



Rising Star of the Year 2024

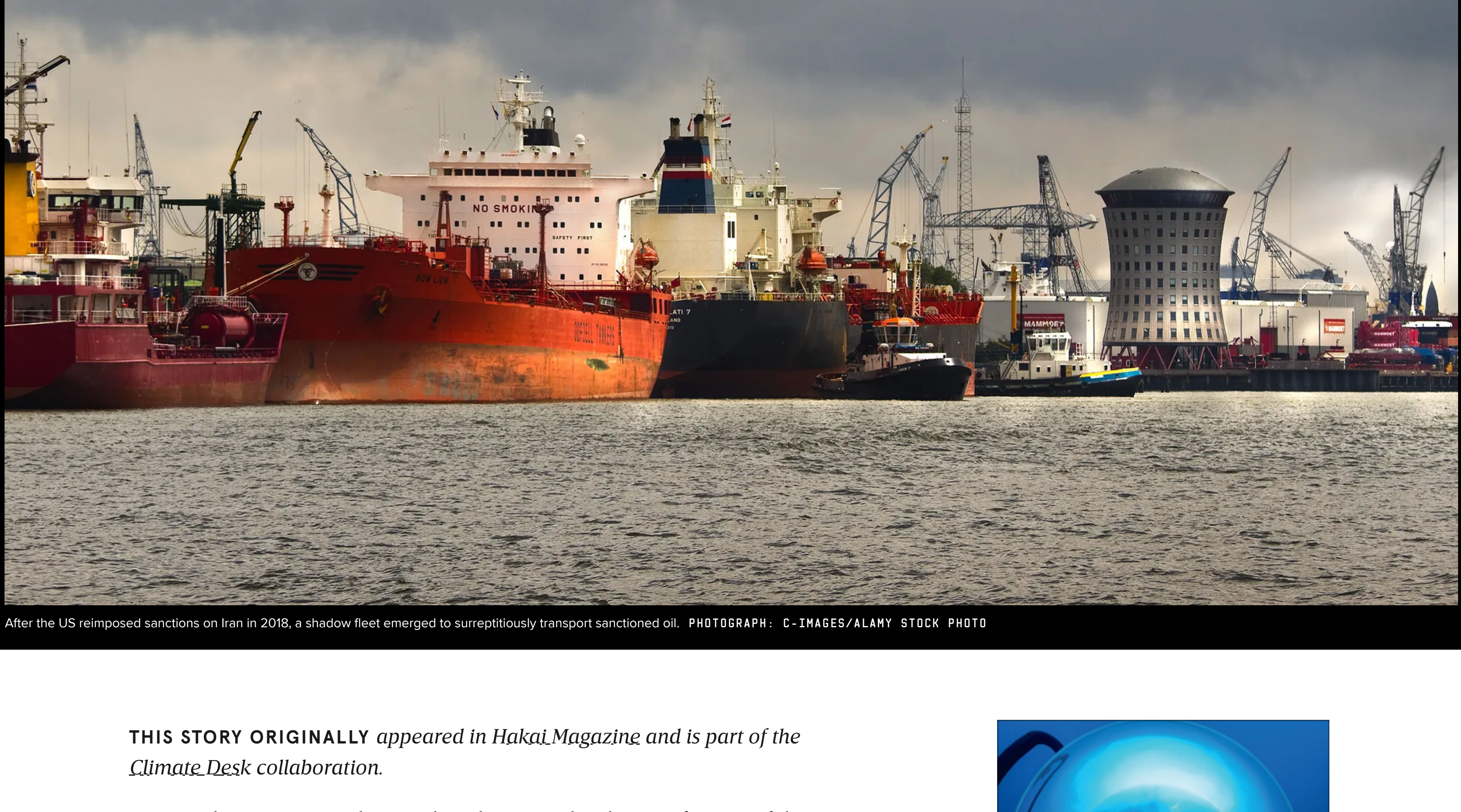
Runner up Submission

Nathaniel Peutherer

BY NATHANIEL PEUTHERER SCIENCE JUN 15, 2024 7:00 AM

Ukrainian Sailors Are Using Telegram to Avoid Being Tricked Into Smuggling Oil for Russia

Contract seafarers in Ukraine are turning to online whisper networks to keep themselves from being hired into Russia’s sanctions-busting shadow fleet.



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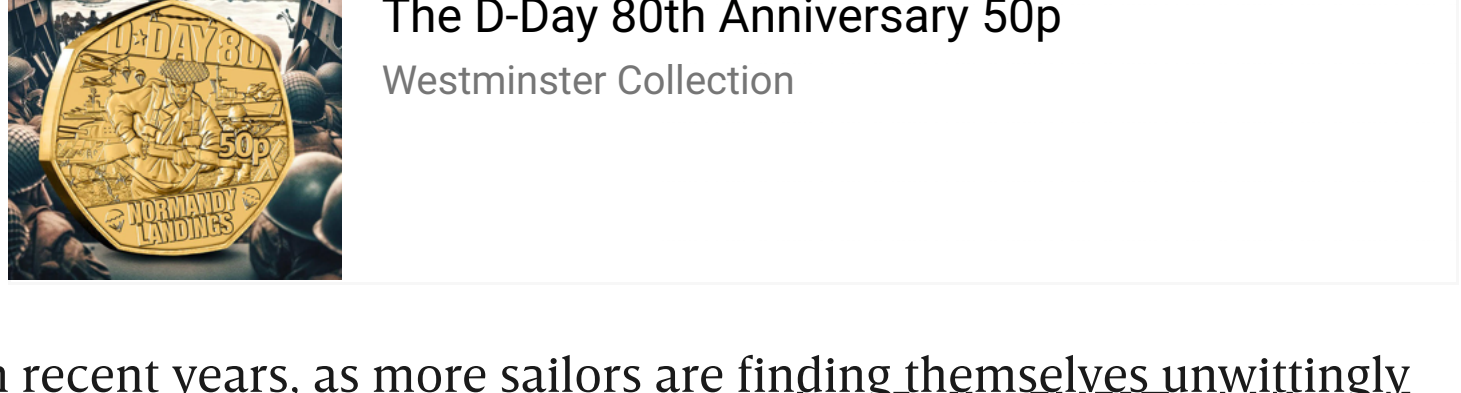
THIS STORY ORIGINALLY appeared in *Hakai Magazine* and is part of the *Climate Desk* collaboration.

A new video appears on the social media network Telegram: footage of the smoking area aboard a large vessel. The curtains are ripped, the lights are broken, and ash and glass litter the floor. “This is how they drink on our ship,” says the young Ukrainian deck worker filming the scene, turning to show the furniture thrown to the corner of the room. “I’m freaked out.”

A Telegram administrator asks the deck worker if he can share the vessel’s name. They change the ship’s name multiple times a year, replies Feliks Bondar, whose own name has been changed for this story. “I don’t even know what name to tell you,” he writes in Ukrainian. “Our ship was originally called *Eagle*, but in Venezuela, we were *Matador* and then *Shoyo Maru*.”

A chorus of similar messages had flooded the chat in recent months: stories of dangerously rundown ships, operators withholding pay, abandoned crew members, and vessel owners changing ship names or manipulating their automatic identification systems (AIS)—the global network meant to help ships recognize each other.

The Telegram group hosts over 8,000 sailors. Some are fresh out of maritime college, others are seasoned captains. All are drawn to the group by a desire to stay safe on the high seas. By telling their stories and naming names—when they can—these sailors have been gathering information about problematic vessels, detailing everything from those with low-quality food to ships where crews often experience pay delays.

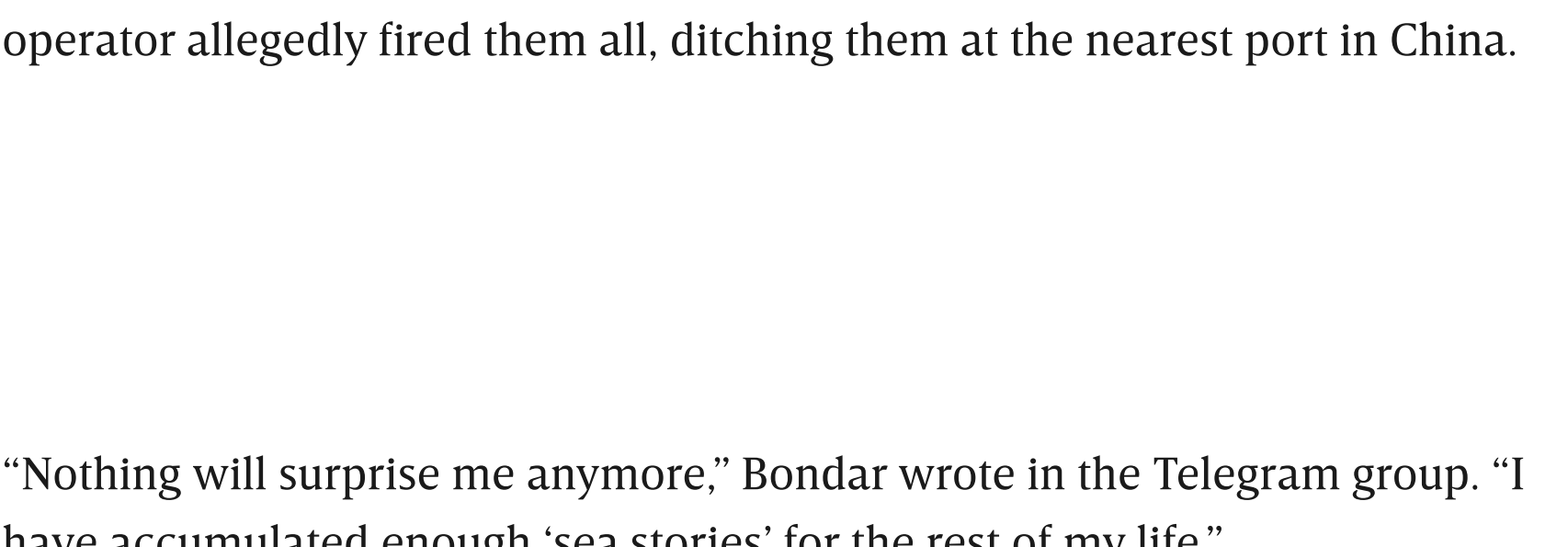


But in recent years, as more sailors are finding themselves unwittingly involved in the so-called shadow fleet—smuggling oil for Iran, Russia, or other clients that have been hit by strict sanctions to restrict their sales of oil—the social media whisper network has evolved. As well as a place to find a reputable employer, it’s become something else: a way for seafarers to avoid helping the other side of a war.

LIFE AS A contract seafarer has never been easy. Workers frequently hop from ship to ship, contract to contract, and country to country. But the rise of the shadow fleet—along with Russia’s war in Ukraine—poses a new kind of risk.

About a year and a half ago, in early 2023, Bondar sought out the seafarers’ Telegram network after a particularly troubling gig. Booked to the job by an Ukraine-based crewing agency, Bondar found that the name of his assigned vessel had been painted over, and the AIS was, once again, unplugged. A note on top of the device warned seafarers not to turn it on.

After a six-month voyage smuggling sanctioned oil to China, Bondar says the crew was told its next operation would begin in Koz’mino, Russia. Russia’s most recent invasion of Ukraine had begun while he was at sea and had already been underway for over four months. Bondar and the other Ukrainians on board refused to work smuggling Russian oil. The ship’s operator allegedly fired them all, ditching them at the nearest port in China.



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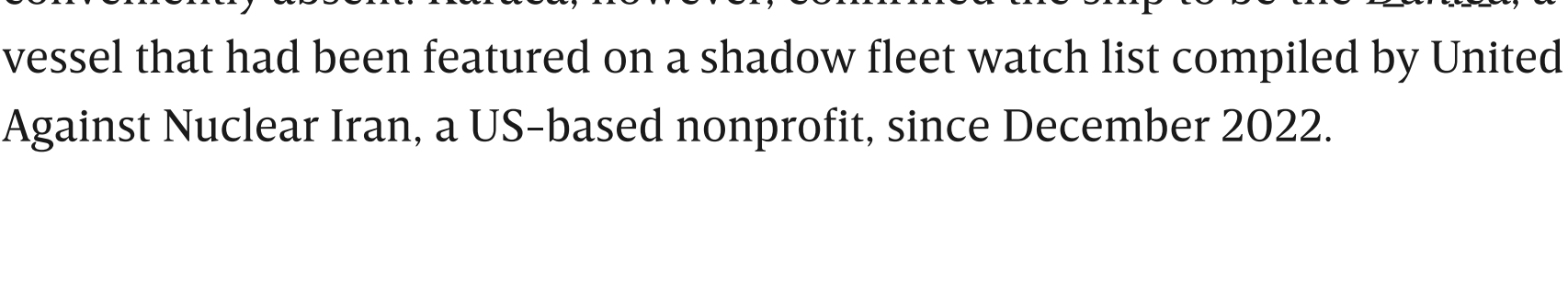
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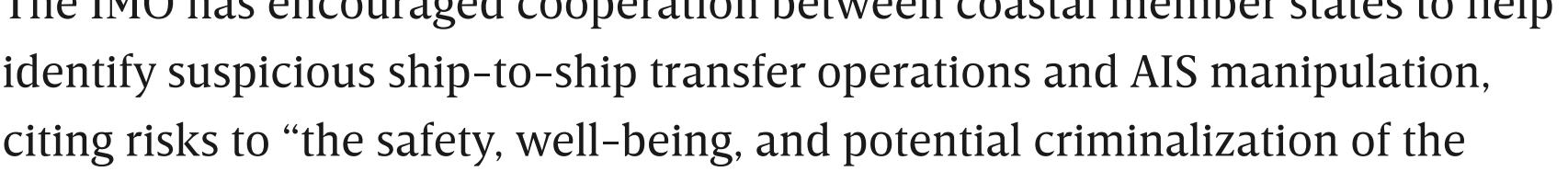
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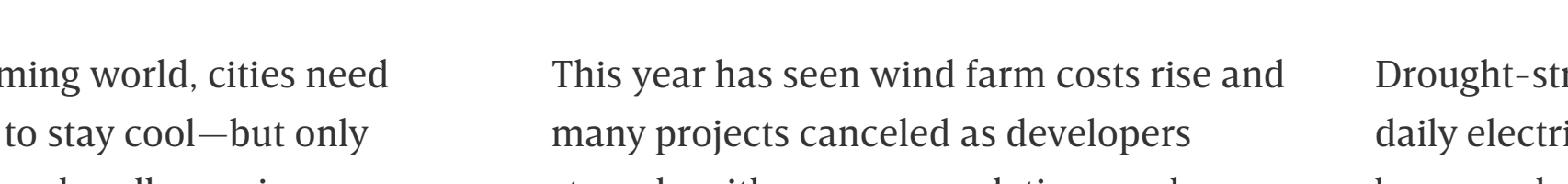
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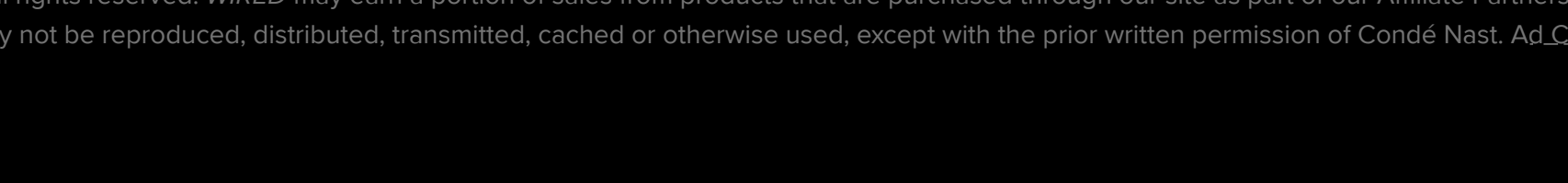
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Dese Crew Management tried to recruit seafarers for the *Danica* and two other ships that were later revealed to be part of the Russian shadow fleet. Fortunately, says Karaca, her company never succeeded in sending anyone to the *Danica* or any of the other known shadow fleet ships during their illicit operations. But only “because rumors spread quickly between sailors,” she says.

Each time Dese found a suitable candidate for the *Danica*, the sailor would abruptly change their mind and refuse to board. That had puzzled Karaca and her staff—until she learned about a different online seafarer whisper network, where details were whirling.

Among seafarers, the company that owns the *Danica* had a reputation. Digging in deeper, Karaca says the company was originally named Sand & Sea Marine—before it rebranded to Linda Shipping in an attempt to escape its reputation for unsafe conditions, withholding pay, and abandoning crew.

Once aware of the *Danica*’s and the other ships’ involvement in the shadow fleet, Dese Crew Management promptly blacklisted the vessels. Other crewing agencies, however, have been less helpful. On Telegram, some seafarers even believe that crewing agencies have infiltrated the group to post fake positive reviews about the conditions aboard vessels for which they are trying to recruit crew.

Fortunately, the seafarers aren’t so gull