Channel

The boat is exactly four hundred meters long. Or it would be, minus the addition of a human skull on the pointed bow, and two more looking backward on the blunt stern. Its heavy armoured plating is heavily rusted, leaving not a trace of clean metal or paint its entire length, and the wooden fence that lines its open deck is grey and weathered, but intact and without visible rot, and seemingly a recent addition. The superstructure, towering over the wide expanse of deck, reaches exactly seventy-five meters into the air, far too high to fit under most bridges, but there are no bridges. It is painted a dull white, and studded with windows in a perfect grid pattern. The wheelhouse is clad in glass, and during the exceedingly rare nights you can see the shadowy figure of the helmsman looking out from behind his wheel. There is no name painted anywhere, and in fact the ship has no name. It has no need of one, because it is the only ship on this world.

The world itself is a different kind of construct from that to which humans have become accustomed. The sky is always grey, and the air is always humid and hot. It consists of one ocean and uncountable islands, most of which are large and closely fitted, leaving nothing but wide salt-water rivers to flow between their jungles. There are no prevailing currents, but as the suns move very little in the sky, the heating of the waters encourages both local weather and flow, saving the world from becoming one great swamp. In fact, a great deal of the world is swamp, foetid and clinging, and this is why the sparse crew has no sense of smell.

The ship moves constantly, never tying up. It carries very little cargo, as there is no one to deliver anything to on the vast expanse of its surface. The crew, aside from the small band of scientists, is the only population of the planet.

There is a child leashed to a mast on the otherwise empty deck. She has been there as long as she can remember, which isn’t long, as her memory is purely visual. The sterncastle is so far away that she can barely tell when there is another human figure walking its weathered surface; the crew wears only the drabbest of clothing, as there are no members of the opposite sex to impress. The child is left to her own devices, in the hopes that eventually a wild creature will take her into the jungle. It hasn’t happened yet, there being none, and she has long since outgrown the clothes she wore when put there, clothing painstakingly cut down to her size by the engineering crew. She is completely naked, and would be filthy if it didn’t rain on such a constant basis. The rain doesn’t bother her, but she is always hungry, and the once-daily meal delivered by the black-clad cook never fills her. It doesn’t matter. She will never learn to speak, and so cannot express her needs.

The captain in his wheelhouse sits to one side of the helmsman and his wheel, so that his view is not blocked. He can therefore, by rotating his chair, see in three directions clearly, and has a partial view out the windows beyond the helmsman. There is nothing to see, but he sits there all day, every day, day being a myth on a planet that orbits a triple star. He says nothing, does nothing. In fact, he has no authority, as there are no orders to give. The helmsman makes entirely arbitrary decisions about which channel to enter and which to avoid. Occasionally the captain makes a suggestion, go that way, which the helmsman, in his compassion, accepts and complies with. The ship will stop them from running aground, and many times it has stopped in mid-channel and forced them to back out, sometimes for days.

The astrologer keeps his eyes on the heavens, just in case the clouds clear. He is hoping for a sign. He was an astronomer once, but has been reduced to superstition by the lack of work. The wide-spectrum telescope simply shut off one day, and all attempts to convince it to work have failed. He has been predicting a great discovery for untold time now, and every day feels closer to it. He has absolutely no reason to believe it, but reason is no longer his strong suit. He often sits at a table behind the captain, wishing he had something to do. The ship takes care of itself, with the help of the engineering crew, two almost-humans with almost as little to do as he. He wonders, idly and without enthusiasm, whether the child on the deck will reach adulthood, in which case they will fight over her, and he will die. He has never been in a fight in his life. When his indolence annoys him beyond his capacity, he draws arcane signs on the backs of irrelevant maps, or attempts to find landmarks that they may recognize. The navigation controls tell him little, as there are no landmarks. The ship has long since lost communication with the orbiter.

It wouldn’t actually matter if they all died. The ship would continue, with or without crew. It is powered by a force they cannot understand, a force that if released could eat the planet. In the vaguest of ways, they tell themselves that if they ever find the port, the scientists will help them remove the power source and contain it within the escape vessel. On a world this size, the odds are against them, but they are sure that they will live indefinitely, as the ship takes care of its superfluous crew, and they do not age anymore.

They have been doing this so long that they have lost all track of the passage of time. Sometimes the captain thinks of leaving the ship and attempting to build a life on shore, but his quarters are dry and comfortable, the hydroponics and fish farms will feed them indefinitely if uninterestingly, and some part of him retains the hope that one day the port will heave onto the horizon, and the scientists will crowd the single dock to welcome them. Perhaps they will have females.

For some time, the helmsman has been hatching a plot against him. The female child is young, true, but that won’t stop him when the time comes. She will not slake his loneliness, ignorant as she is, but she will do for his long-pent desire.

The crew, a long time ago, took her aboard as an act of compassion, finding her alone on the dock of an abandoned village, doubtless the progeny of scientists or explorers long since vanished into the mists. They had once seen her as an interesting project, but she showed no interest in them, and soon the crew lost interest in her and left her on the deck, their consciences eased by the slowness of time. If she survives, there will be trouble, but no one has the stomach to kill her, or pitch her overboard. If they let her loose, she will no doubt break things and wreak general havoc, as she did when she was smaller, so they tie her to a mast, and hope that fate will have its way with her. Maybe, the captain once thought, they could share her. He has, however, no libido whatsoever, no sense of hunger, literal or figurative.

They don’t know how old they are. The engineering crew find this disturbing, but there is nothing they can do. There are no days, no seasons, no necessary routines. There is nothing to give order to the passage of time. They oil things that look like they need oiling, but there are so few working parts on the ship that they argue constantly with a feeling of futility. The gravity drive needs no engineering.

At a certain moment, the captain sits up in his chair, concentrating on the horizon. There is an object there, something with square corners and regular lines, and a red dot glowing at its crest. Every long time or two, they pass a ruin, manned only by a computer with a laser signal, and the captain knows not to get too excited. The child is the only humanesque creature they have ever found alive. This object, if perspective be true, is exceptionally promising.

He stands, an unusual event, and points through the window at the distant object. The helmsman catches his eye and nods. The captain sits back down. It may take another long time or two to get to it — who knows where the channel will lead?