

C.H.A.S.E.

BRIAN WALTHAM

(EXTRACT)

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*In the late 1960s, the United States Army scuttled **SS Corporal Eric G. Gibson** and **SS Mormactern** with VX nerve gas rockets aboard as part of Operation C.H.A.S.E. – Pentagon shorthand for ‘Cut Holes and Sink ‘Em’.*

## FRIDAY

**A**t the Gunyu quay all seemed normal. The activity was what you would expect around an eighteen thousand tonner towards the end of loading in the late summer heat of Istanbul. A clerk from the Harbour Office dozed in his car waiting to read off the marks, three seamen got out of a taxi and began arguing about the fare, someone from the Agents was climbing the gangway with a briefcase. Off the starboard quarter gulls were quarreling over debris from the galley. A deck-hand was painting a rail, but not as if his life depended on it. Above him the radar scanner turned lazily, picking out its targets among an oil-tank farm and the southern reaches of the Bosphorus.

The ship sat patiently in the harbour, gently wallowing on her moorings. She looked what she was: a middle-aged workhorse carrying the dents and rust-spots of her trade, ready for a spell in dry-dock. But she was safe enough. You could fill the engine room with water and she would float. You could flood a hold as well, and she would still stay up. Separating these spaces were massive bulkheads, built to withstand anything short of disaster. Even below the holds there were

double-bottom tanks which would take the brunt of a gash in the hull.

Three of the four decks forward of the bridge were already stacked with containers. Only the No.1 hold was still open. The sling of a mobile crane dangled motionless over crates and sacks on the quayside. On deck a gang of stevedores lounged among the hatch covers.

If there was anything out of the ordinary, it was below them where, in the half-empty hold, Symeon Mardas and the Extra Third Engineer were doing a final check. At least, in the mind of Kleon Spiliades, the Second Officer leaning against the rail, it was bloody irritating that in every hold they had left their final inspection of tank tops until loading had already started. To check for stressing they said. They had been around for days, these two, getting under everyone's feet. If it had just been the Extra Third, then Kleon would have enjoyed pulling rank to bawl him out. But this Symeon was a very big wheel, Mr Superintendent sent by Head Office to see about major repairs. To be fair, it was impressive that anyone so grand should be crawling around holds getting his hands dirty. And even more so in the engine room, so they said. He probably knew the inside of an office a damn sight better than the inside of a ship.

For a moment, as he looked down into the dark square of the hatch, Kleon thought of the torn label on one of those three drums of fertiliser. What was it that he had read in some magazine? He shrugged and, although there was no wind, cupped a cigarette expertly as he lit it. What they loaded and how they ran their fleet was not his sweat.

As if to confirm this, an Able Seaman appeared at his side with a message for him to report immediately to the Captain's

cabin. There Mackenzie, the replacement Captain, handed him a telex and went on signing what was put before him.

‘In view of certain irregularities which have come to the notice of Management, Second Officer Kleon Spiliades will leave the ship immediately. The Agents will arrange his return to Greece. A replacement Second Officer will join the ship before she sails.’

As he read it a second time, a nerve ticked in his pinched face. What could have been logged against him? Two or three tiny little things. And you're chucked off the ship for that? Someone had his knife in.

He was ready for a fight, but not with this doddering old Scotsman who'd only just come on board. He needed a drink. And then a fight with a Greek.



**A**kti Miauli is a one-sided street. On the waterfront three miles from central Athens, it looks out across dangerous traffic at something older and rather more dangerous. It does not pretend to elegance or antiquity. Your guided tour will not include it. But if your business is shipping, this is where you will come.

On this lazy morning the Zenophon Building looked, as always, slightly shabby. The same air and sun that now tried to prink it out had eaten away at stucco and paint. But, in shipping terms, it was a good address. High on the wall in the dusty lobby were the names of solid, respected ships' chandlers,

chartering agents, marine surveyors and average adjusters. For the first floor there was just the one name: Dracoulis Bros, followed by a list of companies. It did not need to mention its trade. Everybody knew Dracoulis.

And Damien Dracoulis? Everyone in shipping knew Damien. He would pin you down to the last dollar and still you would trust his word on the telephone. Looking for something that meant both straight and cold, the waterfront community called him ‘northern’.

His kind of face was never off-guard, but this morning the tautness of his small lean frame had stretched upwards into cheekbone and temple. With him, worry always came out as anger. He slapped at the print-out of the Manifest on his desk. He needed someone to bully, but he had the wrong audience.

‘Look at it. Three drums of fertiliser. I made it bloody clear that there was to be no chemical cargo. Can't that fat bugger in Istanbul read clear instructions? I telex him to get them off and, look at this, he says they're overstowed<sup>1</sup> and can't be got at. He can't even find out what the bloody stuff is.’

His older brother, Spiros, was not worried. Many years ago he had decided that, so long as the money came in, there were very few things worth worrying about. He leaned back in his chair with one leg over the arm and closed his eyes. His good-looking face wore an expression of amusement. He talked almost to himself.

‘So it's fertiliser. Three little drums of it. Do we have to get in a paddy about that?’

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<sup>1</sup> Overstowed: i.e. other cargo had been piled on top, making the drums inaccessible

With only a small change of expression Spiros leaned forward.

‘If you really concentrate, you might get back to what matters.’

Despite himself, Damien could not help looking over his brother's shoulder at the photograph on the wall. The old man was in his new Captain's uniform. He had started out as a deck-hand on a fishing boat. Spiros didn't need to turn round.

‘If you're thinking of Lord God Almighty, he would have been a little further ahead of the game than you are.’

There was more than enough truth in it to get Damien up from his desk and walking. From the window he saw a small fishing boat which had edged itself between the tourist ferries. On the waterfront steps one of the crew was thrashing the ink out of an octopus. The other was spreading a net in the sun. This many drachs owed on the boat, that much for a catch that would be sold within the hour. Everything fifty-fifty. Brothers probably.

‘Which way do you want it, little mastermind?’

The nursery jibe had so much packed in it that Damien became calm. He returned to his desk and spoke levelly.

‘All right, what about this new Captain?’

Spiros laughed.

‘He's hand-picked. A collector's item.’

‘Then what about this Second Officer that suddenly gets thrown off the ship for peanuts?’

Spiros stood up lazily and put his palms on the desk. ‘I thought crewing was my department. If you're interested, that little man can't keep off the booze. That's not a problem you'd understand, is it? Why don't you get on with what you're good at and leave the rest to me?’

As his brother sauntered out, Damien tidied up the telexes and stared at the pile on which they rested. The loss-making voyage accounts for the last twelve months, a surveyor's report on the scantlings<sup>2</sup> of the shell-plating, a recommendation for a new ventilation system for the holds, a re-modelling of the bows, strengthening of the decks ... Who needed a Symeon to say that she would cost a fortune?

But the real meat was in the other pile on his right. What his brother called 'the bloody figures'. The fleet accounts, computer print-outs from the bank, a telex from the London brokers about overdue premiums, a letter from the P. and I. Club to the same effect. Two letters from the bank, the second with a clear warning of legal action. On top was a clumsy paperweight, a present from his youngest daughter. He gripped it for a moment, noticing clinically the increased trembling in his arm.

He went once again to the window. The net was still on the wall. The two fishermen were loading baskets into a van. A police car had just drawn up behind it.



The call came in at 4.45 p.m. London time. It was for Lorimer, but it was Sandra at the switchboard who decided its final target. She tried his secretary, but hardly needed telling that he had already left to beat the weekend traffic up to his Norfolk cottage. She tried four other partners and could have

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<sup>2</sup> Scantlings: dimensions of a ship's framework

tried more, but then, malevolently, she thought of Hopkins. He had spoken out of turn that very morning when, in a lapse that could happen to anyone, she had cut him off from Rome mid-sentence. And not the first time he had been rude.

A call late on a Friday afternoon and sounding like trouble.

Among the wires and switches in her little alcove Sandra smiled. ‘Oh Mr Hopkins, it's Mr Ritchie of the Salvage Association. He says it's urgent. I can't get any of the partners. Can you take him?’

Hopkins sensed the malice. ‘Which case is it?’

‘He says it's a new matter.’

It was the perfect moment to shelter behind protocol. All instructions on new cases – as Sandra bloody well knew – were to be taken by partners. He paused on the brink of telling her just that. But it wouldn't do any harm to prove that he was around at the right moment.

‘Put him through.’

Ritchie was in a hurry. With any luck the six thirty shuttle would get him to Glasgow in time for the celebration. The rest of the family were already there.

‘Is that you, Frank?’

‘No. Mr Lorimer has gone for the day. This is Alan Hopkins.’

Ritchie frowned at the voice. Should he insist on a partner? But his eye caught his watch.

‘Look, can I leave you to find someone who can handle this? A rather odd telex has come in from Mason of the Istanbul office. It's quite short. Can you jot it down? Here it is. *Unidentified informant, possibly with initials TCDD, advises*

*that Eleni Dracoulis, 18000 GRT<sup>3</sup> sailing today from Istanbul to Leixoes Portugal with general cargo may have a problem. Informant not entirely coherent. Doubt if message serious. Await instructions.* Have you got that? She's insured on full terms at dollars 3.7 million. We think her market value is well under the million.' He gave Mason's home and office phone numbers. 'In case it's sabotage, you're on for war risk underwriters as well as marine. The leading underwriters are leaving it to you whether it's worth doing anything about it. I have to dash now. Have a nice weekend.'

Ritchie rang off before he could be asked any questions. Nothing was going to make him miss that shuttle.

Hopkins looked without interest at his neat scribble. Not exactly headline stuff. Just enough to spoil somebody's fag-end of the week.

Not unlike Sandra he searched in his mind for a victim. Why not Searle, who only yesterday had criticised his use of written English? With a feeling of malign pleasure he set off down the corridor. With any luck Searle too might be wanting to get away early.

But Searle's secretary met him at the door of the empty room and was both cheerful and over-familiar.

'Sorry dear, but he's gone to the rugger match with Scots.'

'What the hell's he doing at rugger matches at his age?'

With great economy, no more than a glance, she managed to suggest first that his question was out of line and second that if he had any balls he would be at the rugger match too.

Bloody rugger. The official religion of the firm. It meant crossing all six junior partners off his hit list. It would have to

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<sup>3</sup> GRT: Gross Registered Tonnage

be Silverman, with whom at the moment he did not have any quarrel. On his way he stopped at the annexe to the library and got the essentials from Lloyd's Register. *Owners: Cia Promontadora of Liberia. Managers: Dracoulis, Piraeus. Built 1977. Container/Dry Cargo. Four holds forward of the engines. Classed Lloyd's Register. Last interim survey 18 months ago. Major survey due in three months.*

What about that other, less public, record, the Lloyd's Confidential Index? He thumbed it open at 'Dracoulis'. Sixteen ships, each of them under separate owners. No previous total losses.

Silverman's door was usually open. Had he swanned off too?

Hopkins pushed at the door without knocking. Through a tobacco haze five faces turned towards him and Silverman looked up with irritation. Hopkins retreated with a mumbled apology.

Back in the corridor he remembered that Robinson was in New York, Briggs and Foley were both at the Oslo Seminar and Chandler was taking a late holiday. Two other rooms had an unmistakable gone-for-the-day look. The first signs of worry pencilled themselves in above Hopkins' spectacles and he went down fast to the third floor. With disbelief he learned that four senior partners were at the same rugger match, that a fifth was away sick and a sixth at a funeral.

That left only old Sherwood. Was it worth going back and interrupting Silverman? Well was it? No. He knocked on Sherwood's door and went in.

As always, Sherwood was courteous. It was said that in his day you would still be thanking him before you realised he had removed your shirt. Now, semi-retired, free from

administration and with all the shirts he needed, he had settled into a Pickwickian role.

‘Excuse me Sir, but you 're the only partner available.’

‘Ah, but available for what? I'm out of the mainstream you know.’

Hopkins couldn't help returning the smile, although he realised it was the old man's way of saying that he wasn't going to give much help.

‘The S.A. have just telephoned with a new case. They wanted Mr Lorimer, but he's gone for the day. The only other partner in the office is Mr Silverman and he's tied up in a meeting.’

It was said calmly enough, but Sherwood caught the undertone of worry. With half a glance he took in the awkwardly tall body, the angular cheek bones, the prominent Adam's apple, the under-filled waistcoat and the hand clutching its sheet of paper.

‘Sit down and tell me about it.’

He listened with his eyes closed and then chuckled.

‘Do you know, for a moment you had me worried. But I think we can forget it. Mason is dropping a fairly large hint and he knows his own backyard. And Dracoulis? They've been in the market for donkey's years. More respectable than us. I remember some ten years ago...’

Hopkins sat back and calculated how soon he could excuse himself without offence.

‘...on the other hand there is the sabotage thing. You say we're also on for war risk underwriters. Yes, I thought the Turks had cleared up those terrorist groups ... but I'm out of date with my reading ... no, perhaps we can't just ignore it.’

Hopkins frowned and sat forward.

‘No, I suppose ... tell me Alan, what do you think we ought to do now?’

Hopkins was grateful that the old man had remembered his first name, but felt that the conversation was going the wrong way.

‘All I've done is take a phone call and look for a partner.’

‘And all you've found is me? Well, let's think. Get a chart of the Med. She probably makes about 13-14 knots. It's always interesting to see where a ship is. But what else should we be doing?’

The first pinpoints of sweat were forming behind Hopkin's ears.

‘Please excuse me, but Ritchie simply asked me to find a partner.’

‘Well, you've found one, haven't you? How long have you been with us, Alan?’

‘Five years since qualification.’

‘Have you done one of these before? No? Excellent. Just the right time and the right case. Almost certainly nothing in it, but very good experience. We'll handle it together. So, what do we do next?’

Sherwood was beginning to enjoy himself. He seemed not to notice the expression on the face across his desk. Hopkins, whose shirt was now sticking to his back, seriously considered getting up and running from the room. Instead he heard himself saying, ‘Well, I suppose someone should go and see Mason and follow up the telephone call.’

‘Well done. Absolutely right. Get yourself on the first possible flight...’

*End of excerpt*

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