

Plight

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FADE IN:

EXT. SEA - NIGHT

Towering waves cut through a dark sea at pace, and a violent wind swirls in the air. As the wind collides with the waves, it hurls foamy jets towards a darkened sky, thick with clouds and the threatening clap of thunder.

SUPER: The Strait of Sicily, Mediterranean Sea

A bolt of lightning streaks through the air and for a brief instance reveals the sheer size of the moving walls of water, some 20 foot high, and in amongst them lie the pummelled remains of a wooden boat.

Another flash of lightning, and surrounded by the debris we find TAREQ AL-LIBI (7), panic stricken, clinging onto a drenched TEDDY BEAR. The young boy is thrown around like a rag doll by the waves, and struggles to keep his head above the water.

TAREQ
(In Libyan Arabic, subtitled)
Momma! Pappa!

From his side, a wave smashes into the boy and forces him under the water. Tareq swirls around below the surface, pulled by the drag, but he still keeps a tight hold of his teddy.

The wave loosens its grip, but disorientated, he swims downwards and precious bubbles of air leave his mouth, only for another passing wave to catch at his feet and drag him back up to the surface.

TAREQ
(spluttering)
Momma! Pappa! Aya!

Nothing but the roar of the sea and clap of thunder overhead. There are no screams from anyone else, Tareq is alone. He treads the water as hard as he can, but he's losing his fight against the waves.

Shattered planks of wood fly by him, which he tries to grab at, but they can't take his weight and he once more falls below the water.

He resurfaces in the trough of a wave, but the fight has nearly gone out of him.

TAREQ

Pappa, help me, pappa! Someone help
me please!

His energy sapped, Tareq's strokes become less vigorous, when another bolt of lightning brightens the area to reveal a tattered blue WATER COOLER floating amongst the debris.

Tareq's energy returns for one last effort and he fights the waves and paddles with all of his might to reach the cooler. Another wave collects him, and he and the cooler are flung in the air and crashed down below the surface.

Below the water, Tareq fights the drag of the wave with all his will as the cooler heads back towards the surface. With one mighty kick he manages to grab a handle, and he's dragged back above the water, where he forces himself and his teddy bear onto the plastic box.

TAREQ

Help! Someone help me!

A wave rushes on him, but this time the cooler helps Tareq to ride over the crest and splash down into the trough.

TAREQ

(whimpering)

Help me. Momma, Pappa, help me.

Tareq clings to the cooler box for all his life as another wave approaches.

EXT. SEA - DAY

The storm clouds from the previous night have left, and are replaced by a beautiful day. The water, now peaceful and calm, reflects the clear blue sky above.

Tareq, drained from his fight with the sea the previous night, rests his upper body on the cooler box. The small boy holds his teddy bear in front of him, and talks to it with a steely tone in his voice.

TAREQ

Momma and Pappa haven't come to
find us yet, but they will. They
had Aya with them, I saw them
together when the boat broke apart.
They will keep her safe.

There's a beat while Tareq looks into his drenched teddy's eyes, before he pulls it towards him and tightly embraces the toy.

TAREQ

You never left me, Abu. Uncle Hassan taught me how to swim, and I taught you last night. If you can swim in that sea you can swim anywhere.

The small boy puts his teddy, Abu, in the water and pushes some splashes over its head.

TAREQ

You see? The waves hit you like that, but you swam with me. We were underwater, the waves pushed us down but you helped me kick and we found a way out. Uncle will be so proud when we tell him, just you wait.

The cooler box bobs up and down in the water as Tareq plays with Abu. In the distance there is the slightest outline of a small crop of land.

EXT. SEA - NIGHT

Darkness has once again returned, but the ferocious waves have stayed away. Now exposed to the cold night, Tareq's teeth chatter as he shivers. Abu lies on the end of the cooler, motionless. The cloudless night reveals a pure white crescent moon and thousands of stars in the sky overhead.

Tareq looks at the reflections cast in the water around him. The moon ripples slightly as the cooler box bobs beside it, and the white reflection scatters around. Suddenly, a slither of yellow light catches on the ripples and mixes with the reflection of the moon.

Startled at first, Tareq slowly looks up and finds in the distance a dim yellow light bobbing up and down. His lost energy returns.

TAREQ

Hey! Over here!

The light does not move.

TAREQ

(screaming)

HEY!

A beat, before the light starts to move and focus on the water near Tareq.

TAREQ
HELP! Over here!

He leaves Abu on the cooler and waves his hands in the air as he starts to tread water. The light continues to move around, before it catches Tareq in the face and blinds him. The young boy closes his eyes, and continues to tread water and wave his arms.

TAREQ
Over here, please help me! Please help me. Please.

We hear the faint whir of a motor in the distance.

INT. BOAT CABIN - NIGHT

A tiny cabin with a ship's wheel at its centre, lit by a single low powered light in the ceiling. Tareq, wearing a large jumper and a towel around his waist, sits in a chair beside the wheel. The cooler box rests at his feet with Abu sat on top.

SALVATORE (O.S.)
(In Italian, subtitled)
What the hell were you doing out here on a plastic box?

SALVATORE CANNIZZARO (60's), a large, well-built man enters the cabin. In his worn hands he holds some coffee in the lid of a thermos flask, which he hands to Tareq. The small boy looks at the cup, then gives a nod of thanks to Salvatore.

SALVATORE
It's been an hour and you still haven't said a word, not even a thank you! Why won't you talk? What is your name? What are you doing out here with a teddy and a cooler box?

Tareq places the lid of coffee between his legs and holds his shaking hands over it, allowing the steam to rise and warm them. Salvatore looks on at Tareq, his expression starts to fall to one of frustration.

SALVATORE
Where's the gratitude? I know you're scared but you could at least tell me what the hell you were doing out there.
(beat)

SALVATORE
Fine, keep quiet. I have to fish,
then I'll take you to land come
sunrise.

The fisherman throws his hands up in the air and turns to exit the cabin.

TAREQ
(In Libyan Arabic, subtitled)
Tareq. My name is Tareq al-Libi.

Salvatore stops in his tracks. As he hears the Arabic, his shoulders slouch and his face drops as he finally realises where Tareq has come from. He turns to face the child.

TAREQ
(pointing at his teddy)
And this is Abu.

SALVATORE
Did you come from Libya?

Tareq does not understand the language, let alone the question.

TAREQ
(pointing to himself)
Tareq.

SALVATORE
Tareq. Okay, you are Tareq. My name
is Salvatore.

The man places his hands on his chest, Tareq nods in recognition.

TAREQ
Salvatore, thank you for saving me
and Abu.

SALVATORE
I don't know what you're saying.
Did you come on a boat? How the
hell do you say boat?

Salvatore walks outside the cabin onto the deck, and hits the side of the vessel.

SALVATORE
Boat?

Tareq nods in response.

SALVATORE

Okay, where is the boat?

The man points out to sea, and then holds his hands up in a questioning motion.

Tareq understands. He rises to his feet and wobbles his way out onto the deck. The small boy points out to sea, then holds one of his hands up flat. He moves his hand up and down as if it were a boat on the water, before he smashes his other hand into it.

SALVATORE

A wave hit your boat? But the water is calm, there aren't any waves tonight.

The boy once again makes the hand gesture, and then makes as big an arc as he can from the side of the boat over his head. Salvatore looks on, confused.

Tareq, frustrated, points upwards and makes a crackling sound to imitate lightning, and then shoots his arms out to try to show how it ran across the sky.

Salvatore understands this time, his face drops to a look of disbelief, and he raises a hand to his mouth.

SALVATORE

Yesterday's storm? Mother Mary in heaven, are you a ghost? No one could have survived out there. Inside, we have to go back to harbour now.

Tareq looks confused as Salvatore crosses himself, then ushers him back into the cabin.

SALVATORE

No one should have survived that, especially not a small boy. A miracle child, a miracle.

Salvatore sits down at the ship's wheel, before he grabs Tareq and places him on his lap. The motors start to whirr as he turns the ignition.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

In a poorly lit kitchen, Salvatore sits across a wooden table from Tareq. Fork in hand, the small boy attacks the large bowl of pasta that lies in front of him, only taking occasional breaks to drink water from a bottle by his side. Abu sits at the head of the table.

SALVATORE

Eat up little man. Soon we'll have to speak to the police and I don't think they offer the same home cooking.

Tareq doesn't listen, he's too busy concentrating on the food.

SUPER: The Island of Linosa, Italy

A door directly behind Tareq slowly creaks open, and Salvatore's mother, PROVVIDENZA CANNIZZARO (80's), a well-worn appearance, enters the room.

PROVVIDENZA

(In Italian, subtitled)

Salvatore? Why aren't you fishing? We need you to fish and you're still here, why?

Salvatore avoids the gaze of his mother and does not say a word. Provvidenza squints through the gloom and stops when she spots Abu at the end of the table.

PROVVIDENZA

What is going on?

Provvidenza slowly moves towards the table, and when she finally arrives she turns to find Tareq. The boy looks up at the wrinkled face of the old woman, not sure what to do or say.

PROVVIDENZA

Who is this?

SALVATORE

I went looking for fish, and I found him. He and his teddy bear were alone in the sea, clinging to a plastic box.

The old woman lowers herself down to Tareq's eye level. She looks the small boy up and down, before she strokes his cheek with the back of her hand. Tareq, gripped by fear, doesn't move a muscle.

PROVVIDENZA

And where did you come from, little man?

SALVATORE

He doesn't understand. He only speaks Arabic, my guess is he's come from Libya.

PROVVIDENZA

Ah, an Arab. And where are his parents? These little water rats always travel in groups on their boats.

SALVATORE

His boat was lost during that monster of a storm yesterday, that's all I've managed to understand. It's a miracle that he's alive, I'm assuming his companions are all dead.

PROVVIDENZA

A miracle child indeed. Well, he's going to need all the help he can get when he gets to the immigration centre on Lampedusa.

SALVATORE

I don't think he's ready for that yet, mother.

PROVVIDENZA

If he can survive that storm, he can survive anything. Your sister has given me grandchildren already, I do not need this one. Tomorrow you will take him to the centre.

SALVATORE

No, mother, I'm...

PROVVIDENZA

Doing the job of the water police, I know. I shall not hear any more of it, in the morning he's gone.

No more protests from Salvatore. Tareq watches as the old woman turns, and slowly makes her way back to the door and out of the room. Salvatore looks at the boy, visibly upset.

SALVATORE
I'm so sorry, little man.

TAREQ
(in broken Italian, subtitled)
Mother?

Tareq points towards the door through which Provvidenza has just left the room. Salvatore's face lights up.

SALVATORE
Yes, mother! Well done.

Salvatore searches around the table, and grabs a bowl of salt. He shakes it in front of Tareq.

SALVATORE
Salt. You try, salt.

TAREQ
(in broken Italian, subtitled)
Salt.

SALVATORE
Excellent! Now, this is a fork and
this is a knife.

The man picks up the respective cutlery, Tareq breaks into a smile.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Daylight streams through an open window into a traditionally styled living room. Tareq, cuddling Abu, lies fast asleep on a couch, a woollen blanket pulled over him. Provvidenza and Salvatore share a couch on the opposite side of the room.

PROVVIDENZA
We are going to have to wake him
soon or we'll miss the ferry.

SALVATORE
I think he should stay here for a
few more days.

PROVVIDENZA
I don't care what you think, he
doesn't belong here. He has his own
country, his own friends, his own
family.

SALVATORE

Had his own family! He had a family, and they are likely to be resting at the bottom of the sea.

Provvidenza bristles at her son's interjection.

SALVATORE

He's helpless, alone and you are wanting to throw him to the wolves.

PROVVIDENZA

I am wanting to obey the law, and leave him with his own kind.

Salvatore gets to his feet, and heads towards a door in the corner of the room.

SALVATORE

There's no love for this child and words can only get him so far. He needs supplies for what lies ahead, I'm going to the market.

Salvatore leaves the room and shuts the door behind him. Provvidenza looks agitated, she taps her feet and turns to look out of the window, when a rustle draws her attention back to the other couch.

Rubbing sleep from his eyes, Tareq slowly pulls himself up to face Provvidenza.

TAREQ

(in broken Italian, subtitled)

Mother?

A long beat, before Provvidenza's stern exterior cracks. Tears start to fill the old woman's eyes as she meets Tareq's innocent gaze.

FADE OUT