



Divine Vessel

Professor George R. Morello checked his watch for the seventh time since getting into the taxi. Blast it. How could I have overslept? It really isn't like me, he asked himself again. He was, of course, correct. It really wasn't like him to oversleep, not even by a minute, but today he had overslept by nearly nine unforgivable hours. Nine hours, how is that possible? It was not even as if that extra sleep had left him feeling refreshed. His eyes felt heavy and his pale skin clammy. He had tried to make the long thin strands of hair stay stuck over his bald patch but they were sticking up like antennae. He had waken thirty, no it would be twenty eight, minutes ago in his bed at the Hyatt with a dull headache. As he had rushed to pack up his belongings and get a cab he had felt a strange disassociation between his limbs and his brain. Just performing some of the simplest actions, like fastening the catches on his pair of old leather suitcases, had felt like he was doing it for the first time. He had been informed by the agent the day before that the ship would be leaving from Pier B at sixteen hundred hours, and that he should board two hours before that.

Seeing a sign for Pier B flash past the taxi's window, George glanced at his watch again. 'Three fifty nine, blast, I'm sure going to miss it now,' George cursed to himself as he nervously polished his glasses with his handkerchief. He tried to prepare himself for the disappointment, imagining arriving at the pier and seeing the ship one hundred yards from shore heading straight out to sea, blowing its horn mockingly. He pictured a dignified George R. Morello standing on the dock, calmly watching the Divine Vessel sail out of sight.

It was therefore a wonderful sight that George beheld as his taxi turned through the gates of Pier B. It was the Divine Vessel, all one hundred and eighty six metres of

her (George had looked that up), still securely moored to the dock. She was not as big as the other cargo ships he had travelled on in the past, but she looked in fine condition, and from the pictures he had requested before booking, his quarters promised to be both practical and comfortable. George sat in the now stationary taxi for a moment and watched the Japanese stevedores, dressed in their green jump-suits and funny white spats, rushing to load the final containers. She was painted a businesslike dark steely blue colour above her waterline and a complimentary rust red below it. Her name was painted in silver in a futuristic looking italic font down her side, more suitable for a space ship than a cargo ship George felt. The ship had three yellow onboard cranes that were distributed evenly down its centre. These were presently doing their job of lifting the containers from the dock onto the deck of the ship where the stevedores secured them for the voyage. At the stern of the ship was the superstructure, a five storey high white box that contained all the offices, mess rooms, galley, accommodation, and on top of all these the bridge and the wheelhouse. George paid the driver and retrieved his two smart, but well travelled, suitcases from the trunk. Though both the same size one was far heavier than the other, filled completely by history books for the voyage, and George struggled with them up the gangplank.

‘George R. Morrello, Professor,’ said George, placing the heavier case on the deck and extending his right hand to the man waiting for him at the top. ‘I am the new passenger. I am so very sorry for arriving late. It really is inexcusable. I do hope I haven’t delayed or inconvenienced you in any way.’

‘Please do not be worry, the ships departure has been slightly delaying. We have been expecting you,’ said the somehow familiar man whose hand he was still shaking ‘I am the chief officer. Welcoming on board the Divine Vessel.’

What was that? thought George, did he say welcome back? No, I must have imagined it. There is though something familiar in his manner, as if he knows me. Darn if I can place him, I would have remembered that

strange scoop out of his head if I had ever met him.

‘Going along here to the poop deck, turn right down the corridor and the lift is halfway along. I believe your cabin is on the forth floor, number eight. I will inform the steward that you have arriving,’ said Oddbjorn only now releasing George’s hand. ‘I would escort you to your cabin myself, but I have to oversee the loading of these last minute ‘special’ containers,’ and as if to emphasis the word ‘special’ he gave George a curious wink before headed off down the ship.

‘Sweetie?’

George jumped, he had found the lift and was waiting for it to come.

‘Sweetie? Sweetie sweetie?’ continued the woman that George had now turned to face. She was extending a bag of sticky looking brightly coloured candy right under his nose.

‘Thank you, but no thank you madam,’ said George politely. ‘My name is Professor George R. Morello. I am the new passenger on board.’

The information seemed to wash over the woman. ‘Are you taking the lift?’ she demanded.

‘Erm, yes, I have...’

‘I never take the lift. I think that only very lazy people take the lift. It’s like people who drive cars. Very, very lazy they are. Sat there just turning the wheel, what kind of exercise is that? That’s why I don’t drive. I always get one of my daughters to come and take me to the shops. And I always take the stairs, its such good exercise you know. When I go up the stairs I tighten my buttocks, you see its very good for them, I squeeze them together with each step. That is why they look so good for my age. Look at them.’ And with that she turned around and stuck her fairly large arse out for George’s inspection.

‘Hum, umm, oh, the elevator is here. Perhaps another time,’ said George, lifting his cases in first and then stepping into the small space after them.

‘Elevator? Elevator? Oh you mean lift.’ The woman stepped into the lift after him. ‘Where I come from we

say lift. An elevator is what they have in department stores, those moving staircases. They have them in underground stations and in shopping centres, and in airports. No this is a lift dear, not an elevator.'

'What floor?' interrupted George.

'Sorry?'

'What floor would you like to go to in this lift'

'Oh, I am going to the captain's floor. The captain has a bit of a sweet tooth, he loves my sweeties. He likes our little chats we have, though my, he is such a talker I hardly get a word in edgeways. Yesterday I was in his cabin for three hours, my how he can talk, it can be so hard to get away. I can't sit there talking to him all day, I am a very busy person you know.'

'Which floor is the captain's?'

'Sorry?'

'What number floor is the captain's, so that I know what button to press here?' persisted George.

'Oh, let me think, the top floor, so number four.'

'That is where I am going, apparently my cabin is there,' said George pushing the top button.

'You have a cabin on the captain's floor?'

'Apparently so. Number eight'

'But mine is on the third floor. Why didn't I get a cabin on the captain's floor? You must be paying more, yes that's it you are paying a lot more money. Well, I can't go spending money willie nillie you know, not now I'm on my own. I have to watch my pennies. Look after the pennies and the pounds look after themselves.'

'I think all the cabins cost the same, I am sure yours is just as nice as mine.' George tried to placate the woman. 'Well, here we are at the captain's floor. After you.'

The woman stepped out of the lift. 'You know the captain hates it if you are late for dinner,' the woman said expressing it almost as if George made a habit of being late for dinner. 'He hates it if you are not there at exactly five thirty.' It seemed to George she wanted to add a 'so there'. Then she stood, blocking the exit of the lift, and her eyes seemed to glaze over and she seemed somewhere else in her mind for a moment. And then just as quickly she was back, 'Sweetie?'

‘No thank you.’

And with that, one of the worst insults she could imagine, Margaret McKlusky whisked herself off down the corridor towards the Captain’s cabin, swishing those buttocks.

At five thirty George was seated in the dining room at the opposite end of the long white table clothed covered table from Captain Nemo. He had changed his clothes, showered and finally managed to make his hair lay flat over his balding head. George had in fact made his way down to dining room ten minutes early, and was worried that he had got his timings wrong again when he found a glum looking captain already halfway through his dinner. After introductions however, the captain had reassured him that his timing was perfect on this occasion, and that he was eating early merely because he had to supervise the immanent departure of the ship from Osaka.

‘Yes, so you are our fourth passenger, Professor Morrello,’ continued Captain Nemo between mouthfuls. ‘We have a young couple, writers or artists I think, and an older lady, this Mrs McKlusky.’

‘The one with the candies?’

‘Ha, yes that’s her. If you want my advice don’t tell her where your cabin is, or you will not get any peace. My, she can talk.’

‘Shucks, I am afraid it may already be too late’, said George.

‘Tea, sir?’ The somewhat frazzled looking steward had been hovering behind George’s left elbow for some-time, and sensing a small break in the conversation had made his move.

‘Yes thank you. My name is Professor George R. Morello. I am the new passenger on the ship.’ He turned to face Rudi.

‘Oh, very good sir. I am the steward, though now I have to cook as well. My name is Rudolf, like Rudolf Nuriev, but I no dance. Everyone here calls me Rudi, or Steward.’

‘That’s right, Steward is having a go at the cook’s job as well. It’s a wonderful opportunity for him to make

something better of himself,' said the Captain from the far end of the table.

'What has happen to the cook, Rudi?'' asked George.

The steward looked extremely unsettled by this question. The flaps of additional skin that hung around his jaw seemingly began to quiver under the pressure of the question. He studied his shoes, a small orange stain on the table cloth, the sunset through the window and finally he looked to the Captain for help. He too seemed slightly worried by what George had intended to be an innocent enquiry.

'Cook left the ship unexpectedly in Osaka. It happens sometimes, especially with these Mongolians. There is a problem with there family's livestock, and they disappear at the next port. No, it's a good thing for the ship to be rid of a man like that, and a good thing for Steward here. Isn't that right Steward?'' said the captain, perhaps just a bit too forcefully.

'Yes, yes Captain.' Rudi, backed out of the room towards the galley nearly bumping into Seth Banks who was on his way in.

'Evening Captain,' nodded Seth to the far end of the table, ignoring the new face at the other end.

'Evening, if you will excuse me I most go and prepare for departure.' The captain left the two men at the table.

Seth took his seat two places down from George and began an inspection of his cutlery. They sat in silence, Seth seemingly oblivious to the new fellow passenger, until George could bear it no longer. 'Hi, my name is George Morrello. I am the new passenger. I am going to all the way to New Zealand and back.'

'Hello,' replied Seth, deep in thought about the next twist in the sci-fi he was writing.

'Evening.' Andre Valov entered the room.

'Good evening. My name is George Morrello, I am the new...' started George.

'I know who you are,' Andre interrupted, giving George a disconcerting wink. 'I am the Chief Engineer, and you are our new passenger. A professor I think.'

'Well, yep, you are correct. I am a music professor.

I teach now, well I have always taught, at Berkeley in California. But now I spend about four months of the year outside of the States, travelling and giving lectures.'

'And what are you doing on our ship Professor? Not going to give us any lectures I hope,' said Andre, looking across at Seth who gave the required chuckle.

'Well no. Apart from music my other passion is history. I am a professional music teacher, and an amateur historian. I use these long trips on cargo ships read all the historical books I have no time to read at home.'

'You have been on a cargo ship before?' asked Seth, unintentionally addressing the professor's unusually large forehead.

'Yes, four times before. Oh, thank you Rudi, this looks delicious what is it?'

'Is ox tails, sir. Potatoes? Rice?'

'Potatoes, thank you. Last year I did a voyage from the east coast right around South America and up the West coast,' continued George. 'I just love the solitude you get on ship, no telephone, no fax and especially none of that damn email. It's wonderful, all your meals are cooked for you, and everything happens right on time. It's just great.'

'No meat for me steward,' said Andre.

'What, no ox? Rice? Potatoes?'

'No. Just get me a large salad. Seth, where is your wife? Is she coming to dinner?'

'You mean my girlfriend? She's in our cabin, she thinks she has seasickness. These women, huh. Potatoes please Rudi.'

'Oh what a shame, I guess I will have to meet her tomorrow. Seth, what is it that you and your girlfriend are doing on this ship? Is it a holiday?' asked George.

'No, working. I, we, are writers,' replied Seth, his attention still caught by George's expanse of forehead. The professor's chin disappeared into his neck as he chewed making his head curiously light bulb shaped, Seth thought. 'We have planned to write a book whilst on the ship.'

‘Writers? How great! What kind of stuff do you write? Would I have every heard of the pair of you?’

‘We write sci-fi. I, we, have had a certain amount of success in Tasmania. We wrote two books about giant cod attacking a holiday camp there, *Night of the Cod*, and *Cod’s Moon*. They are kind of huge mutant fish that can go on the land. You know, cod have really sharp teeth and can give you a nasty bite. But you wouldn’t recognise our names because write under the synonym Dr Guy R. Armidillo. It’s very important to have the middle initial for sci-fi.’

‘Cod? How interesting, and what do the pair of you intend to write whilst on board?’

‘Well, I, we, had this idea about writing about these two artists that decided to release all these plastic bath toys into the sea, as a piece of modern art. So, they pretended to be passengers on a ship and then pushed this big container overboard during a storm. But what they don’t know is that all these little plastic toys will end up spreading out all over the planet and, through the combined effect of all the little differences they make to the lives of the people who find them, change the course of human kind and the planet for ever.’

‘They push a thirty ton container over board?’ ventured Andre.

‘Well, yes, there’s a storm or something like that. But the good bit is that Earth is being watched by aliens, its always has been watched. These aliens have a kind of science that can predict all the things that could ever happen, and so foresee that if they can make someone push all these toys into the sea humans will not destroy the Earth and themselves, but will evolve into a super race. So they sort of make these artists have this idea in the first place, and then kind of help them do it.’

‘Sorry Seth, but why would the aliens want to help humans evolve into a super race?’ asked George as politely as he could.

‘And what about these two artists. Why don’t the aliens just push this container over the side themselves, or better just drop the toys from a spaceship?’ chipped in Andre, seeing no reason to be polite.

‘Well, we, I, we are still working some of these details out you know. It’s just an idea.’ Seth flushed and concentrated on his ox tails.

‘And a very good idea, Seth, I once....’ complimented George and he was about to go on when he thought he heard something approaching down the corridor. Looking at the faces of Andre and Seth he could see that they had also heard it now. Louder now and approaching fast, it was the unmistakable ‘Sweetie sweetie? Sweetie?’ of Margaret McKlusky.

‘Hello sweeties. Oh look, you have all started without me, well never mind,’ she said as soon as she stepped into the room. ‘I had a lovely chat with the Captain today, oh he can talk...’

‘Excuse me,’ said Andre as he rose from his chair. ‘I think I need to go and start the engine.’

‘I was telling him this afternoon about my daughter, she lives in...’

‘Me too, I mean I need to go, to check on Ruby, see if she’s ok.’ Seth headed for the door.

‘She has such a lovely big house. He’s very rich, sells...’

‘Chief, do you think I could come and take a look in the engine room,’ shouted George after Andre, and not waiting for a reply he got up to go, ‘excuse me lady.’

‘She has a lovely daughter, my granddaughter, but I don’t get to see her much. Oh, you have all left the room. Never mind, I like to eat on my own, it gives me time to chew my food properly. Well what do we have to eat here then, salad, bread, cheese, meat...’ Margaret McKlusky continued, ‘clench Margaret. Am I talking to myself?’