

TINKER'S  
SEA

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SAMPLE



# CHAPTER ONE

# COAST GUARD

The waves tossed the wooden ship. Wind bore down on its tattered sails, alternately driving its bow under or nearly capsizing it. The headsail was torn and flapped through the sleet and hail that pummelled the deck.

“We can’t get to it, the swell’s too high!” screamed a man dressed in bright orange, wetsuit-like, heavy-weather gear and Wellington boots. He watched the sinking vessel with worried eyes.

“Looks abandoned anyway,” yelled a smaller figure, wearing a similar outfit with gold captain’s bars on the shoulders, as she stared through a set of binoculars. “Or maybe not.” The captain pressed a button on her binoculars, shifting them to infrared. “There, tied to the wheel. It looks like a live one.”

“Ground out, you have the eyes of an eagle. Why haven’t they reefed sail?” called the first figure.

“Don’t know, Bill. Helm, cut a course, thirty degrees port, three quarters ahead,” ordered the captain into a microphone on her collar.

“Aye,” acknowledged the helmsman through her ear bud. The polycarbonate rescue ship cut into the waves as its bio-diesel-fuelled engines drove it forward. Water from the rain and the waves formed icy sheets on the deck and hand rails.

“Tabitha, this one’s a goner, and we can’t take this gale much longer ourselves.”

“Belay that. They’re in Novo Gaian waters. That makes them

our responsibility! Bring up the line-gun.” Tabitha threw back her hood, revealing a length of grey-streaked, dark brown hair pulled into a braid. Water streamed over her attractive features, which were marred by a furious scowl.

“You’ll never make the shot,” challenged the first mate.

“Would you like to wager on that? Get me the shorting line-gun.”

As the first mate disappeared below decks, Tabitha moved to the bow, gauging the distance between her vessel and the floundering ship. The converted forty-foot yacht beneath her keeled over with a wave and she clutched the icy railing as the ship righted itself.

“Don’t take the larks for granted,” she spoke to herself.

“Here.” The first mate passed her what looked like a shoulder-mounted missile launcher. “You tied off, Tabby?”

The captain smiled at the breach in protocol. “Always, Bill.” She snapped the rubberized line that connected her safety belt to the rail. “We’ll take this astern. If we can tow that ship’s bow into the waves, we might ride out the storm.”

“Aye.”

Tabby and Bill followed the rail that secured their safety lines to the stern of the ship. Once there, Tabby placed one foot on the lower railing as Bill connected the winch line to the gun. Tabby hefted the gun to her shoulder. Her heavy-weather gear conformed to her fit, medium-bosomed body, leaving little to the imagination.

“This one gets painted,” observed Bill quietly.

“Engines to half,” snapped Tabby as her ship pulled ahead of the floundering vessel. The rescue boat slowed, barely holding position against the swell.

“We’re taking on water. The bilges can’t keep up,” observed a voice through Tabby’s ear bud.

“Steady. Steady.” Tabby’s finger tightened on the trigger. With a blast of flame the line was away, arcing towards the sinking ship at the end of a small rocket.

“It’s... it’s... Hurn’s arrow! You hit them. Just below the pulpit.” Bill sounded shocked.

The cylinders containing chemicals in the rocket’s cone burst and mingled on impact, activating an instantly setting adhesive stronger than steel.

“Full power to engines and steer into the swell,” Tabby spoke into her uniform’s collar. “Bill, man the winch, once we pull into position bring them in closer. I’m adding a retrieval buoy to the evac harness’s gear. Divers should be able to salvage something if we have to cut them loose.”

“Aye,” called the mate as he disconnected the line from the launcher’s feeder and manned the winch.

“Captain,” engineering called up. “The pumps can’t keep up with the water we’re taking on.”

“Understood. Tell Tim to rig a couple of the portable pumps to help keep us dry.”

“I heard that. We’ll lose power. Generator can’t keep up as it is,” hollered a man’s voice through the ear bud.

“Open up the sails.”

“In this wind? The fins won’t take it!”

Tabby turned and looked at the twin pillars of the turbine-rotary sails rising from the deck.

“They’ll hold.” Only Bill, who was coming on deck, could see how his captain crossed her fingers.

“I have the evac rig.” Bill pulled a motorized chair with a scuba rig attached to it onto the icy deck.

“Send me over. I’ll get them in the inflatable, then haul the lot of us back,” said Tabby.

“Captain, I should—”

“That’s an order. A girl has to have some fun.” Tabitha pulled an equipment vest off the back of the chair and put it on.

Gritting his teeth, Bill sealed the clamps holding the unit to the line and helped Tabby attach herself to the seat.

“You’ll have to hurry. I don’t think that log can stay up much longer,” observed Bill.

Slapping the supply pack at the chair’s base, Tabby smiled and said, “Long enough,” before pulling the scuba mask over her face and filling her mouth with the regulator.

The chair lurched forward, following the safety line which was held taut by her ship’s constant movement away from the stricken vessel. Tabby found herself alternating between being submerged and above water as waves crashed around her, tossing her from side to side. For a moment she found herself upside down. Minutes after leaving her ship, she was facing the bow of the wooden vessel.

“What a ride!” She clipped a line to the ship’s railing, then released her safety harness and scrambled onto the deck. A second later, she’d grabbed the equipment pack’s snag line and clipped it to the railing, then hauled the pack up after her.

Following the railing, she struggled over the pitching deck to the ship’s wheel.

A male youth in heavy, wool clothing, soaked to the skin, fought to hold the wheel steady.

“I’m Captain Drivensky, Novo Gaian Coast Guard. How many aboard?” yelled Tabby.

“Six. The rest are sick. I’m—” The young man was silenced by dry heaves.

Tabby moved to steady the wheel until he recovered.

“Why haven’t you reefed sail?” she yelled.

“The storm came up too fast, and I don’t know how.” The youth’s voice cracked as he was speaking and Tabby revised her estimate of his age downward.

“We need to dump your sails before they pull you over.”

“How?”

“I’ll blow your masts.”

“Shorting! The captain will kill me if I let you do that.”

“Better him than the storm.”

Tabby left the open bridge and fought through the driving sleet to the base of the main mast. Opening a pocket on her vest, she took out what looked like a piece of modelling clay and pressed it against the wooden pole. Taking a detonator from another pocket, she pressed it into the clay and then tied a strip of high-tensile-strength polymer fabric around the charge, ensuring the energy would be directed into the wood. That done, she scrambled to the second mast, repeating her actions, then the base of the forespar. Seconds passed as she positioned herself by the port rigging lines. Gauging the wind, she took a remote control from another pocket and pressed a thumb-sized button on it. There was a sound like thunder and the masts shattered, toppling into the lake, dragging the ship dangerously to starboard. Taking a knife from a hip sheath, she slashed the first set of hemp ropes binding the fallen rigging to the port deck. Following the line of the safety rail, she reached the second set of lines and cut them. The masts twisted, then fell into the water on the starboard side. The ship dragged to starboard and shuddered as the mass of its own rigging slammed into its side.

Racing, Tabby made her way to starboard, cutting lines as she went until the masts fell completely away. The ship stopped lurching and tipping as the effects of the wind were reduced.

“Now the pump can do some good.” Moving hand-over-hand, she followed the rail back to the bow where she opened the emergency kit and pulled out a cube-shaped device half a metre to a side. Clutching the handrail with one hand, she carried it to a hatch that opened into the ship, then set it on the deck and hit a button. A report like rifle fire sounded as spikes were driven into the deck, securing the device. Pulling a short hose mounted on a reel at the pump’s side, she clipped it so it would shoot over the gunwale. Dragging a longer hose on a reel, Tabby opened the hatch and moved into the ship.

She found herself in a dark, narrow companionway with dirty, wooden walls. The smells of stale sweat and vomit permeated the air. A burly man dressed in heavy clothing lay face down on the floor in a puddle of blood. His hair had fallen out in clumps, leaving his scalp a patchy mess.

Activating a line of LEDs mounted on the shoulders of her turnout gear, she moved to the body and checked the man's pulse. "Lady Freya, protect me. May your gods grant you peace, no matter who they be," she muttered as she moved past the corpse and down a flight of stairs. Below decks, the ship was knee deep in water and loaded with barrels and crates. Groping in the half light from her shoulder units, she found a floor grate that opened to the bilge. Pushing the end of the hose into the bilge, she pulled the remote control from her pocket and hit a combination of keys.

On the deck, the pump began drawing a steady stream of water out of the ship.

In the half light, Tabby failed to notice the marks burnt into the barrel lids. She climbed the stairs and started opening doors along the companionway. One door opened to reveal a room with two sets of stacked hammocks separated by a narrow walkway. Four men lay on the hammocks, their skins deathly pale and blood staining their blankets. One of them looked at her with bloodshot eyes. His thin, pale lips moved in a parody of speech, then he fell unconscious. Tabby checked the men's pulses. Two were dead, and as far as she could tell the other two were soon to follow. She moved towards the deck hatch.

"*Orca*, this is Captain Drivensky. Do you read?" Tabby spoke into the collar of her weather gear.

"We hear you, Captain. You better get the survivors off that log. It doesn't look good," replied Bill's voice.

"Wish I could, Bill. There's a sickness here. Designate this as a plague ship, full quarantine. I can't risk infecting our crew. Keep up the tow but don't risk the ship. I'll ride it out here."

"Tabby—"

"That's an order, Bill! Get us to the Hope Island quarantine port if you can. If you can't, tell Sara her mom loves her, and tell Malcolm that he's still a son of a bitch! Over and out."

The ship lurched to one side, then righted. Tabby fought her way to the bridge. She turned off the LEDs on her shoulders when she stepped on deck. The youth had let go of the wheel and was again dry heaving.

"Ground out!" Tabby raced to grab the wheel and true their course. The sleet whipped around her and the *Orca* was little more than a shadow against the storm.

“What’s your name?” she bellowed.

The youth looked up miserably. “Andy. Andy Camble.”

“Okay, Andy, we’re going to try and ride out the storm. When did the crew get sick?”

“Two days ago. Cook was feeling queasy when he sacked out, but everyone else was fine. The next morning I was the only one who wasn’t puking for a change. I didn’t know what to do. The captain told me to steer east-southeast and keep going till I hit Novo Gaia. Said Bright Land healers could fix anything and they’d help us for our cargo. I did my best, but I wasn’t sure where we were and then this storm hit and…”

“Relax, you’re in Novo Gaia, I’m here now. Do you know where your bilge pump is?”

“Yeah, it was my job to pump out the bilge.”

“Go to it and start pumping. The unit I put in will be overwhelmed by all this. Just keep pumping as fast as you can until I tell you to stop.”

“Okay.” Andy stood, unclipped his line and lurched as the ship tipped to starboard. Tabby grabbed his arm and held him as the deck righted itself.

“Ground out! Never unclip a line until another is secured. Always tie yourself off!” she snapped. “Now go and stay alive long enough to get there.”

Andy clipped his safety line to the railing and pulled himself hand over hand to the hatch.

Brushing her transmitter with her chin, Tabitha turned it on. “*Orca*, do you read?”

“We read you, Captain.”

“Status?”

“Between the wind turbines and the engines we’re running the bilge pumps full. We’re dry. Meteorology says the squall should start to taper down soon. When we’re clear I’ll set course for the plague port. What’s your status?”

“We’re holding our own. Tell the medicos we have a six man crew; three dead, two critical and one seemingly unaffected. I don’t know my status. When we’re out of the storm I’ll examine the victims. Over and out.”

“Understood. Over and out.”

Tabby lost track of time as she fought with the ship’s wheel. After what seemed like days, the storm began to abate. It was full night by the time she felt confident in tying off the wheel. Collecting her medical kit from the equipment pack, she headed below decks to examine the sick men. Entering the grubby hallway, she could hear a *thump whoosh* sound. In a room to one side, Andy worked the long handle of a pump. The boy was

stripped to the waist, revealing a thin, muscular frame. Sweat dripped off him and soaked his short, black hair, despite the near freezing temperature. He paused to dry heave, then pulled himself up and went back to pumping. Blood dripped from burst blisters where he clutched the handle.

Tabby moved to his side and placed her hands on the backs of his. Andy looked at her with uncomprehending eyes.

“You can stop. Good job.” She gently eased his hands away from the pump. The skin of his palms looked like ground meat.

“I...” Andy collapsed.

Tabitha helped lower him to the floor. “You did great. Rest, I’ll be back to bandage your hands after I check the others.”

“Okay.” Andy sat staring at his hands as if they belonged to someone else.

Tabby nodded once to herself and muttered, “Tough kid,” as she moved to the sleeping cabin. A quick check revealed that one of the two survivors had succumbed. Pulse, respiration, pupil response followed for the unconscious survivor. Opening the med kit, she took out a bag of normal saline I.V. solution and started it feeding into the man’s vein. An abnormal amount of blood dribbled from the puncture site. Tabby pulled out a tube as long as her middle finger and slowly passed it over the man’s body.

“Ground out!” She stared at the numbers on the tube’s display screen.

“What is it?” asked a voice that cracked mid-sentence behind her.

“Andy.” Tabby turned around.

Andy stared past her into the cabin. “What happened to them?”

Tabby looked at her young companion. His arms trembled from over-exertion and his skin was pale, but blood no longer dripped from his palms. She held the cylindrical device over him and checked its readout before sighing with relief.

“I don’t know how but, I’m sorry. Andy, it’s radiation.”

The whites showed around Andy’s eyes.

Tabby rushed to continue. “You’re okay. You hardly show any.” Tabby leaned against the wall as she thought. “Did they eat or drink anything you didn’t?”

Andy snorted. “Everything! I’ve barfed every grounded thing I ate since I got on this log.”

“That’s where it probably came from. Where’s your galley?”

Andy led the way down the companionway to another door. Tabby opened it, revealing a small galley complete with a charcoal stove. Potatoes had spilled out of one of the cupboards

and rolled around the floor. A side of salt fish half a metre wide hung from floor to ceiling. The bottom of the side of fish had been cut away. Leading with her Geiger counter, she entered the room, then pushed Andy back when he moved to follow.

“Not a good idea. It’s hot in here.” Stepping to the side of fish, she ran her Geiger counter over it and whistled. “Where’d this come from?”

“They were a gift to the captain. Supposed to be some kind of delicacy. Fish stew every night since it came aboard. It tastes like carp and that’s shorted.” Andy stared at the fish with distaste.

“And you didn’t eat any?” Tabby backed out of the galley.

“Didn’t keep any down, grounded ship, shorted lake. I, excuse—” Andy fell to the deck dry heaving.

Tabby closed the galley’s door and activated her transmitter. “*Orca*, this is Captain Drivensky.”

“We read you, Captain,” Bill’s voice sounded in her ear.

“I’ve looked at the medical cases. I think it’s radiation poisoning. Forward that to the plague port. There’s something weird going on here. Currently we have two survivors and I don’t expect one of them to last the night.”

“Understood.”

“Over and out.”

“Over and out.”

Tabby shook her head, then moved to her medical kit and sat on the floor opposite Andy. “I’ll give you something for your stomach, then fix up your hands, okay?”

“I can’t keep pills down,” he objected.

“Then a shot it is. Don’t worry; I’m a nurse and a tinker.”

“Oh, wow.” Andy stared at her. “A tinker! I’ve heard about tinkers. My uncle said you were a bunch of grounded thieves, but my ma told me a tinker saved my pa’s life when they were little.”

Tabby half listened as she gave the youth his shot, then bandaged his hands. She then looked him in the eyes, bracing for what she suspected would be the hardest part. “That’s your hands fixed up. They’ll heal now. Just try not to use them. Andy.” She donned a face of professional compassion perfected during years as an ER nurse. “Do you want to say goodbye to any of the crew?”

Andy stared at the corpse in the companionway. Standing, he moved to the body.

Tabby watched, not knowing what to expect. The boy reached down and roughly pulled a long chain supporting a pendant from around the dead man’s neck.

“You can toss the grounded scum overboard now.” He clutched the pendant. “This was my pa’s. The only thing the pirates didn’t take. One of them said I should have something of my parents, not that it’s worth much. The captain took it when I came aboard. He said he owned me so he owned everything I had.” Andy kicked the corpse.

Tabitha shook her head as Andy walked to a door further down the companionway. “This was his cabin.”

“Child slaver! Serves you right, you bastard.” Tabby repacked her med kit.

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