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Disincanto

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You know the posters.

A tall man in proud blue's abreast a wave-breaking battleship. A patriot, and a stud. Oh yeah, the guy too. He knows it. You know it. You want to be him. He knows you want to be him.

A woman directs Hellcats above via radio transmitter. A yellow ribbon volunteers to hold her hair in regs. Could it have been any other hairpiece? You bet she had a Smith & Wesson revolver strapped down, and the designers just forgot to show it. *Join the WAVES*, the poster reads. Join? You've been pulled under.

Don't forget those Hellcats. Look at them! Your grandfather flew a Hellcat. He could be that pilot in that Hellcat right there. Rosie the Riveter herself must have assembled that beauty back in the day. That agile warplane, and all her pilots defended freedom and American honor. You could, too.

Last, but so far from least, a man lugs shells into the firing chamber of a battleship's main battery. They must be heavy. You know only he could rise to the occasion to do it. He meets the bare-chested requirement, that's clear. Muscles ripple and bound from forearm to powerful forearm. What's that muscle you see there? Is that a real muscle? You've never seen it before. That's right, you haven't seen it before because you aren't him. It has to be real, and now, you just have to be him. The original poster must have included Adonis and Poseidon scowling over smokes, reassuring one another that this sailor's mythological jawline had to be fake. The PR team clearly had to leave that out. You know, they have to keep things humble.

Each poster-sailor features eyes sharpened to pierce would-be patriotic souls. The man standing beside you at the career fair booth wears freshly pressed summer whites. You could look for a crease out of place, but you know you'd be wasting your time. His eyes have the same gleam as those on the posters. This man will tell you he's a submariner on shore duty. A

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lieutenant commander. You didn't yet know what rank that even was yet, but you did know that the petty officer looking over your transcript said you'd be a great fit for the navy, maybe the nuclear navy. Maybe they'd even pay you at an E-6 level while you finish college if you commit right now, and pass the Nuclear Navy's interview process. Maybe you'd like that. You do like that. If might matched marketing, none could tread water before the Navy.

You can smell salt suspended in sea air already. The placebo weight of a seabag pulls at your shoulders, as you kiss the spouse you do not yet have, on a pier not yet below your feet, before a seaward sunset you've not yet seen. But you will. You'll have it all.

Then, all of a sudden. You do. Only without the spouse, pier, and sunset. You close the door to your car left in the trainee lot. A deep breath yields flavors of dying algae, and ... something else. What was it? A seagull hears your unspoken question, and proceeds to shit on your car. Ah, that was it. Welcome to Newport, Rhode Island, Officer Candidacy School.

OCS isn't *that* bad. You rise early to push-out as many push-ups your now-growing body can muster at muster call. The worst part comes as you listen to everyone your senior telling you exactly how easy you've got it now. The navy recruit division commanders and marine drill instructors would complain of policy of prohibited profanity, but clearly there is also policy requiring all statements by RDCs and DIs to be proceeded with "Do you know how easy you've got it?" A smirking recruit in line remarks that the RDC's protruding gut implies he's had it pretty easy himself. The RDC hears him and sets him on his most worthwhile twenty laps OCS.

Soon enough it's the last day of training before graduation. Your RDC reminds you that should you be lucky enough to see the sun rise on graduation day, he'll salute you as an officer, but he won't like it. The DI stops in front the prospective officers and asks one officer candidate why he's decided to bleed all over his PT uniform. He informs the DI that he'd forgotten to place

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anti-chafe Band-Aids on his nipples, and they disagree with the rough texture of his shirt while getting run into the dirt. The DI surprises us as the first to break character, but soon the whole class breaks rank with laughter.

The last ounce of fat slips off your bones as you finish your last lap. You consider putting forward a dissertation on time-speed-distance calculations as you complete the last one training country has to offer you. The true eve of OCS graduation is upon you. The event on said eve known as “Hi-mom’s” kicks off as we greet our moms for the first time in months with a simple “hi,” and call ourselves clever before embracing loved ones neither seen nor heard from in three months. You thought that was a long time, at the time. Near-ensigns regale families of stories of training country, and on news of new duty stations. They regale us their pride, and how we all look like the men and women on navy recruitment posters. You look in the mirror and find it to be true. Eyes bright, and sharp, above a chiseled jawline. Breaking into view behind you is your own battleship.

The night blurs into memory with the help of the first drinks in a long time. Salty sea air shoves the moon and stars out of the way to make room for graduation day sun. In that sun you stand proud before our families, instructors, division officers and commanders. The ceremony passes more quickly through pomp and circumstance. First salutes and associated commemorating coins sail through the air. The fun times are over, the navy whispers into your ear. Nigh is time for duty.

You arrive to a foreign airport with a pamphlet in English from your mentor aboard your ship. The pamphlet serves little use in an airport full of signs adorned in hiragana, katakana, and kanji. It doesn’t take long for an upstanding Japanese woman to recognize a lost US Navy lamb. She guides you to the Tokyo-Yokosuka station you were failing to find. Two hours by bus brings

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you to the base you'll call home for the next two years. There, a pier bereft of ships offers only an officer left behind to meet you. He's shorter, pudgier, and balder than the men in the posters and training country. He's there to meet you and one other female ensign arriving that day. The ship was ordered out to sea before your arrival.

Your salute is returned with a request to neither salute, nor refer to him as "sir." He escorts you to your room at the navy lodge before escorting the female ensign to his. You question what you saw, but don't linger on the thought. He must be grabbing something from his room before escorting her to hers. That's got to be it.

Atop the green rims of otherwise white walls that line all buildings on base rest this morning's birds. They neither chirp like those in American suburbs, nor squawk like the gulls. They caw. Loud, echoing caws emanate from the massive crows you find commonplace here. They are your only company on the pier as the sun rises on the pier your ship is to return to. On the other side of it rests a Japanese warship. Her haze-grey paint radiates, attempting to outshine that morning sun. Later, it might make the sunset feel insecure of its beauty. Your unworthy eyes burn. The eyes of her Sailors emit a similar light as they walk past. The light remains, as the eyes fade into the distance as the ship gets underway smoothly from the pier, unassisted by tugboats or pushers. A textbook sea & anchor evolution, you remark to your company of crows. Only your navy would have such an ally.

Your ship returns later than expected. Her own radiance is subdued under what must be tactical rust-themed camouflage. Strategic. Amazing, as usual. Two tugs spin her around so that her aft end faces you. The rust-job is well done. It dances along all sides of her hull, and up her ladder-wells. Down her stern, an orange-brown waterfall bisects her painted name.

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Laterally, your ship advances to the pier. No wake comes from her stern, and the commotion on the bridge wing appears to be only that of the embarked Japanese harbor pilot to those on the tugboats. The captain appears to have rendered the pilot full control in docking the ship. His own ship drivers must be over-qualified, and not lacking in practice.

Nearly touching the pier, six of her sailors loose mooring lines. One of the lines lay on the pier, the rest in the water. Second and third salvos produce five lines on the pier. A final fourth salvo for one sailor undergoing high volume reinforcement from a senior deck member finishes the job.

Your fellow new ensign arrives beside you. She appears tired and lacking for desire of conversation. The supervising officer appears soon after her. You think back on your arrival and reception last night. Imagined whispers tell you to think on it harder, before being silenced by whistle blast via shipboard announcing system. Moored.

The crew is busy. Too busy to be bothered with a butter-bars. Rightly so, this is a working warship. There are jobs to be done. You find your mentor on board, and she finds the time to show you to your rack in spare berthing mixed with junior enlisted sailors, chief petty officers, and new officers. You slide your seabag onto your bare rack, the bottom of the stack of three. Maybe receiving bedding is supposed to come after receiving your rack. You take a second to take in your surroundings and get a feel for the place. What you feel instead, is the sense of this place getting a feel for you. Your bright eyes darken just the slightest bit, and your tail feels slightly less bushy.

Racks are undone for sailors of all rank here. Underwear adorns the floor. A small pool of a liquid you can't identify gathers and sloshes along the aft bulkhead. Your mentor is gone. You start to think that maybe someone should have had time to actually show you around and

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introduce you to the crew. You start to think it would have made sense for someone to show you how to even find your way around the ship. You realized no one is coming to do so. You do it yourself.

You find and meet your division, and your chief thereof. Further exploration yields the wardroom, the meeting place and recreational room for officers. Therein you meet the majority of the ship's officers, busy indeed with ... something, maybe. Maybe not. Certainly, those seats need sitting in. Someone, some group of officers, has to do it. You choose to not think about the lack of concern for a new officer. Most there claim ignorance they were to receive a new officer, let alone two.

Given time, you make a name for yourself. You push ahead in your qualifications, outpacing some of those that showed up before you. Some ask you to slow down. They say you made them look bad. Your eyes get darker then, and your tail noticeably less bushy. You do not oblige.

Not long after the exchange, the officer who arrived with you confides in you that she'd been assaulted by not one, but two officers on board the ship. She asks that you not tell a soul. She only wants to confide. She only desires healing. She needs support. She tells you their names.

You know them. You eat the only meals you have with them. You stand watch on the darkest and coldest nights with them. You share history and formative memory with them. You look into their eyes. Every day.

Now, you choose to think about that which you chose not to before. You cannot think of anything else. Assault by sworn brothers on a sworn sister is assault on all sworn. It's an assault on you. Shared beliefs of service, brotherhood, and honor melt into rage. It bubbles and rises and

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begs to be released. It demands action. You ask that rage to not make a sound in order to respect the wishes of a shipmate and victim of betrayal and darkness in uniform. Dwelling only feeds the feeling. Tell no one. Do not act. Seek not your action. Seek her peace. Respect her wish. Calm down. Focus.

You do respect her wish and offer your services to the command to become the next sexual assault victim response unit advocate. You attend the class and learn more than you expected to regarding the statistics of blue-on-blue assault within the service. A stray thought pierces your consciousness, and it tells you to look at yourself. You look down to find clenched fists. An innocent pencil now snapped fills your hand. Your forearms felt tired, fists had been clenched for some time. Your breath is fast, and through nostrils only. You realize you can't hear anything over the sound pumping blood, and heart beating at a pace fit war drums. The battle-beat from your heart yields to beating helicopter blades on sea air. You aren't in SAPR VA class. you are three hundred feet above sea level in a MH-60R Seahawk minutes from touchdown on the fantail of your ship. When did this happen?

You find another stray thought demanding focus. It tells you to slow down. Focus. Survive. Survive the lies. Survive false expectation and deception. Cut off that tail; it hasn't been bushy for a while. You didn't need to worry about dimming your eyes anymore. Your visor is up.

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Piercing thought once more, but unlike before. Across from you, a passenger sits with his visor down. His hand pulling mic to his lips. His name tag bears a last name of Italian heritage, one similar to your own. His words enter your mind through your headphones. You however, do

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not know the language associated with your namesake, though you understood what he meant. You knew what he saw in your eyes.

You don't respond, not to him anyway. Instead, you resolve to survive. Mentally, physically, and emotionally, you would make yourself survive the external lies and internal conflict.

You resolve to take stock of the simple pleasures, the things that keep you going. After all, this whirlwind of a tour would leave there being less countries in the Pacific unseen, than otherwise. You see the royal blue algae glow in wake unfurling from waves broken from the bow. Stars are never so bright as when observed afloat. Dolphins become so often a sight, you come to term them sea-rats. It is no longer necessary to just imagine whales breaching the surface of the sea. You indeed make some friends along the way. Some good people found their way alongside you. You even had heartwarming personal notes of support and well wishes on qualification exams from Sailors you leave a positive mark on. You don't watch the news anymore, you are a part of it. Your ship puffs its American chest as those of near-peer adversaries puff theirs back at you in contentious sea zones. Not everything was a lie, or a soured memory. You can work with that.

Your struggles don't end at resolution of survival, though. Not long after returning to your ship, you learn a chaplain commander has embarked. He is eager to speak with you. A former marine, he is large and imposing, but such appearances fade behind an intense urge to crack dad jokes whenever possible. He does not wish to discuss jokes this time though. He is disappointed to learn that though you finished your SAPR VA classes, your certifications are not yet arrived. He is in need of a qualified and reliable VA. You inform him there is another VA fully qualified onboard. He reminds you of his emphasis. The one you suggest had betrayed

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victim confidentiality for gossip before, unbeknown to you. You tell him you'll take the case as soon as credentials arrive. They then seem to arrive sooner than you ever anticipated. Chaps mentions knowing a great many good people in the VA community.

Despite your resolve, you are not yet ready to handle a case like this. Blue-on-blue sexual assault, cut and dry. One forces himself on the other. Alcohol soaks the story. Blood soaks the following suicide attempt by the victim. She survives and is recovering off ship in a navy Hospital. Her chief, only ever stoic before, seems mentally broken before you. She found her sailor following the suicide attempt. You'll never forget this chief struggling to form coherent sentences while sobbing and gasping for air, reliving the memories for the record. Training did not prepare you for this interaction. This isn't on the recruitment posters.

The rest of your tour passes in a flash. You see sailors and their families interrupted by their officers and chiefs mid pack-out, due to depart for the well-earned reprieve of shore duty. They bear news that their orders are extended on station, and that they must unpack their packed belongings to spend another couple years with the team. Was it you, who delivered that news? You can't remember anymore. *Focus*, your mind tells you. You learn newer female officers find themselves barraged with solicitations to see the homes of senior personnel before they learn who in uniform they can trust. It sounds like many avoid assault, fortunately. *Focus!* Your mind starts to scream when your thoughts stray to this topic. Time flashes forward again.

A sailor on armed watch doesn't return on time to the ship after being relieved. *Survive*, you hear inside. Weapons Department officers and chiefs notice that sailor is on the list of those not to be issued a firearm. Those in charge of the armory, and officers thereof begin to scramble around you. *SURVIVE!* The single thought screams so loud you almost don't hear the sound of a single shot ringing out in the night. You almost don't hear the awful silence that follows, but you

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do. You will begin to forget these memories, and those like them. They feel more like dreamlike. Time begins to move faster, as you begin to remember less.

Before you know it, you earn the captain's highest recommendation upon departure, along with jealous glares of other junior officers. In his congratulations, he applauds your incredible focus. You don't know how you got here. You think back on that blur of a tour. You know there is even less unseen in the Pacific now, but you can't quite remember what it all looks like. You know some Japanese now and have a branded walking stick from a Mt. Fuji climb. Those memories do not visit you in the night, though. Unsolicited, specters, memories and tendrils of betrayal and darkness leave you covered in sweat in the middle of the night. You don't know how to make them stop.

Only after you leave the command do they begin to leave you. Only after the deck ceases pitch or yaw. That's right, it doesn't even roll. It isn't a deck, but a floor. No piss-filled plastic bottles rock in angle irons between ship ribs. Pens fail to roll themselves off desks. Glasses do not have to be watched for fear of falling over simply by existing at sea. You survive your peacetime tour. The thought sours.

The notion of such self-induced chaos on any organizational level of this organization confounds you still. You fight it off remembering the small things that got you through what should not have ever been such a challenge as peacetime operations. Sailors should never have turned on one another but they did, and you survived. The fight isn't over, but you figure out how to get past it.

You fall in love, on land, and resolve not to ever lose that. You'd return only for the wonders that kept you going. You still drive ships, just smaller ones now. Ones that fit on small lakes and pull inner tubes behind them. You call them boats now. You pilot them with the one

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you love, surrounded by family and small dogs. These new memories start to replace old ones. They don't wake you in the night in cold sweats. Sleep you treats you with comforting dreams instead.

The mirror doesn't show you the young man you thought you were still. You wear a little more life on your face now. The one who eager to serve, the one imagining himself like those on the posters with bright eyes and a bushy tail is dead. But you survive. You survive every day now.