

20

‘Four thousand, and one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, four thousand and ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, four thousand and twenty...’ Professor George R. Morello said under his breath. He was on the passenger deck taking a morning walk. Back in California he always did three miles every morning on the treadmill before his coffee and muesli, and this was his goal now. Before leaving his cabin this morning he had measured the length of one of his strides. Lacking any tape measure or ruler he had improvised by laying out sheets of paper in a line and seeing how many sheets one of his strides covered. With the figure of two and three quarter sheets, and of course knowing the exact length of one sheet, he was easily able to calculate the length of his stride, and therefore how many would be required to cover the desired three miles. He could have gone one stage further and worked out how many strides it took him to walk around the small passenger deck, and dividing that into the total used the resulting figure as a guide on how many circuits he needed to complete. However the Professor thought that this merely added an additional margin of error into an already unreliable estimate, and so he had decided upon counting his strides as opposed to circuits.

He had waken feeling fantastic this morning with none of that uncontrollable drowsiness that he had been experiencing the last few days. The ship left Yokohama today for its long voyage to New Zealand, and he felt determined to make up for lost time. ‘Eight, nine, four thousand three hundred and ninety, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, four thousand four hundred, and one, two, three, four...’

This morning George was dressed in his exercise

gear; an old pair of short white shorts, a remnant of when he used to be in the athletics team when he was a student, white ankle socks, white pumps, the laces double knotted, and a baggy grey Berkley University California T-shirt. His legs were surprisingly good for a man his age, but his scrawny upper body and thin arms gave away the fact that he was a man in his late fifties that sat behind a desk most of the day. His thick tortoise shell rimmed glasses, tight wrinkles around his eyes and mouth, balding head, and long comb over, added perhaps ten years onto his actual age. He had a skull the shape of an inverted tear drop, resulting from a large forehead, both unusually wide and high. This gave him the classic caricature look of an academic, which of course he was.

‘Four thousand eight hundred and twenty, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, four thousand eight hundred and thirty, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, four thousand eight hundred and forty, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, and...’ said George more loudly now. ‘Three miles exactly.’

He leaned on the railings and slowly stretched each of his calves out in turn. Looking down he saw one of the other passengers, Margaret McKlusky, four decks below. She was perched on a bench next to the empty swimming pool knitting a very long lilac scarf. It coiled onto the deck, up along the bench and into her lap like an exotic fluffy snake. Her lips were moving but George couldn’t hear what she was saying, nor see any one that she could be talking to.

George shifted his weight to stretch his hamstring, enjoying the feeling of tightness down the back of his thigh. Below Margaret, on the aft main deck, a deckhand was busy with a pot of orange paint and brush, touching up one of the ship’s huge iron cleats. As George shifted his weight to stretch the other leg the deck hand looked up in his direction, seeming to have sensed that he was being watched. George was amazed when he heard the man ask, ‘Feeling better Commander?’ It sounded to George as if the man had been stood right next to him, not five floors down, and George could have sworn that

the man's lips never moved. He was also confused about what he had said. Why on earth had he addressed him as Commander?

George felt it better to ignore the deckhand and walked across to the other side of the passenger deck and up the steps to the flying bridge. Here he could look down the length of the ship to the bow. He watched the busy operations on the docks as heavy duty forklifts moved containers into position beside the ship from where the ship's cranes lifted them on board. A large refrigerated container rose from the dock, and swung slowly across in front of him and onto the ship. From his vantage point George was able to watch the two Filipino operators of the ship's cranes in the glass cockpits at the top of the cranes' towers. George jumped back in astonishment as the pair of Filipino's lifted their eyes towards him, and said in unison, 'The four new containers of rabbits are on board and secure. Good to have you back Commander.'

George was even more astonished when he heard himself reply, 'It's good to be back.' There was no way he could have heard those operators through the glass of their cockpits, and George was equally sure that he hadn't opened his mouth even though it had felt to him like he had spoken a reply. He stared again at the crane operators, but they now seemed completely unaware of his presence as they concentrated on their work.

A man had walked up the gang plank and was talking to the Indonesian deckhand. He was tall with a large stomach that protruded from inside his open jacket. His face had a ruddy complexion and sported a silver moustache. The man stopped talking and looked up, returning George's stare. Something in George's head told him that he knew this man, and without moving his lips, or uttering a sound George found himself saying to him, 'Welcome on board Captain Pimento. You did well last night, for a while there we wondered if you would be able to join us. The plan appears to be back on track and entering its final phase.'

'Thank you Commander.' George heard him reply.

'You should go to your cabin and rest now,' George

added and he watched the man walk off with the steward.

This is most peculiar, thought George to himself as he looked down at his hands as if to find an answer in them, what on earth has come over me?

‘Everything shape ship Commander?’

George jumped, he hadn’t seen Oddbjorn Ballengrud, the chief officer, approaching.

‘Yes everything appears to be in order Chief Scientist, good work.’ George again found himself replying without even understanding what he was saying. Now, though it was feeling slightly more natural, as if something inside him was gradually taking more control of him.

‘Everything is prepared for the transmission tonight; the broadcast equipment is being assembled and tested as we speak. The planets will be the correct positions at exactly midnight and will stay in alignment for almost two minutes.’ George heard the chief’s words ring inside his head. They seemed to make more sense to him now. Everything began to feel like it fitted into place, finally something had taken complete control. He felt stronger and more powerful than he ever had in his life.

‘Excellent,’ he said, not even thinking to open his mouth now. ‘I am sure our leaders will be extremely pleased with our report. The plan is going perfectly. Nothing can stop us now.’

The chief lifted his head and stared. George’s eyes followed his gaze. The two men stood and stared, stared at the sun, unblinking.