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‘Aarrgghh!’ The cutlery crashed over the galley floor as it fell from Rudi the steward’s hands. He stood open mouthed, eyes wide, staring at the lumbering monster in front of him. ‘W...wh...what,’ he stuttered ‘has ha...hap...happened to you, cook?’ For it was Geral the cook, but a very poorly looking cook. Since the last time they had seen each other, early the previous evening at dinner time, Geral’s conditioned had taken a terrible turn for the worst. Overnight the swelling and sores had spread from his eyes to all over his face and across his body. ‘You no look good, cook. What happened to your face, what that custard on your face?’

‘Ohhh, Rudy, I feel like shit,’ moaned Geral, wiping the yellow mucous away from his cheeks with the edge of his tea towel. ‘It just seems to be getting worse. When I woke this morning it had spread all over, just look at me.’ His whole face had become distorted and almost unrecognisable by irregular lumpy swellings. In some places they had stretched the skin so much as to make it split, and from these lesions ran a foul smelling discharge that no mopping could keep at bay. It collected around his red raw nose, at the corners of his swollen cracked lips, and it had solidified into crusty scabs around his weeping ears. Geral’s eyelids were so swollen now that they closed over his eyes, making it almost impossible for him to see. Holding his left eye open with one hand, Geral struggled to make a mutton dumpling with the other. His fumbling fingers had also puffed up, and the steward found himself retching at the sight of that putrid liquid flowing from lesions between the cook’s fingers onto the balls of raw sheep. ‘Rudy, I have...to get breakfast ready. I need your help,’ he wheezed.

‘Ah no, I no cook again. You know it too much work. I cannot cook the egg, run to table, run to cook the egg,

run to do coffee, run to burn toast, run to the burned egg. It no possible,' pleaded the steward.

'We cannot let the...Captain find out. He will...throw me off the...ship...I am too big...a problem. There is no way I can leave the ship...not now,' struggled the cook through now laboured breaths.

Rudy continued to stare at the cook's huge hunched form. There were fist sized lumps now clearly visible beneath the cook's thin grey tee shirt over his back. From some of the growths lesions wept, seeping through the tee shirt's fabric and creating slowly growing damp stains. The cook turned and staggered across the galley, attempting in vain to locate the ladle. Rudy still stood in the doorway, exactly where he had dropped the cutlery minutes before, unable bring himself to reach out and stop the cook, and unable to give in and help him. Geral, blinded by his swollen eyelids, felt his way around the stainless steel work surface to the gas hob, where a fatty milky broth had been boiling over the top of a huge pot. He struggled to turn off the gas, but his slippery fingers made it impossible to get a purchase on the knob. He stopped and prized open both of his eyes with clumsy fingers, looking around and taking stock of the position of things. Then, letting his lids drop and his eyes close, he fumbled for the pot's handles and lifted it with both hands. The heat from the steel handles didn't seem to scald his fingers, at least it didn't register on his face, already distorted almost beyond recognition. He stood swaying, not from the pitch and roll of the ship but from a terrible weakness and dizziness that had overcome him. As he turned towards the steward, holding out the steaming pot in front of him and gesturing for him to take it, his left leg crumpled beneath him. The pot fell from his hands, spilling the steaming milky fluid across the floor, and Geral, the Divine Vessel's cook, collapsed sideways bringing down a shelf full of saucepans around him.

'Steward, what the hell is going on in there?' bel-lowed Captain Nemo from the Officers dining room, where he had been waiting patiently for his breakfast.

'It's the cook, Captain. He falling over. I no think he very well. He looking horrible,' apologised the steward

as he ran from the galley to the dining room. 'I think he got a nasty rash. You better come and look.' Rudi hadn't wanted to tell the captain but was too scared of him not to.

Captain Nemo's first instinct, having seen the cook's moaning body lying in a pool of mutton broth, was to get him some first aid, and then to the nearest hospital. It seemed obvious to the captain that the cook had some kind of horrible skin complaint, although it was something that he had never encountered before, and the chances were that it was infectious. But then the captain began to think about that terse fax he had just been reading from headquarters. His ship was way behind schedule, and everyone knew that it was because his mind hadn't been on the job lately, that he had let personal matters interfere with his work. There was no way his ship could get any further behind. His job was on the line. If he sent this cook to hospital then the Japanese immigration and then the health officials would get involved. There would be endless paperwork and questions, Jesus, they would probably quarantine the whole ship. No, he couldn't risk that. He also couldn't risk his crew, or certainly himself, catching such a disgusting thing. The ship was following the coast of Japan now, and they would reach Osaka that evening. Until then he would have cook confined to quarters. As soon as they reached Osaka he would have a couple of the crew secretly escort Cook off the ship. Yes, that would be the best, a most professional plan of action. After all he was himself leaving the ship in Yokohama in a few days and then it wouldn't be his problem. He would just say the cook had gone missing on shore leave. The steward could do the cooking from now on.