was not feasible. And the last group was made up of those who hadn’t replied yet.

At this point he was barely holding out hope. Everything had seemed so simple in Gotthelf’s office, or at least possible. But now he was facing the harsh reality. Pure logic dictates that the market doesn’t offer goods that have never been requested.

However, he wasn’t one to give up so easily and while he waited for good news or a brilliant idea he had moved on to the second part of his project: getting a crew.

Just like with the ship, common sense dictated that he would find the most qualified people in the military sector. But, same as with the ship he knew it wasn’t going to be feasible. He knew enough soldiers to know that their great sense of duty and service to their country would keep them from engaging in such an enterprise like the one he was proposing, especially the officers. Maybe he could convince a couple here or there but they wouldn’t be the best and he needed really good people.

He also knew that the most important ones were the captain and his officers. Most would want to select their own men. That was a good thing for two reasons: It would make for a united and committed crew. And second, it would relieve Reyes of an important burden of the job. A job he knew the future ship’s captain, if he ever found him, would be much better qualified than him to carry out. He was a strategist. He wasn’t used to working with such detail. And what better person than the one who was going to be in charge to select his own people?

It had been quite a few days since he had started looking for his future captain. After ruling out the military sector he had begun looking among the staff of shipping companies and related corporations with no success. Most of them had no experience in anything related. Which was, Reyes thought grimly, absolutely logical. Most of the very few that had experience (all of them from the Navy), had terrific contracts and awesome jobs that they were obviously not going to quit. The rest weren’t really good enough, or they were too old, or retired, or in one case, completely crazy.

For the first time since everything had started Reyes really thought that he was not going to make it. It was just too difficult.

However, he had never given up on something and this was not going to be the first time. That's why he kept looking and making phone calls, moving heaven and earth and even underground. He was sure that by now all of Spain knew he was planning on putting together a ship to take to Somalia and hunt pirates. Maybe a little publicity couldn't hurt, he thought.

That morning Gotthelf had called to inform him that the conversations with the Somali vice-president, whom he evidently knew, were going well and that Egger was starting to prepare drafts of the necessary documents. However, now they needed something more tangible in terms of the ship. In other words, they had done their part and the only thing left to do was his part.

Defeated and exhausted he went to bed. While he dozed off he thought that maybe the next day when his mind was fresh he would come up with a masterful idea.

#

At ten the next morning the previous night's hope had vanished completely. After getting up early, showering and having a breakfast of coffee and toast, he had tackled the work with lots of energy. But now two hours of negative results had put him in a bad mood. There was just no way.

Then the phone rang.

Expecting another negative response in a list that seemed never-ending he picked up the phone. "Yes."

"Good morning, Jaime Reyes? My name is Felipe Nieto from Navantia in Cadiz.

"Hello Felipe, it's me. How may I help you?"

Navantia in Cadiz. If he remembered correctly they had already responded with a resounding 'no' about a week ago. What could they possibly want?

On the other end of the line, a voice undeniably from Cadiz answered.

"Listen, when you told me about your project I honestly told you that we couldn't do anything for you. To tell you the truth, I got the impression you weren't surprised to hear that."

Reyes let him keep talking.

"But the situation has changed considerably. As I'm sure you know, Portugal is going through some bad economic times and it seems as if in the last few months it's gotten considerably worse."

Reyes remained silent. He still didn't see what all that had to do with this project. Felipe didn't seem discouraged by the silence and continued.

"The thing is that our neighbors canceled the payments on all three BAMs they had ordered and, I must add, almost finished."

Suddenly it seemed that time stood still. With that entire preamble, there must be a reason why they called him.

A million possibilities went through his head. BAMs (Maritime Action Ships) or Buques de Acción Marítima were Meteoro-class offshore patrol vessels designed in Spain. After the initial delivery of the first series to the Spanish Navy Portugal had ordered a few units from Navantia. And since the Spanish government benefited if the shipbuilders continued getting contracts, they agreed to sell their technology to those who, after all, were their allies and neighbors.

At just under three hundred and ten feet in length, reduced crew, capability to operate with just about any helicopter and a multitude of light weapons, it was the perfect ship for his project. And that was only what he could remember off the top of his head.

After pausing long enough for Reyes to assimilate the news, Felipe continued.

"After the shock from the news wore off a little I went to the director and told him about our conversation last week. He's willing to listen to your proposal and, maybe I shouldn't be saying this but, probably quite eager to get rid of those three ships."

Reyes couldn't believe his luck. He tried to calm himself and in doing so he realized that there may still be an obstacle to overcome.

"And what do you think Spain will say when they find out Navantia wants to sell their technology to a private company?"

"I have no idea," Felipe answered frankly. "But the director seems to think that the government will do anything to save the company. I don't think they want a bunch of people laid off with the elections right around the corner."

Reyes was positive he'd never had this much luck in his life.

"Will you tell your boss I'll be there first thing tomorrow?"

"Certainly."

#

Five hours later, and definitely feeling more relaxed, Reyes was sitting in his first class seat on the 3:37 PM train to Cadiz. He still couldn't believe his luck.

After a couple of phone calls to friends he could trust to confirm a few facts, he called Gotthelf in Switzerland and informed him he now had the perfect ship and that it was going to cost him less than one of his supertankers. Thank God BAM ships were relatively inexpensive. Items such as latest technology radars, combat systems (computers and hardware that control the weapons and sensors on board), missiles and sonar equipment, were what drove up the price of ships. But a patrol ship had no need for that kind of equipment. In spite of the price, Gotthelf had not even batted an eyelash. All he did was make sure that Reyes was certain it was the right ship and then all he had said was that, if that was the case, he agreed.

In spite of how much money Reyes knew that Gotthelf had, the ease with which he spent it still impressed him. Nevertheless, he was sure that Gotthelf was not a man who would squander his money. He knew what he wanted, and when he found it he didn't mind spending whatever it cost.

Reyes had no idea what to expect when he arrived at the Navantia branch in Puerto Real the next morning. But everything seemed to be heading in the right direction. What's more, with some luck he might even get a good deal if it was true that the shipbuilders were desperate for buyers.

As a way of disconnecting during the more than four hour long trip, Reyes looked around. Seated next to him was a thirty-something man reading the paper. Reyes observed the man discreetly. He wanted to have a pleasant chat to help pass the time. What the hell, even if he's an uninteresting bore, at least it will help me forget about ships for a while, thought Reyes.

Then he noticed his seatmate had a garment bag with the Navy's coat of arms. He looked at it again. He probably looked older than what he actually was and he had the permanent dark circles under his eyes of someone who has spent years standing watch. His hair was short and he was meticulously clean shaven, shirt, chinos and boat shoes. Something about his gaze and the way his brow was furrowed gave the impression he was someone used to making decisions. In fact, he exuded self confidence. Everything indicated he was a Navy Officer. All that from just a look? Why, of course. There are things one learns to notice with experience.

"Are you a seaman?"

The man closed his newspaper and looked at him surprised but not upset.

"Huh? Yes."

"I'm sorry, it's just that I've always been fascinated by your line of work. Where are you going?"

There's no better way to strike up a conversation than by complimenting someone.

"Oh, no worries," he said. "It's nice to know someone appreciates what we do. Right now I'm the captain of the patrol boat Tabarca."

If he was not mistaken, Tabarca was a small, old patrol boat one of the last in a class where most had been decommissioned. However, the captain was a Navy Lieutenant (which would rank him as an Army Captain) and very few of that rank commanded ships. He must have been very good.

Reyes decided to lighten up the conversation to break the ice.

"What did you lose in Madrid? I doubt you ran your ship into the Manzanares River."

The Lieutenant smiled.

"No, I'm coming back from a court case."

Gauging from the way he answered, Reyes could tell the Lieutenant didn't want to talk about it. If he had to bring his uniform along it was probably official business and more than likely unpleasant. But his smile indicated that he was willing to talk so Reyes decided to continue chatting.

By the time they were passing Cordoba, Reyes found out that Nacho Marzán Febles, was born 34 years before in Cartagena. His father was a retired Rear Admiral and his mother was a housewife. He was the second oldest of five brothers, of which the oldest was also a seaman. He was happily married and had two young daughters. He was going to Cadiz for personal reasons (his ship was in Marin, Pontevedra). To be exact, he was taking advantage that he had gone to Madrid to visit his father who had just had surgery, thank God, successfully.

Nacho turned out to be the perfect seatmate. They were having quite an enjoyable and pleasant conversation. Up until now Reyes had managed to avoid talking about his work. But he knew that wouldn't last until they reached Cadiz. Finally Nacho asked him, "So, what do you do?"

Reyes wasn't sure he wanted to talk about it but deep down he was curious to get an objective opinion. Besides, he thought, none of what we're doing is a big secret and, who knows? Maybe he'll have something useful to contribute.

So he decided to tell Nacho about his project, sparing no details, ending with this trip and the possible reward waiting for him.

When he heard the story Nacho's eyes opened wide in amazement and he asked Reyes if he was really thinking about getting a BAM and if it was really possible. After Reyes convinced him it was true, but also making sure he highlighted that nothing was sure, Nacho got lost in thought a few minutes.

After he thought in silence for a while he congratulated Reyes on his plan and his luck. He also said he agreed with the strategy and, being a practical man, he asked an obviously logical question, "What about the crew?"

Reyes decided he was starting to really like this guy and decided to be upfront with him.

"I have nothing yet."

Afterwards, he explained his approach and Nacho nodded in agreement. But when Reyes told him about how he was going about finding a captain, he smiled and shook his head.

"What's wrong?" Reyes asked puzzled.

"Are you really going to find the man who's going to lead a group of strangers on a new and dangerous enterprise by just looking at some papers? Maybe you haven't noticed, but probably ninety percent of the success of this plan depends on your selection. And you aren't even going to meet the guy before you hire him?"

Even though Reyes didn't like his work being criticized, deep down he knew Nacho was probably right.

"What do you suggest? So far I haven't been able to find a candidate that's even worth interviewing," he said defending himself.

Nacho smiled and became pensive.

"Maybe when you find out who it is you will say it's favoritism, but I think I know someone that might interest you."

"Who are you talking about?" Reyes asked his curiosity piqued.

"My little brother is a Merchant Marine Officer. He doesn't have specific experience but he's always been very linked with the military field. In fact the reason he's not in the Navy is because he's always been an adventure seeker, and the Navy was never challenging enough for him. He's in Cadiz right now, and unemployed. If you're interested, I can call him and you can have a beer together. If you don't want to feel obligated, I don't have to tell him you're looking to hire someone."

It had been difficult for Reyes to step back into his professional self, but once he got past it he thought about the proposal carefully.

What had impressed him initially was the way in which Nacho had proposed the idea. Anyone else would have overwhelmed him trying to get a job for their brother. But this guy seemed to be merely proposing a solution to his problem notwithstanding the benefit to his family member.

Reyes decided to accept. After all, he had nothing to lose.

#

“Good morning Mr. Reyes. It’s so nice to meet you.”

“Good morning Mr. Guerra. It’s nice to meet you too.”

At 56 years old, Miguel Guerra Méndez was the manager of the shipbuilding company Navantia, formerly Izar and Bazán. Reyes hadn’t heard much about him. All he knew was that Guerra was a naval engineer who had developed his career within the company.

That, thought Reyes, could be very good or very bad. He could be a man who knew his business inside and out (from the engineer’s point of view) and who had learned from experience exactly what the company needed. Or it could be that the man’s lack of experience as a businessman would eventually catch up with him.

Reyes was hoping that whatever it was it would help him accomplish his goal.

“I hope you had a nice trip over from Madrid,” Guerra said.

Why did he get the impression that all the conversations that were going to have an impact on his future began the same way? Nobody really cared how his trip had been. It was just a simple way to break the ice.

“It was good, very good. The trains keep getting better.”

“That’s true,” the manager agreed, suggesting he also often traveled to Madrid.

He’s not comfortable, Reyes thought. He seems to be playing a role he doesn’t like. Something told him that Guerra was more at home with his plans and models than with negotiations and financial affairs. And probably politics didn’t appeal to him much either.

It looked like the typical case of an executive almost running a business into the ground and then abandoning it, thus forcing the company to find a replacement. The company, leery of entrepreneurs and strangers places one of their own in charge. Maybe Guerra was the most qualified for the job, but he still didn’t seem comfortable in the position.

This is going to be interesting, thought Reyes.

“Well, Mr. Guerra, I don’t want to take up too much of your time,” he said.

A practical man would appreciate that subtlety.

“The man I represent,” he continued, “Mr. Friedrich Gotthelf, is interested in acquiring a ship with similar characteristics to a BAM. His starting offer is sixty million Euros. For anything above that amount I will have to consult with him and get his approval.

After thinking about it the night before, this strategy seemed to be the best. He was offering a fairly low price, like any good haggler, but not so low as to discourage negotiation. In addition, when playing the card of needing Mr. Gotthelf’s authorization he gained valuable time to study their counteroffer and plan his response accordingly. It really was all bluff. He virtually had carte blanche to negotiate.

“I’m glad to see you don’t like beating around the bush. However, I must tell you that I can’t accept your offer. With what you’re offering I can scrap the ships, sell them for parts and get more out of them.”

This is going to be interesting, thought Reyes. Guerra was not a fool. He knew how to negotiate and probably thought, if he didn’t already know for sure, that it was practically the only chance Gotthelf had for carrying out his innovative project.

After a long morning of negotiations, offers and counter offers, make-believe calls to Switzerland and tedious renegotiation, the two men reached an agreement over ninety million Euros. Reyes knew that Gotthelf would not have minded paying double that amount, but that was no reason to throw money away.

In addition, throughout the morning a light bulb had gone off in his head and he had added a condition to his requirements. The final agreement included the use of the shipyards for whatever small remodeling work he thought necessary. Reyes knew that for the Spanish company that was the only way to keep many of its employees working and not have to resort to laying them off. While for him, it was the solution for another small problem. He had not only acquired a boat, but also the means and staff better qualified to finish it according to his specifications.

Excited, he called Mr. Gotthelf (this time for real) to give him the good news. He seemed delighted and congratulated him on his progress. He also informed him that contacts with the Somali government remained satisfactory and that Egger had recommended that the ship navigate under a Somali flag to avoid problems and facilitate some legal aspects. Reyes had no objections to the idea. In the world of merchant shipping it was not unusual to sail under flags that had nothing to do with the nationality of the company, the owner, the captain, or home port.

Lastly, Mr. Gotthelf gave him a responsibility he had not anticipated.

“Well, Mr. Reyes, you found the boat, you may have the honor of naming it.”

That was something Reyes had not anticipated. He could not help but smile at the thought of how something that seemed so trivial would probably take him just as long to do as some of the major tasks.

Once back with Guerra, he decided to tackle what seemed to be the last hurdle.

“Mr. Guerra, up until now you and I have reached an agreement on a ship that your company has built. However, that ship is riddled with technology developed in cooperation with the government. Do you have some sort of plan to get a permit for selling it to private buyers?”

Guerra smiled with the air of someone who’s already thinking three steps ahead.

“Let’s just say that bridge’s is already been crossed,” he said. “Spain can’t afford to lose its only military shipyards nor generate thousands of layoffs. I have obtained permission to sell the technology on the condition that it will never be used against Spain or any of its allies. If so, the sales contract would be immediately revoked without possibility of a refund.”

Reyes could not ask for more.

“I just have to ask you,” the engineer said, “to give your project some positive publicity. It won’t hurt, and let’s just say the government would like its citizens to know that the technology that has been developed with everyone’s money is going to be used to do good.”

And that was not a very indirect way of saying that the government wanted to make sure they had public opinion on their side.

Reyes knew that Guerra was right, and that some publicity was certainly not going to do them any harm. He imagined the government would present this sale as an excellent way out of a somewhat complicated situation. As far as he was concerned, he knew exactly who he had to call to get a couple of pages in a national newspaper. Inflow of foreign capital, generating and maintaining jobs, and the possible eradication of damages inflicted on innocent people by evil pirates, were the perfect arguments to convince anyone.

“Splendid Mr. Guerra! It has been a pleasure doing business with you. In a few days you will hear from me with the modifications I have in mind.”

And with that, Reyes said goodbye, looking forward to an afternoon off to celebrate the strides his project had taken.

Then he remembered he had an appointment.

#

Pablo Marzán Febles’ phone rang.

“It’s Nacho,” he told his brother Javi before answering.

“What’s up Nacho?”

After listening for a couple of minutes he replied, “All right, I’ll be right there.”

After putting his phone away he looked up and met the quizzical look of his older brother.

“He wants me to meet someone. He didn’t tell me who it is or what he wants but he hinted at maybe having a job for me. Apparently they met on the train,” he said, making a face to indicate he didn’t know what to make of it all.

Pablo watched his brother carefully. He had always been a role model and a source of good advice. Even then, at thirty-three years old, sitting on the sofa in his older brother’s living room and drinking coffee after the amazing dinner they had just had, Pablo was surprised at the influence Javi had on his life.

The oldest of the Marzán Febles brothers was thirty-nine; married, with three kids. He had become a Navy officer following his father’s footsteps. He was already a lieutenant commander and was assigned as a teacher at the nearby NCO School in San Fernando.

He had always had great drive and enthusiasm for his work, but over the years he had become disillusioned with it. The lack of real-life operations and the enormous political restrictions on the ones that had taken place had disappointed him. Besides, he had discovered a second passion: teaching, which he was doing at present. Having a family also played a part in the fact that now he only asked assignments on ships as commanding officer or to meet the minimum years of embarkation required for promotion.

From what Pablo knew and had heard, his older brother was really good at his job and truly believed in the Navy, but not in how it was used. When the youngest boy was a teenager, Javi’s influence, even more than that of his father, had made him want to enroll in the Naval Academy, the training center of naval officers. However, some comments from his brother and idol disconcerted him and he had decided to talk to him.

He could still remember every detail of that long chat. His brother had not been long out of school, but was beginning to realize that it had not been exactly what he had expected. It’s not that he regretted his choice because he had always wanted to serve Spain, but he also knew that his chosen career would have very frustrating moments.

As the responsible, older brother he had wanted to convey all this to young Pablo in that conversation. He never discouraged or tried to influence his decision. No one better than he knew that the military offered economic security, albeit not luxurious, but it was something to be thankful for. It also provided opportunities to travel and to live quite unique experiences. And he never criticized. He devoted himself to show Pablo objectively all those things that only could be seen from the inside.

But that was enough for young Pablo. He knew it wouldn’t have discouraged the others, like his brother Nacho, the second of the five, who also eventually followed in his father’s footsteps. But Pablo was different. He always had a need to try new things and feel useful. Maybe even be special, though that may have been the result of being the youngest of five brothers.

Because of all that Pablo had made the decision to become a merchant marine. He had done his research and had learned that there was more to it than just taking ocean liners across the seas. It would allow him to keep in contact with the sea, which fascinated him so much, and would open the doors to adventures he only dreamed of having.

Even after all these years, he often relived in his mind the day he decided to join the Merchant Navy and not the Navy. And yet, there were days when he wondered if he had made the right choice.

Like all careers, his also had its ups and downs. He had done it all. Fishing and transport, sailing and motor, routine routes like the Ceuta Ferry, which he had become bored with, and amazing navigation such as the one around Cape Horn on a 130 foot double mast sailing yacht.

Had it been worth it? Maybe he’d never know. Did the incomparable experience of going around Cape Horn on a sailing yacht make up for all the time he had been unemployed, or had a horrible job? Fortunately, with time and experience he had carved himself a small niche in the world and it wasn’t hard for him to find work.

He knew what his parents would have preferred. He also knew that no one in his family would be proud of him if they knew some of the things he had to do. There were times he had been well aware

of the illegality of actions that he had deemed necessary to take in order to fulfill some contracts. Of course, he himself cringed when he recalled the trucks going off into the darkness. Truckloads of packages labeled “FRAGILE” that had been unloaded on the beach just a few minutes before from the ship under his command. Furniture? Jewelry? Exotic animals? He was sure they weren’t drugs, but that didn’t ease the shame of the memory. Coldly considering it, the adventure of approaching a beach at night, everything turned off, was unique. But it wasn’t exactly one of the qualifications that were required from an officer or captain.

Sometimes he couldn’t help thinking he’d imagined a life as a sailor too fantastic and impossible to fulfill. A life based on books with storylines from the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Pablo smiled to himself. Javi had also been the one who had introduced him to the books he loved.

While he got lost in his memories, his brother seemed to have been thinking about Nacho’s call, and just limited himself to point out that he had nothing to lose.

Pablo knew that his older brother, as always, was right. After thanking him for the invitation to dinner - it was funny how their frequency increased when he was out of work - he left with the very faint hope that the stranger who Nacho wanted to introduce him to had something interesting to offer. Although he may have quit some jobs out of sheer boredom, he couldn’t stand being out of work.

#

“Reyes, this is my brother Pablo. Pablo, this is Jaime Reyes Luzón.”

Nacho had chosen the bar Terraza with its tables right in the Cadiz Plaza de la Catedral. The three sat down and each ordered a beer.

Nacho, having arranged the meeting, began the conversation.

“Reyes has an interesting project that he was telling me about on the train. I gave him my opinion, but when he learned I had a brother in the Merchant Navy he wanted to meet you to find out where we differ.”

Reyes needed no further introduction and explained his plan in detail to the young seaman. He intentionally left out the part about the crew. Pablo just nodded and asked a couple of specific questions. When Reyes finished his story, Pablo fell into a long silence. Then he broke it to say, “I think it’s a great idea, but it has a couple of weak points. First, the crew; for what you are proposing you will need professionals and those can only be found in the Navy,” he said nodding to Nacho.

“Second, the legal aspect; you have not yet said anything about how you intend to obtain permits to operate in Somali waters.”

Reyes nodded in agreement.

“As for the ship, it lacks cruising and top speed. If I’m not mistaken,” Pablo said looking at his brother, “the BAM have a top speed of twenty to twenty-two knots. That may not be enough to chase one of those mother ships or to reach the site of the incident on time. In addition, you have a ship capable of operating helicopters, but no helicopter. I’m no expert, but flight operations on ships are not as simple as they seem,” he said looking at his brother again, who had no choice but to agree with him. “And it’s clear that the helicopter is key.”

Reyes was already impressed that someone with no specific experience knew so much and had such a clear grasp on the matter.

The youngest of the three continued, “Speaking of the helicopter, a pilot trained to land on ships is not easy to find. As for the boat, there is a lot of equipment and devices that you’re not going to need and that take up space you could make better use of. If I’m not mistaken,” he continued turning to look at his brother, “BAM have a three inch cannon mounted on them and I cannot imagine a situation where you might need that in Somalia. I would trade it for something with smaller caliber but more accuracy. I’m also thinking about the electronic warfare equipment or some redundant equipment that the Navy carries that is not entirely necessary. And finally, what the Navy calls boarding team, that is, the team that’s responsible for boarding, searching and possibly seizing other ships. That’s probably the most important part, since they would be the ones carrying most of the offensive responsibility

in the operation, the spearheads if you will. They will be handling ninety percent of non-deterrent operations. You will need people with specific training and someone very good with plenty of cold blood to lead them. I would also try to get one or two sharpshooters to place on the upper decks of the ship.

“Amazing! You seem to be quite a specialist on the subject,” was all Reyes managed to stammer, overwhelmed as he was.

“My father and my brothers only talk about work. And I can’t deny that I like it. Besides, I subscribe to several naval magazines and I don’t know if my brother told you I almost joined the Navy as well.

Reyes quickly regained his professional demeanor.

“I understand you’re out of work and, as you know, I don’t have a crew. I would like you to be the first member and my right hand man during the preparation period. I cannot promise you command, but I can promise you will at least be one of its officers.”

Pablo was caught off guard. With all the talk, he had forgotten that his brother had hinted that Reyes might have a job for him. And he certainly had not thought about going away from home for an indefinite time, at least not just then.

“I need to think about it,” he said.

“Of course,” Reyes replied, not suspecting Pablo’s reply in the least.

But Nacho was somewhat surprised and he watched his little brother wondering.

Reyes had allowed himself to get carried away by a hunch. But now, thinking calmly, the young sailor had proven to know even more than some professionals in addition to having an analytical mind. Besides, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Maybe he would never get another chance like this one.

“One last question,” Pablo said. “What’s its name?”

Reyes smiled. He had no idea what was it about the Marzán brothers that made them so likable.

“I was hoping you could help me christen it.”

This time it was Pablo’s turn to smile.

“If we end up working together, I think I have the perfect name.”

#

A few days later, Nacho and Javi went out into the garden of Javi’s house bringing drinks and appetizers. Just beyond the table, his back to the door leading to the house, Pablo was on the phone. Judging by his gestures and tone of his voice, he was arguing with someone.

“Do whatever the hell you want!” raged the youngest of the brothers to the device before hanging up.

Turning around and seeing Nacho and Javi, his face quickly went from anger to embarrassment, and then an attempt at innocent neutrality. But his brothers knew him from birth.

“Who were you talking to?” Javi asked, in a tone of naive ignorance.

“A girl,” Pablo replied, without looking at his brothers.

Javi and Nacho looked at each other and smiled. The baby of the family had always been very leery of relationships. He had only introduced one of his girlfriends to the family, but everyone knew that there had been several more.

“Well,” Javi said, partly to avoid an awkward silence and partly because he was dying of curiosity. “What are you going to do with the job they offered you?”

“Accept it,” Pablo said matter-of-factly.

His brothers smiled.

“When were you going to tell us?”

I just decided two seconds ago, thought Pablo.

Chapter Three

“Mohammed!”

The man being called quickly went to his boss' office. There was no mistaking the deep roar he had in his voice. It always seemed on the verge of breaking, but he always finished his sentences.

"Yes, Sir?"

"Did you take care of Mukhtar?"

"Yes, Sir. We paid them and I have given him the necessary instructions so that they will be available again in a couple of weeks."

"Good," he growled. "He'd better not disappear or try to pull a fast one. Are they being watched?"

Mohammed nodded.

"There are lots of freebooters in Somalia," continued his boss. "But this kid is special, and after everything we've spent training them, I don't want to lose them and have to start from scratch. Are you sure he doesn't know who you are?"

"Absolutely, Sir. We've never seen each other, and I've led him to believe I represent a Western insurance company."

"Very well, no one can link us to them. No one, do you understand?"

Mohammed nodded fervently.

#

Pablo and Reyes sat in Guerra's office waiting room. The previous day they had begun working and had been discussing possible modifications to the ship.

They had both decided to propose their requirements to the shipbuilders and let them come up with the solutions. After all, that was their job. Pablo had insisted on speed. BAMs, as the Navy had conceived them, had two great advantages: autonomy and low fuel consumption. With twin screw propellers, one on the port side and one on the starboard side, and a diesel engine for each shaft, they could reach a maximum speed of twenty knots without excessive expense. In addition, each shaft also had an electric motor that got its energy from the power generation system on board (four generator motors), which had very low fuel consumption.

However, Pablo wanted a faster boat, and Reyes didn't think Gotthelf would mind the extra expense. Neither of them was an expert on the subject, so they wanted to present the problem to the engineers and see what solution they offered. Pablo was hoping just a minor modification would be enough since he knew that a major change to the propulsion plant could delay the delivery date of the ship considerably.

He also knew there was another option. One that was used by the Navy to propel their escort ships: gas turbines. Derived from aircraft engines, turbines provided much more power and were generally more reliable, but their fuel consumption was through the roof. Besides, he had never heard of such a small vessel ever being propelled by turbines because space could be an issue.

The other means of propulsion used by the Navy was nuclear, but that was completely unfeasible. Only the large submarines, cruisers and aircraft carriers of some navies used it.

As far as weapons, they had been discussing the usefulness of a 3-inch gun. Reyes maintained that it was a very important deterrent, but Pablo insisted that they needed a weapons system that would provide them accuracy above everything else. For him, the ability to hit a small and fast target from relatively far away was essential, while firepower was much less important. He was tired of reading about incidents in which the inability to discern whether the shot would hit the outboard motor or the pirate ended up in not being able to open fire.

BAMs were by far the Navy's ships that were better equipped for this kind of scenario, with two 25 mm machine guns remotely operated from the combat information center (adjacent to the bridge), and controlled by an electro-optical fire control system (basically a camera and a computer for the computations), a laser range finder, and a fire control radar¹. In addition, the associated camera could be used for search and track purposes. They also had planned to bring numerous small arms on board. However, Pablo wanted that kind of precision in all his weapons.

In any case, they had decided to voice their concerns to Guerra to find out if he could come up with any solutions, and Reyes had called a friend in the world of naval armament to see if he knew of anything that could help them.

They had also decided to give Guerra a list of the unnecessary equipment and asked him to give them a series of proposals on how to maximize space utilization. In addition to what Pablo had said when they met, they thought they also would not need some of the communications equipment, especially that which was specifically for military use.

Finally, Pablo thought it was necessary to have an extra RHIB just in case. The boat had two, with specific stowage places and lifting cranes to lower them into the water, but in a somewhat long mission if one of them broke down it could leave them high and dry. It wouldn't be a bad idea to store one in case they needed it. They had also raised the possibility of a faster launching system like the ones the US Coast Guard used. This consisted of a small jetty or beach in the stern of the boat from which to drop the RHIB into the water. The problem was the practicality of the work at this stage.

A few minutes later, Guerra invited them into his modest office. Nothing like Gotthelf's, Reyes thought. After they shared their concerns, his first reaction was not entirely positive, as this could pose a significant workload. However, he immediately reacted recalling that, after all, they were his clients. Then, Reyes and Pablo could see his face light up as he got to work. It was clear what part of his job he truly enjoyed.

"Well gentlemen," the engineer said. "I'm glad to see that you have thought about it and that you know exactly what you want. As you know, what's going to give us the most trouble is the propulsion system. I will raise the issue to that department and see what they tell us. In any case, here in Puerto Real we only work with diesel engines, as for the turbine, which by the way strikes me as very ambitious, we would have to contact our branch in Ferrol. And what's more, acquiring a turbine is always more complicated than a diesel. Virtually only Rolls Royce and General Electric make turbines for ships."

"As for the cannon," continued Guerra, "I can try to get something from the arms companies that we usually deal with but I have no record of anything like what you're asking for, either in Spain or abroad. Removing some of the equipment and the extra RHIB shouldn't be a problem."

Reyes took the floor, "Excellent Mr. Guerra! We'll let you get back to work. We'll keep in touch, but if anything comes up please call me with any news. And when you can, please give me an estimate of when the boat will be ready."

"Will do."

The two men were heading towards the door when Reyes recalled the other decision they had made.

"Oh, one last thing. We will call it Albatros."

#

A couple of hours later, Reyes and Pablo addressed the next issue, the crew. Reyes, the methodical man that he was, wanted to organize the work before they began.

"What do we need?" he asked almost rhetorically. "What is of most importance?"

Pablo thought a moment and replied, "Given the direction of the enterprise we're about to undertake, I think it makes sense to base our crew on a military model. In that case, it's clear we should begin with the officers. It takes at least three that are trained to keep watch on the bridge and who could also take the lead in the different departments or divisions. We can also adopt these three divisions from the Navy: Deck and Navigation (including communications), Operations (sensors and weapons), and Engineering. We also need someone to take care of procurement and habitability, and a doctor or at least a watchful nurse. Finally, we need one or two helicopter pilots, even though we don't yet have a chopper, and a leader for our boarding team. I don't think we've left anything out."

"No, I think you've thought of everything," Reyes smiled, thinking that without Pablo he'd be rather lost. "And how do you suggest we go about finding them?"

“Good question.”

Pablo stopped to think for a moment and just when Reyes feared he would not come up with an answer he said, “I only have experience with seamen, so if you trust me, I’ll take care of the deck officers. You’ll have to handle the rest, though I’ll help you when I can.”

Reyes thought it was a great proposal but he had no idea how he would address his tasks.

“Sounds good. In that case, I’ll go to Madrid to find a pilot, a doctor, an accountant or at least a bookkeeper, and someone skilled in hand to hand combat. Am I forgetting anything?”

“I don’t think so,” Pablo replied.

“As I said, I’ll call you when I have a suitable candidate so you can give me your opinion. I suggest you do the same.”

“Perfect.”

#

A couple of days later, Pablo and Nacho were again at the Terraza, this time accompanied by Javi. Pablo had invited them out for some beers with the excuse of his new job, but his real purpose was to find out what his brothers thought. He valued their opinion both professionally and personally.

Sometimes, his relationship with his brothers surprised him. He didn’t know of anyone who at their age continued being as close with their siblings as they were. They kept in contact as much as they could, which, given their lines of work, was less than what they would have liked. But each one of them knew he could count on the others anytime he needed anything.

Everyone felt at home at the other’s houses, and Pablo’s sisters in law had become his new sisters, while his nephews had become a mix of his own children and much younger siblings.

Every time he thought about it he couldn’t help thinking that Mom and Dad must have done something right.

There were the three, so different and yet so similar. Physically they were alike, tall and strong, swarthy skin and hair, dark eyes, and the three resembled both their mom and dad. Javi was the one who looked most like Mom’s side of the family and was chunkier. Nacho was an almost exact mix of the two, but with Mom’s facial expressions and Pablo looked more like Dad, but he didn’t have his personality. Javi had inherited his mom’s traits. Like her, he was not very organized but quite intuitive and perhaps somewhat smarter than others and as a result of five years of Naval School, he was also responsible, intelligent and practical. Nacho was similar but more serious and less free-spirited. Pablo also had all those traits, but in him, they were spiced by an insatiable hunger for change and adventure. Maybe that's why they were the naval officers but he... well, he still wasn’t quite sure exactly what he was.

His other two brothers, Pedro and Jorge, were economist and P.E. teacher, respectively. Pedro was the quietest and least active of the five but, as always, he managed to find a job that paid amazingly well and didn’t require much effort on his part. Jorge, who was built like a tank, had always wanted to be a seaman, but after his teenage years, he realized he loved children and teaching. Thus, he had become a terrific P.E. teacher that kids adored, and led a simple life that made him very happy.

Pablo had a very good relationship with Pedro and Jorge, but nothing compared to what he had with his older brothers. He didn’t know what it was. Whether it was the passion for the sea or the desire to serve Spain or a higher purpose, or any of those things that their jobs had in common, but they just got along.

That was why he was now sitting on a terrace with the two men whose opinion he respected the most. He still remembered the best thing about finishing his career and becoming a seaman was the pride he felt being allowed to belong to his brothers’ prestigious club. Sometimes their father presided, but it was usually composed of just the three of them. Dad had to maintain a more impartial relationship with the rest of the family, but the three of them couldn’t help huddling together at every family event.

He couldn't put it into words but it was a very strong bond based on shared experiences at sea and in the command of men.

Javi left his mug on the table as he savored his drink and said, "Well Pablo, it seems your dreams have finally come true. Thank God, because very few people with such complicated dreams ever see them fulfilled. Man, you're like the Cristiano Ronaldo of the seamen."

Pablo smiled. He knew his brother was genuinely happy for him and that he may even be a little envious. Javi never regretted having become a Navy officer, but he had always dreamed of the opportunity to do something like this. Someone once said that servicemen are peaceful but not pacifists. As a general rule, they don't want to start a conflict. They know better than anyone else of their negative consequences but they're not against the use of force if necessary. He also knew, because of his brothers, the struggle felt by having, on the one hand, the dream of defending your country against the enemy, and on the other the hope that your nation will not go to war.

Nacho probably felt the same way, but he was not as disillusioned as Javi. Besides, he was commanding, the goal and dream of every seaman and therefore, delighted with his work at the moment.

It was ironic. Probably every commander and officer in the Navy dreamed of going to Somalia with the kind of orders that Albatros was going to have.

"Well, there's still much to be done, and my role in this remains to be seen," Pablo said, somewhere between cautious and humble.

"How did it go the other day?" Nacho asked.

"Really well," answered Pablo. "After agreeing on the changes we wanted to make to the boat we went to Navantia and talked to the manager. I don't know how much that Swiss guy is paying but we were treated like kings. All smooth sailing and to top it off they were all helpful and friendly."

"I'm still amazed at your luck," Javi smiled as he took another sip of his beer. "I just hope they treat you better than us. If not, forget about having that boat ready in less than fifteen months."

Being a seaman and criticizing the shipbuilders went hand in hand like Bonnie and Clyde. Pablo also feared that a delay on the Puerto Real dockyard would end the project before it ever began.

"Now what?" Nacho asked. "Just wait?"

"No," laughed Pablo. "My new boss has gone to Madrid to find a pilot, a doctor, an accountant, among others. Meanwhile, I have to find three guys able to act as officers on the bridge and, if possible, lead a department like yours: A chief engineer, an operations officer, and a head of the deck and navigation department."

"Wow!" Javi couldn't help exclaiming. "I hope there's a shortage of doctors and pilots in Madrid because otherwise, I don't see how you're going to find your three guys before your boss finds his."

Pablo thought the same but at least this way he had some options. If he had to get all the other officers as well, he would have been completely lost.

"This is better than having to find doctors and pilots," he said, defending himself.

"You have a point," Javi said.

In addition, Pablo knew that to find naval officers he could not only rely on his own experience but also on that of his brothers. That was another reason for the meeting.

"If you had told me this years ago," Javi said, "I would have gone with you in a heartbeat. But now..."

He didn't need to finish the sentence. Pablo knew what he meant. The idea of adding his brothers to his dream come true had crossed his mind, but he knew that it was impossible. As good Navy officers, they would never leave their jobs².

Nacho broke the silence he had maintained since Pablo mentioned his search for officials.

"I may know someone you might want to meet. And this is the second time I've said that to someone about your new project," smiled the second of the Marzán brothers.

Nacho's silence wasn't because he was enjoying his Cruzcampo or because of the scenery. He had been deciding whether or not to introduce his candidate to Pablo. Not because he wasn't suitable, Nacho was sure that he was the best he could find, but exactly because he was so good he might steal the spotlight from his brother as far as being the captain of Albatros. And he knew that although he was excited about the project, Pablo couldn't help thinking about commanding that ship. He knew it because he would feel the same way, and Javi would too.

For his part, Pablo suppressed leaping for joy. A possible candidate this soon was more than he had ever expected.

"Who is it?" he asked.

Nacho sighed. There was no turning back.

"His name is Gabi Huesca Perez," and that's all he said. He knew Javi would finish the story.

"Is that the number one from your class at the academy that just got fired because the ship he was commanding was grounded?" the eldest of the brothers asked.

Nacho was right, the Navy was a great little family and everyone knew each other.

"One and the same. I just came from the trial in Madrid. The verdict said something to the effect that it's not his fault but as he was the commander he is responsible."

He said no more. The comment was not intended as criticism. Everyone knew you didn't delegate responsibility. A commanding officer is fully responsible for everything that happens.

Nacho continued, "Apparently it was night. He was sleeping. His Executive Officer³ was on duty and drove the boat into a rock. The breach was so great that they almost sank right then and there. And they're saying there's no way to fix it. It's unbelievable! He told me that as soon as he took command he knew that Lieutenant Junior Grade was useless. But it's like everything. You can't do anything about it, but if something happens it's your fault."

Pablo didn't interrupt. He knew full well how hard it was for Nacho to see something happen to a colleague knowing that the same could happen to him at any time. What's more, he remembered Gabi, Nacho and him were great friends. The fact of having fought for being number one in class for five years at the Naval School had not affected a great friendship.

"Anyway," continued Nacho, "he's obviously out of work now. But he has been in command although it was cut short. Also, he's been in Somalia a couple of times on board Castilla and Alvaro de Bazan if I'm not mistaken."

"Sounds perfect," Pablo said. And his expression showed that he too realized Gabi could become a rival. "Do you think he'll like the project?"

"I don't know," Nacho said. "He's going through a tough time. It depends on how I present it. But let me tell you, he's the best of the best. I don't know anyone better than he is, besides Javi."

The oldest of the three bowed his head feeling somewhere between grateful and embarrassed.

"I've also heard very good things about him, though we have never met."

Pablo had already made a decision. As incredible as it seemed (he had even surprised himself), he had come to the conclusion that if Gabi was better than him, then he should be the captain. And if he wasn't, then by Nacho's description, he would make the perfect right-hand man.

"Give me his number."

#

The next morning, Pablo was driving his VW Golf along the road to Rota. There had been an idea running through his head for the last couple of days. And the day before, he had talked about it to his brothers. After thinking it over and weighing pros and cons, they had encouraged him to try it.

That was why he was going to Grease's Auto Repair Shop in the town of Rota. The owner, Thomas "Grease" Johnson had been a senior chief (non commissioned officer) mechanic in the US Navy who had retired early at 45 to set up a garage next to the neighboring Rota Naval Base.

The Texan was in love with Spain, and his knowledge of Spanish (as spoken in Texas and some parts of Florida) together with his expertise in engines had turned his workshop into a favorite of Americans on the Base and half the people in Rota.

Pablo had met him while Grease was practicing his other hobby, sailing. No one would have thought that a Texan who loved spark plugs and pistons would be so passionate about a sport that used none of those things. But Pablo knew very few trimmers as good as he was.

Fate had wanted them to be part of the same racing crew for three years and Pablo wanted to exploit that relationship to make the Yankee an unexpected offer.

He had no doubt Grease was the right man to be Albatros' chief engineer. But even if he knew how to navigate perfectly, the American had no title that allowed him to act as deck officer on a ship of those characteristics. However, he had decided to take it one step at a time. He would solve the deck officers issue later. For now, getting a good chief engineer was essential.

While Pablo parked the car he thought he was having too much luck to try to push it. Someday it would have to end.

With a pull of the parking brake, he erased the bad omens in his mind and got out of the car. When he was a few feet from the shop, a middle-aged man with brown hair, large but not fat, medium height with light skin and eyes and a small mustache under a small nose came in and greeted him with a slight American accent.

"Hey, Pablo. What are you doing here? Is there something wrong with your little car?" he said looking at his VW Golf.

Like most Texans, he was a lover of big cars and, even after all his years in Europe, he continued to make fun of compact cars.

"Huh? No, my car is fine."

Grease looked puzzled as he shook Pablo's hand.

"So what brings you here?"

Pablo looked at the bar across the road.

"I'll buy you a beer."

"Can't say no to that," Grease said.

The two crossed the street under the scorching sun and on entering the bar Pablo went to a secluded table where they could have some privacy. The waiter approached them.

"What can I get for you, gentlemen?" The waiter asked with a strong Andalusian accent.

"Two beers please," Pablo said, and turning to Grease he asked, "How's business?"

"It's going well man, I'm making a profit on the expansion from last year, more and more people come. In fact, I already have six employees."

"You've become quite the businessman!"

"Actually I never dreamed I would do so well," Grease said. "If I had known it was going to be this good I would have left the Navy long before."

Pablo began to fear that his plan was ruined.

"Are you telling me you don't miss sailing?"

Grease looked at him carefully. After a few seconds, it seemed he decided that Pablo would fit within that small circle of comrades to whom he could make a personal confession, although perhaps it was more professional than personal. But that's the magic of being a seaman, the bonds with your mates, even if you didn't know them that well.

"I'm not going to lie to you, I'm very happy here, but I do miss sailing, going to distant ports, working in a hierarchical organization and some action every now and again. In addition, the largest engine that's ever come through that door," as he nodded toward his workshop, "is not even a tenth of the ones I had on the ships."

Pablo smiled, that was the eternal topic of the Texan who liked big things.

"Then you may be interested in what I'm about to tell you."

Grease looked at him curiously. The conversation was taking an unexpected turn.

“Let’s just say I’m part of a novel project and we need someone to take care of the engines.”

Pablo let the information sink in. After a few seconds, Grease continued looking at him in the same manner, educated curiosity, but nothing more. Pablo smiled remembering that Grease was a regular poker player.

He decided to continue, “It’s a boat, about a hundred meters long and I want to modify it so it will reach thirty knots. Right now it has two sixteen-valve MTU engines that go up to twenty-two but at Navantia they’re trying to figure out how to get the extra eight.”

“This could cost you an arm and a leg and will suck more than a puta que no folla.”

Pablo couldn’t help laughing. It was funny to hear vulgar expressions in Spanish coming from the mouth of a foreigner.

“My boss is pretty generous when it comes to expenses.”

“Interesting,” Grease said. “I have a couple of ideas.”

“Well, now that I got your attention, I’ll tell you the whole story.”

Grease sat up in his chair, any attempt at masking his emotions completely forgotten.

“We’re going to the Horn of Africa with a Somali government permit to hunt pirates.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m not. I’m being completely serious. These pirates must have pissed off someone enough to make them subsidize a genuine privateer to chase after them. Unfortunately for them, this guy is one of the few who can afford it.”

“Is this an official proposal?” Grease asked.

“I’m asking you to be the chief engineer of the ship. If you accept, tomorrow you’ll have to go to Navantia and fight with the engineers to give me what I want. This proposal is as serious as it gets. All I need is my boss’ approval but I don’t think he’ll have a problem.”

And that’s what’s known as “going all in”. Thank God he had the cards to back it up.

“I’m your guy!” cried Grease. “Now tell me a little more about this crazy plan.”

Pablo leaned back in his chair and asked for another round. Now that he had accomplished his goal he could really enjoy his beer.

#

That same evening at home, Pablo picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

“Pablo, it’s Nacho. I talked to Gabi and he said he wants to talk to you. Write his number down.”

After thinking about it and asking Javi for advice, Pablo had decided it was best that Nacho approach him first. Gabi had gone through a difficult time and the conversation could touch sensitive issues and maybe even become unpleasant.

That’s why he had asked Nacho to call Gabi and explain the situation. He had agreed and it seemed to have gone well.

“At first he was a little stunned,” Nacho said. “Then, when he recovered, the first thing he asked was about you. He said for me to forget you’re my brother and tell him what I know about you as a seaman. I must be a great liar because he wants to talk to you.” Nacho quipped.

“Ha, ha. Thanks a lot, Nacho.”

“It’s nothing, little guy. See you later.”

“Later.”

Pablo looked at the piece of paper. He knew the success of the project could depend heavily on the man whose phone belonged to that number. Pablo saw only two options if Gabi Huesca joined the enterprise. Either he became the commanding officer or his right-hand man. He was not going to find anyone so qualified.

He had considered that the loss of his previous command may have affected Gabi psychologically but Nacho wouldn’t have recommended him if that was the case.

Not wanting to mull it over too much he dialed the number his brother had given him. After two rings, a voice with no accent answered. Even though Pablo had seen in his own family how moving around can cause a person to lose his regional accent, it still surprised him.

“Hello?”

“Good morning. My name is Pablo Marzán, may I speak with Gabriel Huesca please?”

“Speaking. Good morning Pablo, and please call me Gabi.”

“Okay Gabi,” Pablo said. “Well, my brother told me you wanted to talk to me.”

“Yes. The truth is that everything he told me all sounds a bit weird and I wanted to hear it from the source. It’s a little hard to believe that an opportunity like this one has come my way, especially after what just happened.”

Well, he talks about his incident with no problems. Typically that means he’s overcome it, thought Pablo.

“Yeah, I’m sure it sounded like he was making it up. How about I explain everything to you from the beginning and see if it makes sense to you then?”

“Okay.”

Pablo told him everything he knew about the project. Not only what Reyes had told him but also what he had seen from the beginning. He told Gabi about Mr. Gotthelf and Alps Tankers, Navantia and the BAM with its modifications, and the little he knew about what they would do in Somalia. He even told him about Grease.

“It still sounds incredible,” Gabi said. “But I must say I agree with the whole approach. I would just add a holding and monitoring plan for possible captured pirates, as well as establishing clear procedures after they are left in the hands of justice or wherever, and above all, one or two translators.

Gabi hadn’t asked about exactly what role was being offered to him. What had Nacho said to him? Was Gabi assuming that he was going to command? Or that it would be Pablo? Maybe he didn’t care? Or maybe he hadn’t wondered?

Pablo decided he had to stop racking his brain and be practical. One way or another, Gabi would be his closest partner, either as head or subordinate, and they needed a relationship based on sincerity. But before he could react, Gabi asked, “And what exactly is the role you’re offering?”

“I’ll be honest with you. My boss has not yet decided who will command the ship. I was his first choice but the roles are not yet determined. All I’m doing for now is trying to find the rest of the officers. Going by what my brother told me, with your experience you’d make a magnificent executive officer and operations officer if you’re not the captain.”

“Thank Nacho for me for the compliment. That’s something, coming from him.”

Pablo decided to not beat around the bush. They were past the point of no return.

“So, can I count on you?”

After a pause, Gabi said, “The truth is that everything sounds great, but a decision like this cannot be taken lightly. I’ll have to ask my wife and think about what my family will do. Also, you’ve not said anything about a salary.”

“As far as money is concerned, don’t worry. Our ship owner doesn’t mind spending whatever it takes and in addition to your salary there will probably be some bonuses added for aborted attacks and captured pirates.”

“All right, in that case, give me twenty-four hours to think about it and I’ll call you at this number.”

“Perfect. Talk to you tomorrow then.”

“So long.”

Chapter Four

Three days later, Pablo, Grease, and Gabi Huesca sat at a table presided by Jaime Reyes. They had set up their headquarters in offices provided by the shipbuilders inside Navantia itself.

Reyes had wanted to get everyone together in order to clear up doubts and decide what the next steps would be, as well as to meet the new additions to the team.

Grease had already spent a couple of days with the engineers trying to find a viable solution for increasing the speed of the ship to what they wanted. Gabi had just joined them the day before from Madrid and was the newest addition to the team.

Pablo had only seen him in person twice before and he remembered him somewhat differently. Maybe it was the uniform that made him look taller and wider, something chinos and a shirt can't do. The thin, sharp face was the same, although with dark circles under his brown eyes and with less hair and grayer.

"Well gentlemen," Reyes began, "I propose that each one of you updates the rest of us on any new items you may have."

After a series of nods around the table he continued, "For my part, I've had success finding the doctor and the accountant. Both are relatively young and with some knowledge of the sea, and both are motivated. I don't think I need to say much more since we'll be meeting them both in a few days. As far as a helicopter and a pilot, I'm at a loss. However, I've been tracking down someone who I think will be perfect to head our boarding team. On the other hand, I've heard from Switzerland that the legal issues in Somalia are practically closed. And the sales contract with Navantia is signed and authorized by the Spanish government. That's it on my end. Pablo, what do you have?"

Pablo sat up and replied, "My two great achievements are present and will speak for themselves. All I need now is a navigation officer, perhaps someone else to keep watch on the bridge. Otherwise, I think it's time to start worrying about assembling the rest of the crew, especially now that we have our future heads of departments."

Reyes nodded.

"Mr. Johnson?"

"It seems the engineers have a pretty good idea for granting our request," Grease said. "All that's left to do is see if it's feasible. When I have more information I will let you know. As for sailors for the engines, I can get a few. There are two kids in my workshop that could help with propulsion and electricity. Both have Navy experience."

"Excellent. Mr. Huesca?" Reyes addressed Gabi.

"I'm still catching up," he said. "For now my only contribution is what I told Pablo when he explained the project to me. We need to be clear on what we're going to do in the event that we capture pirates both on board and in the process of bringing them to justice. In the Castilla, we had a problem over this issue."

"Good point," Reyes said writing in his notepad. "I'm leaving matters having to do with the ship to you guys. As for the legal aspect, I will consult with Mr. Egger."

Pablo and Gabi both gave a nod of acknowledgment.

"Good. I'm glad everything's coming along," Reyes continued. "Now the idea is to clarify as soon as possible the issue of the engines," he said looking at Grease. "And to continue putting the crew together," this time looking at Pablo and Gabi. "For my part, I will continue working on getting a helicopter and pilots and keep pressuring Navantia to get the boat ready as soon as possible."

"At this point, I think it's necessary to let you know that Pablo will be the commanding officer," Reyes said without preamble.

His listeners were taken off guard and didn't know quite how to react.

"Maybe it's a premature decision," Reyes said unruffled. "But I think it's necessary to establish leadership from the beginning. And my use of the military term is not accidental. Given the characteristics of our company, I think we should consider our captain a commanding officer. Pablo is undoubtedly the most knowledgeable of the project right now and although he is the youngest one here, he has demonstrated with his planning skills that he is the right man for the job. Gabi," he

said, looking at him, “following the recommendations Pablo has given me, you will be the executive officer and operations officer.

Gabi nodded and turned to Pablo. Then he got up, stood at attention and said, "Aye aye, sir," as he held out his hand.

From that moment, Pablo knew he had the best executive officer he could ever want and that the little competition for being head of project, if there ever was any, was long forgotten. Gabi had been put under his command and, like any good seaman, he had respect for hierarchy in his blood.

#

Forty days later, Pablo was nodding approval from the bridge wing of Albatros. On the bridge, a sailor announced over the PA system that they were docked so the deck personnel could retire from their posts. Pablo exhaled a breath that he seemed to have been holding for hours and finally pulled his hands from his pockets. That was the only way he could keep from touching his earlobe like we always did when he was nervous.

Albatros had just completed its first sea trial successfully. It had been a simple leaving of the port to test the latest modifications. The Portuguese had made several such trials but for Pablo and his newly formed crew, this had been the first time. And the first time is always special.

Pablo kept watching from his spot on the bridge wing (in the BAM the wing is covered, inside the bridge) how the deck personnel cleared up lines and other instruments used for mooring the ship while mentally reviewing the last few days.

The Navantia engineers and Grease had made a superhuman effort and had managed to modify the ship's engines in record time. Grease had warned him that they probably wouldn't be able to reach the desired thirty knots, that it would be something more like twenty-four or twenty-five. Pablo knew that the request they had made was quite ambitious and never expected it to be resolved so quickly. In addition, Grease had told him that the improvement implied an increase of fuel consumption close to 200% over twenty-three knots. However, Pablo knew that expense was not an issue. All he had to worry about was making sure they had enough fuel in case they needed to navigate at those speeds. In other words, it was its range that could be affected.

They took advantage of the sea trial to test the new engines and they had responded perfectly. Grease had admitted a few days before that the modifications had gone so well because Navantia had already studied them back in the day and most of the calculations had already been made. All they had to do was implement them.

Since virtually everything else had been tested before and they couldn't afford the time it would take to repeat the entire battery of tests, they would have to rely on the ones previously made by the Portuguese Navy.

The only other innovation they tried out was the two new RHIBs. Navy BAM have free space on the quarterdeck (back) to carry configurable containers. They can have living quarters, humanitarian aid, and even unmanned vehicles. Since they weren't planning on bringing any of those things along, they had taken advantage of the extra space to place two other boats which, in addition to the original two, would enable Pablo to take the entire crew in them if he wanted.

There was still some unused space in the quarterdeck that Pablo thought would work for storing an extra fuel tank. That would restore the range lost with the increased speed.

They had also taken some time to get used to the ship, becoming familiar with her seafaring ability, which was impressive, and to train the crew they had managed to gather so far.

As executive officer, Gabi was in charge of distributing the crew, putting together what in the Navy is known as a ship's watch and station bill, setting the position of each person for every post on the ship.

By now, they had forty of the fifty-five men they wanted, a number similar to the one used by the Navy, leaving room for the boarding team and the helicopter crew with their maintenance people included.

Most of the recruits had previous Navy experience. Some were no longer seamen because of early retirement, others because they had been fired. Pablo had made sure that the reasons for the expulsions had been overcome, like the new boatswain and his former addiction to pot; or they had not been important as in the case of the gunner, whose captain didn't like him. As a result, he had pushed him to the limit to force him to make a mistake.

The rest of the crew came from the merchant navy and fisheries and formed the core of people for deck, bridge, and engine departments.

Pablo and Gabi had decided to follow a procedure similar to the one Reyes had used with them. First, they had sought people to fill the positions of warrant officers and then had delegated them to find their own people, with supervision, of course. Grease had brought two of his mechanics for engineering. Damage Control⁴ was covered by retired Chief Petty Officer Manuel. That took care of Engines. For the bridge, besides the boatswain José, they had signed Alfonso who after fifteen years fishing in Newfoundland had been unemployed.

They had also found a commis chef, who had convinced them that he could be the cook after preparing them a meal; and an unemployed accounting assistant looking for adventure. These two would work under the accountant Reyes had promised them.

Apart from the gunner, also they had an electronics specialist, a radioman, and another former non commissioned officer for the CIC.

These eleven gentlemen had been entrusted with the mission of finding three subordinates each. Within a few weeks, they had a crew of forty men and women, all selected by their superiors and all approved by the commander and executive officer.

Pablo knew that his people were all motivated, each one in his own way, and you couldn't ask for more. Upon joining, the mission of the ship had been made clear to them and also that things would run as they did on military ships. Discipline would be much stricter than what they were used to. Pablo had informed each one about this personally and no one had seemed surprised. Everyone had accepted the non-verbal contract. What no one had expected was that immediately after, they were asked to sign a contract outlining in detail the set of rules on board, from dealings with crew members to the behavior expected of them and including corresponding disciplinary action. In this regard, Pablo and Gabi had opted for financial penalties because that's where it would hurt people the most. The contract also established the commander as an omnipotent judge.

Pablo sighed. Each time he stopped to think, his mind led him to how lucky he was, rather, they were. And occasionally, he pondered the enormous responsibility that was coming. He had never had so many people under his command, neither such a big ship nor such an important mission.

At such times, Pablo would look at Gabi and could not help wondering if Gabi would have been better than him for the position. During the previous days, Gabi had already demonstrated what a valuable asset he would be, always treating Pablo with the utmost respect and subordination.

And that would always bring Pablo back to thinking about how lucky he was.

He came back from his thoughts remembering a saying he had heard years earlier that said, "luck only accompanies those who do not count on it in their plans." He went to the center of the bridge and called Gabi over. Together, they crossed the small CIC (just aft of the bridge). They went two decks down and headed aft to stand under the poop deck.

At the same time, Reyes was coming up the gangway accompanied by a small entourage that was inspecting the boat curiously. Reyes had said he was busy and could not go to the trials. What Pablo didn't know was that Reyes had decided not to go so as not to take away the limelight from Pablo on his first day in front of his new crew.

After shaking Pablo and Gabi's hands, Reyes introduced his companions to them.

"This is Ana Molinos and Esther Rodriguez; accountant and doctor, respectively."

The seamen managed to hide their surprise. The two had expected both to be men.

Reyes looked amused.

“Now, for my surprise gift,” he said turning to the rest of his companions. “This gentleman,” pointing to a man in his forties who was over six feet tall, “is Paco Díez. Paco was a SWAT member in the police but left to start his own training academy for security personnel. After much insistence, I managed to get him to leave his pseudo-retirement and become head of our boarding team. His companions are a couple of former teammates. He has also brought with him outstanding students, former rivals in shooting contests and some former soldiers. Unless you have any problems or suggestions, they will make up the boarding team.”

Dumbfounded, all they could do was nod their heads in awe.

“Did you think you were the only ones working, huh?” Reyes smiled. “And that’s not all. Paco’s Academy gave me an idea, so I decided to take some flying lessons.”

Gabi couldn’t help it, “Flying lessons?”

“Yes. And that’s how I met Joseba Gaztañaga,” Reyes said pointing to the oldest of his companions, a man of about fifty. “But I’m not going to lie to you. I already knew who Joseba was. However, when I learned that after being a Coast Guard pilot and winning several stunt contests he had set up a small company that makes trips between Ceuta and mainland Spain besides recreational flying, I just had to meet him. And incidentally, I suggested he become our pilot. Thank God he said yes. So far everything was going according to my plans, but then he tells me he is bringing a chopper, another pilot, support, and maintenance staff!” exclaimed Reyes as he gestured with his arms to indicate the rest of the people who had come aboard with him.

Reyes waited a few seconds and continued.

“The first one to come out of his state of shock,” he smiled, “may be asking about the chopper. It’s an Agusta Bell 412, marinized of course, and will be here tomorrow morning. Joseba knows the technical data better than I, but I think you will see that it more than meets our needs. What do you think Pablo?”

“Well, Mr. Reyes,” Pablo managed to answer, “perhaps recalling that it was you who gave me this job in the first place, I should have guessed something like this. Today has demonstrated that you are my fairy godmother. And now, if it’s all right with you, we will introduce the new members of the crew,” with that he turned to Gabi. “Everyone to the hangar.”

Gabi nodded and walked away. A few minutes later, Pablo introduced the newcomers to the rest of the crew. When everyone had left, some to settle down and the others to finish up some of their work before leaving, it was only Gabi and Pablo.

Pablo said, “Gabi, would you like to join me for dinner to celebrate today?”

Pablo didn’t know what it was, but he was having trouble enjoying being in charge. Although he had been a captain in the Merchant Navy, he had never had such an important project or one in which so much depended on him. In Albatros most of the defining parts of the project hinged on his decisions. He needed to clear his mind.

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“Well, Captain, I must say, it’s been a while since I’ve eaten such a good meal.”

“Gabi, I’ve told you already that when we’re not on the ship you can call me Pablo,” he said for the seventeenth time.

“Okay, okay, Pablo, then.”

They had gone to El Faro, a very famous restaurant in Cadiz located right in the La Viña neighborhood. It was frequented by high-profile customers such as the members of the National Basketball Team.

They took advantage of this dinner time to get to know each other better since the last few days had not given either one a chance to relax. They didn’t talk about Albatros. They both knew they needed to forget about work for a while.

Still, as sailors and as passionate as they were about their work, most of their conversation had revolved around past experiences at sea. Of course, they had also touched on some personal and

family topics, but what really interested one about the other was their seafaring adventures. Pablo listened intently to Gabi's stories of his missions in the Indian Ocean and Gabi discovered through Pablo a facet of the Merchant Navy he didn't know.

After three hours and a hearty dinner, the two seamen were as tight as if they'd known each other their whole lives. In the past, Pablo had become that close to some of his subordinates, and that type of familiarity had resulted in some uncomfortable situations in the course of his work. But he knew that Gabi was different. Their dealings with each other when they were in front of the rest of the crew would continue to be professional. But while they were in private this newly acquired comfortableness would allow Gabi to advise Pablo more freely.

That is the ideal situation. A good boss would never want his subordinates to tell him what he wants to hear. A good boss wants people who will advise him in spite of the consequences. It takes someone who sees what the boss cannot. As long as, once the captain makes the final decision the subordinate supports it unconditionally.

After they had finished their desserts, Pablo decided to take advantage of the relaxed setting to ask Gabi a question that he had wanted to know the answer to for a long time.

"Well, what do you think of all this? As a colleague, not as the XO of Albatros."

Gabi smiled and took a sip of his drink giving himself time to think. When he answered he did so sincerely and carefully evaluating the facts.

He began by saying they were indeed lucky since they had an almost unlimited budget, an ideal ship for the mission, and a boss who seemed to have things clear in mind and be very competent.

Then Pablo asked him to evaluate the crew and Gabi began by proposing a toast to its magnificent commanding officer and executive officer. After the two laughed a bit Gabi became serious again and started talking about the officers.

First, he expressed his gratitude for the relative ease with which they worked and said he would not miss the endless paperwork at the Navy.

"If we worked the same as in the Navy, there's no way I could be the executive officer and at the same time be the operations officer. But here, I know I won't be pestered with personnel issues, and since we're a private enterprise we won't have to constantly submit reports which, after all, is what the operations officer mainly does.

He congratulated Pablo for his choice of Grease as chief engineer because he had an intuitive understanding of engines and the vast number of auxiliary equipment on a ship. In addition, the people he had brought along also seemed totally competent and Manuel, from Damage Control, had fit in with them perfectly forming the tight engineering department that characterizes good crews.

Gabi pointed out that all his evaluations had been based on his brief but intense dealings with the crew in the previous days and that the voyage to the Indian Ocean would be the ideal time to get to know them better.

After Gabi had finished speaking, Pablo took advantage of what he had said about reaching the Indian Ocean to bring up his idea to develop a plan of intensive training while they headed towards the zone of operations. That was his next priority once the crew was complete and the ship was equipped. Pablo knew that Gabi's ideas regarding training would be fundamental in bringing the crew up to the level of preparedness they needed.

The executive officer of Albatros couldn't agree more with his captain and admitted to having already thought about the matter. They needed to train a relatively large group of people to do a very specific job and that some had not done before. And, more importantly, they needed that group of people who, for the most part, didn't know each other to forge a team. That's the only way to get a crew to become efficient and turn a ship into a war machine.

Going back to the subject of personnel, they both agreed that their most important shortcoming was the lack of an officer to take charge of the navigation section and that could also stand watch on the bridge. Also, an additional bridge officer would be advisable.

As for Reyes' recruits, Pablo and Gabi had only shared a few minutes with them, but they all had given them a good impression. Ana, the accountant quickly had asked to be brought up to date on the ship's situation and aided by Carlos the cook and Agustin the secretary, she seemed to have gotten a handle on things and had even already made a couple of recommendations.

As for Esther, the doctor, the first thing she had done was ask if she would have an assistant. When she found out they hadn't thought of it, she proposed that one of the new recruits still left to complete the crew would at least have some type of nursing knowledge. This way, even though he would be assigned to work in another department, he could still help when necessary. Gabi's first reaction, as head of personnel, was to point out the difficulty of finding someone with those characteristics in such a short time, but Esther had offered to find someone herself.

She had also handed Pablo a list of the instruments and medications that she thought would be advisable to carry on board and drafted out several plans of action in case of emergency, from man overboard to possible evacuation. Pablo had looked at Gabi to see if this was a joke, only to find him completely speechless. Once he recovered, he had admitted his ignorance of the subject and the only restriction he had stipulated was that of space. Then, he had asked Esther if she had experience at sea and she had replied that, after she had been recruited, she had contacted several colleagues who had worked in the maritime field and together with their experience and some research on her part she had come up with the plans. She acknowledged she still had to adapt the plans to the ship's characteristics.

Recalling the meeting, Gabi hesitated whether to reveal the thought that was running around in his head so he just stared at his boss. Pablo was able to read the silence and encouraged him to continue. That was the kind of trust he wanted.

Gabi took a deep breath and blurted out, "I don't know if the fact that they're relatively young and attractive will be a problem."

Pablo let out a loud guffaw. After a few seconds, Gabi joined him and when they both had recovered, Pablo explained why he was laughing.

"You're like my brothers. It's obvious you're married with children. You've been off the market for too long," he teased. Those two ooze rejection of any man who approaches them with the most minimal romantic intentions. They might as well have a sign on their foreheads that says NO," he joked. "Besides, they're too smart to be duped by someone from the crew. As far as officers, I think I'm the only one that qualifies to try something, based on my age and marital status, but I promise I'll behave."

Gabi admitted he was right, but didn't comment on the last of his arguments.

Pablo agreed that their new employees were attractive, but neither one of them was his type. And the last thing he wanted was a relationship. He had enough. Both were probably somewhat older than him, but they had the bodies of a twenty-something.

Ana was tall and slender, with strong but not aggressive features. Light brown hair to match her eyes, wide but nice hips, and few curves. She seemed to be somewhat arrogant, but nice at the same time.

Esther was quite different, a little shorter and with rounder features, including an ample bosom which had already attracted more than one glance. She had dark hair and eyes and a playful smile.

Even with those features, Pablo was certain that neither one of them would give them any trouble after the talk he had given them when boarding. He had made the situation clear and had also informed them that they would be responsible for the female-specific issues on board and therefore would be his immediate advisors in this regard.

Both had reacted positively and he was happy with the outcome of the meeting because he had put himself a level above the rest of the crew, as his position demanded, even though his age didn't show it.

Anxious to avoid raunchy subjects, Gabi went on to speak of the two officers left to comment on, Paco and Joseba. They were the ones he had dealt with the least, but both agreed they had made

a good impression on them. It was clear that they could not have found someone with such adequate experience and in both cases, they seemed to be people with guts. The best they had going for them both was that they provided virtually all of their own teams and materials. And the fact that their teams were made up of volunteers used to working together not only reduced the work of the seafarers, but also ensured the smooth functioning of their respective groups.

Gabi expressed doubt, though admittedly unfounded, that Joseba might struggle to adjust to the discipline on board. While Pablo hoped Paco could adapt to a perhaps less aggressive type of mission than those to which he was accustomed. Still, both knew they had to consider themselves lucky for having a former SWAT member and pilot.

Once he reviewed the officers, Gabi went on to comment on the NCOs, although not individually. They both knew the importance of these, especially with so few officers, as each NCO was head of a division. Altogether he was very happy to know they were all volunteers, positive and proactive. In addition, all of them, whether former servicemen or not, seemed to already have developed the sense of discipline that they were already instilling in the sailors. Everyone seemed to know their job well and the cook was a virtuoso of the stove. A well-fed crew is a happy crew.

As for the seamen, all Gabi had to say was that if they followed the guidelines of their leaders they would have no problems. Again, the fact that they were all volunteers, knew the mission of the ship and, why not say it, were well paid, made for good performance. Gabi was especially satisfied with the meticulous screening they had carried out, even going as far as to contact former employers to make sure the candidates were hardworking and willing.

Pablo thanked Gabi for his sincerity and apologized for the shoptalk, after which he took some papers from his pocket and showed them to him. The papers contained designs of uniforms and badges for the crew. They had decided that a uniform would help keep the environment they wanted to have on board and Pablo had personally taken on the task of selecting them.

The main piece was a blue, fireproof jumpsuit with Velcro fastenings instead of buttons or a zipper and also a Velcro belt. The main objective was comfort and practicality. Under the jumpsuit, they would wear a blue T-shirt. The shoes were mid-calf boots with a reinforced toe. Pablo had made sure that they were the best on the market: safe, light and most of all comfortable. He had not yet established mandatory headgear, although there would be ball caps and beanies available for the whole crew to wear, also work and wool gloves and a neck gaiter, everything top of the line. There were also parkas, overcoats, rain gear, rubber boots and other items commonly worn on a boat. They even supplied polarized sunglasses in different sizes to avoid the use of personal accessories. The idea was to provide everything that the crew needed for their uniforms so they wouldn't need to wear their own clothing.

In anticipation of the temperatures they expected to find, he had also ordered blue pants to wear with just the T-shirt. In this case, the T-shirt must be the regulation shirt and be worn tucked into the pants to avoid the risk of snags and the unpleasant experience of seeing someone's butt crack.

All items of clothing were engraved with Albatros either on the back or on the leg. The intention was to promote a sense of group or entity and Pablo had already planned a contest to find a badge for the ship later on.

Regarding ranks, Pablo had decided to base theirs on a similar hierarchical system used by the Navy but changing the insignia. The officers would have yellow horizontal bars; three for himself, two for Gabi and one for the others, (Grease, Paco, Joseba, Ana, and Esther). The NCOs would have one or two orange vertical bars according to the seniority issued to them (figuring that out had brought on more than a headache at first). The petty officers would wear a red circle and seamen the upper semicircle. This would allow them to keep a system of equivalences that they were used to but with enough differences to separate them from the Navy. The insignia would be worn on the chest of the jumpsuit and engraved on the T-shirts.

Pablo was tempted to have a dress uniform but he knew it would be useless so he discarded the idea.

“Very American,” opined Gabi. “I like it. It’s very practical.”

With that, they set aside work and ordered their first drink. That evening would have ended much later had the two seamen not been fully aware of the work ahead and the need to be at a hundred percent for the next days.

Chapter Five

Pablo reviewed the events of recent days as he headed to the quarterdeck. They were sailing the Mediterranean transiting towards the Suez Canal. They had finished fine tuning the ship in record time and had set a course for the Indian Ocean five days earlier.

The crew was complete. They were a total of eighty-two men and women. This included the helicopter maintenance team and the boarding team. Pablo only regretted not having been able to find a navigation officer. They just couldn’t find anyone suitable for the position. This had left Gabi and him to keep watch on the bridge, so they had hired a young sailor named Miguel. He had very little experience but he had a good career and had excellent references.

This way, they had someone to navigate the ship even though he needed supervision but now they could have three watches. They had not been able to qualify Grease as deck officer. Normally as captain, Pablo wouldn’t keep watch. But he knew dividing the load between Miguel and Gabi would wear upon both the men, especially Gabi, and Pablo wanted them both at a hundred percent. At his age it wouldn’t be a big deal to keep watch and besides, it would give him an opportunity to get used to the ship. He wanted to arrive in Somalia as familiar with Albatros as if he had skippered her for years, and the best way to do that was by spending hours on the bridge.

As for Albatros, she was completely equipped and ready to be in the area of operations for the time required (refueling and stocking up, of course). The helicopter was on board, as well as all the armament, medications, and all the other necessary items.

The day before leaving, Reyes had given the crew some final instructions. In case they captured pirates, they would be handed over to Somali authorities as soon as possible. The crew had to keep in mind at all times that they were sailing under the Somali flag and all papers on board backed that up. However, they would receive all their orders from Reyes.

The only thing the Somali government asked was that they help anyone who was in distress within its area of influence, which was certainly not a conflict of interests for Albatros and her crew. Reyes had met with Pablo and Gabi, and had discussed the strategy they would follow. The three had agreed that they had too little information to develop a detailed plan, so they had agreed to initially only escort Alps Tankers’ oilers. During the dead time in between Pablo would have freedom of action. He had requested to begin their stay in the area of operations with a port visit in the Seychelles. That would allow the crew a few days rest after the intense journey that was planned. The Seychelles are more civilized than Somalia and the crew would be able to rest and enjoy themselves in a friendlier and safer environment, something the ports in Western Africa couldn’t offer. It would be an authentic tropical paradise. Pablo knew that the opportunity to spend their first well-earned paycheck after intense navigation would encourage and motivate the crew.

As for operations, Reyes had stressed to them that their employer had already lost three ships at the hands of pirates and that the idea was to nip the problem in the bud, but with the information they had up to now there wasn’t much they could do. So it was essential to collect as much data as possible.

Regarding international military forces in the area, Reyes had used his contacts to secure the approval of NATO and the European Union, although not their cooperation. Their operatives had been advised of their presence there but they were not about to share information with them. Reyes had urged them to call the commodore of European forces to at least maintain contact and report any sightings, attacks and other important events. The military there would value the advantages of having another ally in the area, even if their political superiors didn’t see it the same way.

Pablo stopped at the end of the flight deck watching the scene unfolding below in the quarterdeck. Following the training plan prepared with the aid of the executive officer they were conducting a man overboard exercise with the deck watch personnel. The exercise was simple; it began by throwing a lifesaver in the water with an orange distress flare. Once the supposed crew member was in the water the alarm was activated at the bridge, and from there action was taken.

It was Gabi's watch, so Pablo had decided to leave the bridge to his executive officer and had gone to the quarterdeck to watch the RHIB being lowered onto the water with the rescue swimmer and the ship's nurse (which Esther had finally found). The exercise was pre-programmed. As he went down the ladder to the quarterdeck Pablo observed how the first steps were carried out quickly and smoothly.

Pablo saw the operator of the RHIB and the rescue swimmer, who acted as bowman, get in the boat before it was lowered onto the water beside the ship. They had two rescue swimmers, always keeping one on standby.

Pablo was thinking about the watch distribution of the crew when he noticed that Ivan, the rescue swimmer, unfortunately bumped his head with a protrusion on the boat.

He watched, as if in slow motion, how Ivan collapsed and fell into the sea off the side of the boat furthest away from the ship.

His brain went into emergency mode.

Gabi was on the bridge. He would know how to react.

"Man overboard! Throw a lifesaver and anything that floats in the water!" he heard his own voice as if it was someone else's.

It was broad daylight, the sea was calm and there was hardly any wind, but it was possible the swimmer was unconscious.

"Alert the bridge!" He, again, heard his voice.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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