MAELSTROM

Mariner Cruise Lines launched its newest flagship, "Voyager," amidst great fanfare from the port of Reykjavik, Iceland. A large crowd came to see her off, with colored streamers, hearty cheers, and rousing music from a local big brass band. It was a crisp yet bright mid-June morning.

The cruise liner's Master Captain was Roald Halvorsen. A thirty-eight-year veteran of command at the helm, Halvorsen hailed from Stavanger, Norway. He took to sea at the tender age of fifteen and worked his way up the ranks, earning his Master's certificate at the age of twenty-seven. Now, at the mandatory retirement age of sixty-five, Roald was in charge one last time on this, his final voyage. The special inaugural trip was scheduled to end in Oslo after seventeen days cruising in the North Atlantic.

This cruise would be unique, however, because the Voyager would be sailing first into the remote waters north of the Arctic Circle, then reverse its path and head to Nuuk, the capitol of Greenland, followed later by six other port stops. The twelve-deck, 785-foot-long Voyager carried 1250 earnest passengers, its guests pampered by 800 crew members from 50 different countries. The ship's second-in-command was Lars Jansson, from Goteborg, Sweden, another experienced seaman, age fifty-three. Both Jansson and Halvorsen were married men with grown children. Their wives had become close friends over the years, and the women bolstered each other's spirits whenever their husbands were away from home, which was often, as expected.

The voyage promised to be filled with exciting natural encounters, including enormous snowy-white icebergs and the potential sightings of humpback whales, dolphins, seals, narwhals, and rare sea birds. But, although the ship was equipped with the latest navigational and safety technology, there were always dangers lurking in the mysterious Arctic waters, especially at night. For example, modern sonar could detect icebergs floating above the water level, but sometimes the underwater bulk of these moving ice islands was not identified until it was too late -- as the ill-fated Titanic sadly discovered back in 1912.

The first two days out of port were smooth and routine. The passengers enjoyed lavish gourmet meals with wine and cocktails; attended informative lectures on Arctic flora and fauna, geology, and history in the ship's central auditorium; worked out in the elaborate new exercise room; watched movies on big-screen televisions in their deluxe guest suites; treated themselves to a spa treatment or a massage; or simply relaxed with a good book and a nice cappuccino in comfy leather chairs in the ship's impressive library. About 70% of the passengers were from the United States, with an additional 10% hailing from Canada, another 10% from Australia, 5% from the United Kingdom, and the remaining 5% from the various nearby Scandinavian countries.

But, seemingly out of nowhere, everything on the voyage began to oddly change.

The sky grew dark and the wind strongly picked up. The normal blue ocean waters turned various shades of grey like dull lead, with growing ten-meter-high waves soon breaking with furious whitecaps. Both the barometric pressure and the air temperature quickly dropped. Although the Voyager was approaching the date of the summer solstice on June 22 -- the longest daylight period of the year, with almost twenty-two hours of sun this far north -- no one aboard ship could tell. The sky and far horizon was now fixed in a kind of murky twilight, the sun completely obscured under thick clouds.

The ship's spacious outdoor deck -- featuring its salt-water swimming pool, with lounge chairs around its perimeter and dual hot tubs --was quickly placed off-limits for safety reasons. Seasickness patches and pills were offered to any needy passengers by the Voyager's Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Owen York. Disposable vomit bags were also made available in discreet dispensers near the ship's elevators.

Master Captain Halvorsen summoned Jansson, his Staff Captain, to the bridge for a consultation.

"Lars, contact our home base in Oslo and report our current position and conditions. Request an urgent updated weather forecast. Let's see if we can find out how long we have to ride out this nasty spell."

Captain Roald next went on the ship's intercom, to inform and reassure both the passengers and crew that the ship was in no immediate danger.

"Your attention, please...This is your Captain. As you know, the ship we are sailing on is a brand-new and sturdily built vessel, so I can vouch for our continued safety during this current rough patch of weather. I'll keep you informed after I receive an estimated time when we can once again enjoy calmer seas. As for now, please relax in your staterooms with a good book or a movie. Try not to walk in the hallways or take the stairs unless it becomes necessary. This request is for your own safety and the safety of others. Voyager will be swaying side to side and bouncing a bit up and down for a while, even as our ship's auto-stabilizers are doing their best to minimize such uncomfortable motions. Lastly, you should know that our regular dining schedule later this evening should not be affected. Thank you for your kind patience and cooperation."

But the sky grew even darker, with roiling clouds exhibiting strange shades of blue and indigo. Soon, an icy fog enveloped the Voyager, signaling that large icebergs were nearby and possibly approaching. A lookout crew with their binoculars were sent to the bow of the ship as a precaution, to alert the bridge if any dangerous ice should appear that the sonar might miss.

Staff Captain Jansson, meanwhile, returned back to the command bridge with some disturbing news. He spoke in a low voice so as not to be overheard by the other secondary officers there on duty.

"Captain, I regret to inform you that all of our external communications are down. Inexplicably, we cannot reach the outside world at this point. Our computer technicians wanted to assure you that they are working earnestly to fix this serious problem as soon as possible and will keep you fully informed."

"Are you telling me that our Global Positioning Satellite link, and all of our emergency radio bands are inoperable?" Halvorsen demanded, frowning and perplexed. "How is that even possible, with our latest sophisticated computer backup systems?"

"I don't know, sir...I also found out that even our wi-fi and every cell phone across the ship is no longer functioning. I'm afraid we are on our own until we can identify and repair this unusual problem. We can't even send out an SOS signal for help, should that become necessary."

Roald quickly pulled out his mobile phone to verify what he was just told. The device was inert. Zero bars. No signal.

"Assemble all the senior officers in the staff conference room immediately," the Captain commanded Jansson. "We have a really serious problem now."

The Chief Navigation Officer (Anders), the Chief Deck Officer (Henrik), the Safety Officer (Nils), the Security Officer (Gunnar), the Chief Engineer (Magnus), the First Chef (Yves), and the ship's Social Director (Amelia) were quickly gathered to hear the latest news from Captain Halvorsen.

"Anders, exactly where was our location before our tracking went down?"

"Captain, we were at (he gave him the last known latitude and longitude coordinates), which was 279 nautical miles off the northeastern coast of Greenland. We are still moving northward with the East Greenland Current. We have already crossed the Arctic Circle. We are also well past normal cargo shipping lanes, so no other ships are nearby to help us."

The other senior officers next gave their reports, detailing the food and fuel supplies, the concerns and complaints already expressed by some of the passengers, and other important information.

"Very well. Inform your staffs to try and keep to our regular routines as much as possible. Keep the passengers calm and reassured. Naturally, I'll keep you posted with any new developments. That is all...Dismissed."

The communications blackout continued for two more days, as the seas continued to be rough and stormy but thankfully not rainy. Then something unexpected was added to the ship's predicament. An immense display of the famed Northern Lights -- the Aurora Borealis -- appeared, with its amazing dancing bands of colored lights, muted green and pale yellow, blazing across the sky. The bravest passengers, extra-bundled up against the cold winds and enduring the pitching seas, came up on deck to witness the extraordinary spectacle of one of nature's true marvels, which are triggered by solar flare activity traveling from the sun, which in turn later strikes the Earth's polar atmosphere.

The awesome heavenly display lasted for about thirty minutes. But when it was over, to everyone's surprise, all of the electricity aboard the Voyager cruise liner went out!

Suddenly, there were no lights, no television, no intercom, no elevators, no automatic-opening deck doors, and no room or salon heating. The ship's kitchens came to an abrupt halt --the electric stoves, microwave ovens, large mixing machines, and the refrigerators and freezers were instantly no longer working. And because the ship relied on its own modern desalination plant to provide fresh water for cooking, drinking, washing, and laundry, all of those crucial ship categories would now be affected with the power gone. The ship's giant electric generators were dead. Everything computer-controlled stopped working, crippling the ultra-modern cruise ship.

Fortunately, the battery-powered walkie-talkies that the ship's officers always carried on their hip belts still worked. Captain Halvorsen was still able to communicate with his senior staff -- at least until those device batteries held out.

He ordered all emergency battery-powered lanterns removed from the Voyager's twenty life boats and given to selected crew members on each of the ship's decks and departments. (The emergency life boats' food and water supplies, however, were to be left undisturbed, should the worse happen later and everyone be forced to abandon ship.)

Minutes later, however, the Captain got the worst possible news from his Chief Engineer, Magnus.

"Captain, our engines are inoperable and our auto-stabilizers are down as well. We still have plenty of fuel, but the electric generators which are needed to power our engines are all inert, as you know. I'm afraid that we are dead in the water, sir. We are at the mercy of this horrible weather and the strong current which continues to pull us north. I'm very sorry to have to report this to you, Captain, but that's where we stand..."

Halvorsen removed his eyeglasses and rubbed his tired eyes, then ran his fingers in frustration through his thick mane of white hair. "*Herregud!"* he cursed in disgust. Nothing in his training and his decades at sea had ever prepared him for such an extreme emergency situation. The lives of over 2000 people was solely in his hands...

Roald thought of his wife, Elsa, and their four children. He had to make the right decisions now if he ever hoped to see them again, and he obviously had to save his ship. He recalled that his aged grandfather, Bjorn, suggested to Roald's father that he should name his first boy after the country's national hero, Roald Amundsen -- the plucky, iron-willed Norwegian explorer who discovered the South Pole in 1911. So it was time to grimly meet the serious challenges he was stuck with, as befitted his name, Halvorsen realized. Now focus and get down to work, dammit! he told himself.

The Captain found out how much drinking water was left in the storage tanks before the desalination plant went down. He ordered Chief Deck Officer Henrik to have his staff individually inform each crew member and passenger stateroom that water would be delivered and restricted to one liter per person per day. All laundry and housekeeping was suspended. No toilet flushing, and no showering would be allowed either. All individual room plumbing was shut off.

The remaining fresh water would last no longer than six days, however. This fact would be kept quiet, in hopes that the Voyager would be noticed missing by Mariner Cruise Lines, and that the lost liner would somehow be rescued before that deadline.

Because of the persistent murky outdoor twilight and no indoor lighting, the ship was almost completely dark inside. All dining room services were canceled. Yves, the First Chef, took a careful inventory of the ship's food and beverage stores. He set up a schedule of room service deliveries of the most perishable fresh foods that would go bad first. Because dishwashing was impossible -- both with no electricity for the machines and no water to waste -- each passenger was given one plate, one cup, and one set of cutlery to reuse. The new menu of meals was understandably crude, and everything was forced to be served cold. (Canned soft drinks, bottles of wine, and some canned goods would be kept in emergency reserve if the situation became more dire.) Eight days of edible food was estimated to remain. The rest of the food stocks would spoil and hence be unsafe to eat after that, according to the ship's Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Owen York.

Most passengers, meanwhile, maintained their composure and obedience under these unusual circumstances. When asked if any candles were available to provide more room light (a lucky few had their own small personal flashlights), Safety Officer Nils was forced to reply no, due to fire safety regulations for all ships at sea. No fires of any kind were ever allowed on board.

Meanwhile, should any panic or crowd disruptions flare up, Chief Security Officer Gunnar ordered his staff to carry their holstered sidearm pistols, just in case. This precautionary move had earlier been quietly approved by Captain Halvorsen. And, although most of the public were unaware that such places existed, every cruise ship actually had a secret brig (jail cell) for any extreme troublemakers, as well as a morgue for any untimely deaths while at sea.

There were no passengers under the age of thirty on the ship (or any pets either, for that matter), so child care was not a concern for the crew. There were, however, about fifteen single passengers (all elderly women), so Social Director Amelia made it a point to visit each person to help ease their feelings of isolation. She cordially offered to chat for an hour, or asked if they wanted to play cards or a game of Scrabble to help pass the time.

The ship was now a week out of port, still drifting, with no end in sight. The revolting stink of unflushed toilets, unwashed bodies and dirty food dishes was mounting. The ship's hand-sanitizer dispensers were empty too, as people had used them to try and stay clean. Although no one was restricted to their rooms, most passengers stayed inside their suites anyway, depressed and frustrated, some even fearful. Both passengers and crew lost track of time and space. Was it day or night? The sun and moon were both covered by thick dark clouds.Were they still going north, drifting with the current, or had the awful unceasing wind and waves forced them into another direction? No one knew. Captain Halvorsen was similarly baffled. He asked Lars Jansson what he thought.

"Any theories, Lars, for when this nightmare will finally end? You know as well as I that everyone is exhausted -- mentally, physically, and emotionally."

"Sorry, no theories, Captain...I only wish I did. I think that sometimes, the only explanation is no explanation," the Staff Captain replied. The men stared into each other's eyes, in futile recognition of their dire situation.

It was shortly later that the ship's Lecturer -Librarian, Bridgett Svendatter, asked to speak with the Captain in private in her cabin. An energetic and attractive forty-five year old blonde with a Ph.D. from the University of Stockholm, she was an expert in virtually everything related to the Arctic Polar regions. She was unmarried ("...still waiting for the right man..." Bridgett once admitted, with a melancholic sigh. "Where did all the intelligent men go?")

"Captain, the Arctic is really two distinct realms: the visibly physical -- with its ice, snow, wildlife, and native peoples -- and the darkly psychological.

The Far North is inhabited by the unhappy ghosts of history -- its failed explorers, its lost ships crushed and later sunk in the ice, and its further harrowing record of starvation, madness, suicide, and even cannibalism. It is the place where Mary Shelley's fictional Dr. Victor Frankenstein went to capture and destroy the renegade monster he had created. It is the realm of danger, terror, utter silence, unimaginable loneliness, and nightmares -- an unknown land given to strange tales, as befitting the Ends of the Earth, similar to Antarctica...True, certain people are drawn to the mystery and romance of the Arctic, but many who risked venturing there never returned.

In Norse mythology, Captain, there is a legend. Two Norse gods were said to be battling over control of the Great Ocean. In their back-and-forth struggle, they whipped the seas into a single gigantic swirling vortex, a wicked Maelstrom of fantastic size and fury. Throughout history, ships have actually reported seeing such a massive whirlpool far off the northwestern coast of Norway, a few hundred miles north and west from the Lofoten Islands. Some lucky ships stayed far enough away to be spared, but others were witnessed to being sucked in and down into oblivion -- much as theorists describe the effect of encountering a black hole in the depths of outer space.

Captain, my intuition tells me that we are being drawn -- for some unknown reason -- towards a deadly rendezvous with that terrible Maelstrom. I fear we are drifting there now, even as I speak. And, under our present unusual circumstances, there's absolutely nothing we can do to prevent it."

Hearing all of this, Halvorsen was now even more disturbed and worried. He thanked Bridgett for her input and somberly left her cabin. His walkie-talkie soon clicked, and informed him that several large waterspouts were now sighted off the port bow -- ferocious water-tornados which could reap havoc if they collided with the Voyager. The Captain, however, pathetically knew that his ship was helpless to maneuver out of harm's way. It was an awful feeling for any leader to be out of any sense of control. Also, more than once, the inert ship bumped into a few icebergs of various sizes, but fortunately the strikes were not forceful enough to damage the hull.

It grew even colder on the unheated cruise liner. Without access to still warmer clothes, the passengers and crew resorted to wrapping themselves in their bed blankets when moving around. The fog continued to thicken. Reality took on the appearance and sensation of being lost and trapped in a dreadful dream. Dr. York prescribed Zoloft and Prozac for those suffering severe anxiety and depression until his supply simply ran out.

Some of the crew began thinking in doomed paranormal and historic terms. Had their cruise ship drifted into some kind of unknown (albeit northern, rather than southern) 'Bermuda Triangle,' where ships mysteriously lost power, lost all sense of direction, and then vanished without a trace? Or could the Voyager become a bizarre 'ghost liner' like the famous ghost ship Mary Celeste, with everyone on board completely disappearing in 1872 from a drifting, yet still intact vessel? Would their ship keep moving north into the ice fields, only to become trapped in frozen seas like Sir John Franklin's ships "Erebus" and "Terror" when he attempted to find the fabled Northwest Passage (1845-1847) across northern Canada as a polar shortcut from Europe to Asia? All had died on that doomed dual-ship expedition, the Voyager's crew grimly knew.

Throughout this strange ordeal, Captain Halvorsen kept in touch with his senior staff and reported regularly to his 1250 captive passengers. He noted as much factual information as possible in his daily log -- hand-written in pen in a spiral notebook, his laptop computer being useless. If they survived, his notes could be a valuable maritime record for others to analyze and learn from. And, if they didn't survive, the same...

Lightning and thunder -- but without any rain -- alerted everyone on board of further deteriorating weather conditions. The thickly-clouded skies were a frightful and sickly dark purple. The howling winds increased to nearly pre-hurricane levels. The exposed, brave iceberg lookout crew in the Voyager's bow then reported a horrible sight, dead ahead!

It was the immense Maelstrom that Bridgett had foretold in her discussion with the Captain.

The Voyager was being sucked toward this ultimate horror, like a frail cork drawn towards a vast, swirling drain. The helpless cruise liner began to spin in slow circles as it was pulled ever closer. With no power to maneuver to safety, the liner was clearly doomed. Everyone on board was certainly going to die...

The dramatic events happened so quickly that Captain Halvorsen had no time to warn his senior officers, let alone the remaining crew and his hapless passengers. He glanced at his digital wristwatch -- 02:44 -- then, in kind of a daze, wrote the time down as a final entry in his log notebook. He said a brief silent prayer of goodbye to his wife, Elsa, and to their four children. Oh, God...oh, God...why??

The last thing Roald saw from his command bridge-- amidst falling, unsecured helm room debris -- was the Voyager tilted stern upward and going down by the bow, into a tremendously roaring and fathomless vortex of inky darkness...

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"Captain...Captain Halvorsen, sir... Are you awake? You told me to rouse you when we were two hours out of port. The Oslo harbor pilot radioed that he will come aboard on schedule in an hour and guide us in."

The face of Staff Captain Lars Jansson smiled and looked kindly as he offered a fresh cup of coffee to his commander. "You were really having a deep sleep, sir. You failed to answer my phone summons, so I came up personally. Well, Captain, how does it feel to have successfully completed your final voyage?"

Roald was rather disoriented. He cleared his throat. "So, everything is O.K.? The ship, the crew, the passengers...are all safe?" He slowly sat up, rubbed his eyes and put on his eyeglasses, then briefly scratched his scalp through his white hair. What exactly was happening, or had just happened? he wondered, his mind still spinning. Nevertheless, he professionally composed himself, stood up, and donned his navy-blue Captain's uniform jacket with its polished brass buttons. The Staff Captain handed Roald his white Captain's cap after Halvorsen took a needed gulp of Lars' offered coffee.

Lars softy chuckled. "You should know, sir...we had a perfect cruise, thanks to you and, of course, Mother Nature. Smooth seas, no rain, with six enjoyable ports of call. The passengers especially raved about Greenland. Icebergs, whales, dolphins, seals, even a pair of dueling narwhals...they got to joyfully experience everything they hoped for."

Once safely docked in Oslo at 08:00, most of the crew and senior officers were quickly assembled in the ship's central auditorium, after all the Voyager's passengers and their luggage were off-loaded. Thirty minutes were allowed for a special celebration, before the hectic turnaround for a new re-stocked cruise with a new captain. The Voyager was now scheduled for an 18:00 departure to several exotic ports in South America.

The surprise gathering to thank Captain Halvorsen for his thirty-eight years of faithful service -- and to wish him a very happy retirement -- had been organized by Lecturer-Librarian Bridgett Svendatter. Brief laudatory speeches were made. Vintage champagne was served. The Captain was loudly applauded when he accepted a specially inscribed gold Breitling watch. He was about to say a few words, but first he felt he should remove his old digital wristwatch and try on his new gift.

But when he glanced down at his wrist, he was shocked to see that the time was 02:44. He gasped in disbelief.

When he looked back up at the auditorium crowd, he saw that everyone had vanished. The room was silent and empty. He was totally alone.

And that was when everything went black...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

August 12, 2023