

# 21

The officer's dining room was clad with dark wood effect laminate. It had three dining tables each covered with white table cloths which were spotted with the faint remains of dinners past. The chairs were covered with a rough orange fabric and this was followed through on the lampshades. The carpet was beige and had the outline of a flood still clearly visible across it. In the evening the room had an orange glow, rather like a Norwegian chalet on a cold night Oddbjorn had thought the first time he saw it. Ruby thought it looked dated and faded. There was an adjoining room that was separated by a folding plastic curtain. It was similarly decorated, but had easy chairs and low tables, supposedly for after dinner coffee and evening games of canasta on dark nights. But this was hardly ever used as the DVD collection of the Divine Vessel was massive and most the seaman had there own players in their cabins. However, between five thirty and six thirty every night, local time, all the passengers and officers used this room. Mostly they ate their dinner quickly and left but sometimes, like the first evening of the long voyage to Auckland they lingered and chatted.

‘Good evening Chief.’

Oddbjorn was the last to sit at the long table for dinner. Professor Morrello was first, as he was always punctual, then Seth, followed by Andre, Ruby and then Margaret. They were all either finishing up or half way through their chicken, boiled egg, rice and thick brown gravy. An unusual combination even for Rudi, but as he had repeatedly explained everytime he served up, ‘I no cook, so I just do best I can, and I no find key to store so this all I got.’

‘Good evening Professor. How are you feeling?’

‘Much better, thanks Chief.’

Oddbjorn sat down. The only empty chair was the captain’s, at the head of the table. Margaret looked up from her plate, cast her gaze around all the faces, seemed satisfied that there was sufficient audience now and addressed everyone with her news.

‘Such a shame about Captain Nemo. He was so young.’

‘What do you mean, madam?’ Professor smiled widely at Margaret displaying his large dentures and a piece of decorative parsley lodged in the front of them.

‘The last captain, you know...’

‘Unfortunately, Captain Nemo committed suicide last night.’ Andre said officially.

Margaret scowled at the Russian. She had waited all evening to tell everyone that. No matter, she thought, I have another piece of news I know for certain that no one here knows.

‘Oh that’s terrible.’

‘Yes, it’s very, um, er, unfortunate. He was on shore at the time and apparently had been drinking heavily in the seaman’s bar.’ All eyes around the table were on Andre.

‘Coffee, madam?’

‘Yes, steward, where’s that cream?’

‘According to eye witnesses he stepped out in the path of an oncoming car.’

‘How awful,’ said Ruby looking straight at Seth and retying her ponytail.

‘Steward, are there any vegetables?’ Rudi was just leaving the room after placing Oddbjorn’s dinner down in front of him.

‘I already spoke to him,’ Andre said quietly across to Oddbjorn. ‘He’ll do some next time.’

‘I will be so very close to the death if I have to eat this rubbish all the way to Auckland,’ Oddbjorn hissed back.

Seth looked up and caught Ruby’s eye. ‘But, Chief,’ Seth said slowly, ‘couldn’t it have been an accident?’

‘Oh no, no doubt about suicide.’

‘He was so young,’ muttered Margaret. ‘Any pudding steward?’

‘There were, of course, signs. He hadn’t been well for a while it seems. Unfortunately none of us had been on the ship long enough to notice them.’ Andre looked over at Oddbjorn who was gingerly picking at his chicken leg with a knife.

‘Yes, yes apparently his wife was leaving him very recently,’ he added without looking up.

‘I don’t think so,’ Margaret said authoritatively. ‘Captain Nemo and I spent many hours together and we were,’ she coughed for dramatic effect, ‘very close. And he would have told me, I’m sure.’

‘You said that there were eye witnesses?’ Ruby asked Andre.

‘Yes, who saw him leap out, a couple of our own crew. Can you believe it? He flew through the air, apparently quite high.’

‘It was quick, he means the death, it was quick.’ Oddbjorn added.

‘Well, I don’t understand it, such a young man. And even if his wife did leave him there are always plenty of other fish in the sea. He had his whole life ahead of him. Can I have some cream on my cake?’ Margaret lowered her voice and smiled at Ruby ‘I always like cream when I’m on holiday.’

Ruby smiled weakly back. God that woman’s a freak, she thought. Rudi was circulating with squirry cream and a plate of odd shaped muffins.

‘I cook myself, first time I bake the cakes.’

‘But madam.’ Andre paused and wiped his eyes and forehead with a dirty handkerchief. ‘You are mistaken. Captain Nemo was not a young man, he had just celebrated his sixtieth birthday. He was going to have to retire in the next five years. I imagine that the thought of spending his retirement alone was probably too much for him.’

‘But sixty isn’t old, he could have lived for another thirty years at least...’

‘Well, exactly,’ added Oddbjorn, ‘and all the time living by himself, and his wife with his younger brother. That is not a life.’

‘His younger brother?’ Seth said and waved away Rudi who was hovering ready to squirt.

‘Yes.’

‘What a nasty business.’ Professor Morrello said quietly from the other end of the table. There was a pause in the conversation. Ruby looked at Seth worriedly. They were both thinking the same thing, they had seen the whole thing and it had never looked like a suicide to them, that had never even occurred to them.

‘Coffee Chief?’ Rudi was now hovering with the coffee pot.

Ruby’s mind was in a muddle, why hadn’t she just said something in the beginning. They were there. They had seen it. But it would seem suspicious now, they should have done something at the time, instead they couldn’t really be bothered, and now they here sitting having dinner, hypothesising about something they had the answer to, a murder.

‘We were there you know. We saw Captain Nemo’s accident.’ Seth couldn’t refer to it as a suicide. Everyone looked up.

‘What do you mean?’ said Andre slowly.

‘Well, we didn’t see everything,’ he said looking at Ruby’s face. Shit, he thought, perhaps I shouldn’t have said anything.

‘Um, we were in a taxi coming back to the ship and we saw, um, er someone getting hit by a car near the port. It must have been Captain Nemo.’

‘Did you see him fly through the air?’ Margaret enquired.

‘What?’ Ruby’s head jerked round to face her.

‘How very very interesting Seth.’ Oddbjorn sipped his coffee, and then changed his tone and looked at Ruby. ‘That must have been so terribly disturbing.’

‘Well, we er, just saw an accident, of course we didn’t know who it was until this moment.’ Ruby was thinking carefully, trying not to let too much slip. She knew she should have reported it to the police or at least said something at the time. Damn, they were so stupid.

‘Oh, I’m sorry for you. It must be so very horrible hearing about it like this at the dinner table.’ Oddbjorn said sweetly, but Ruby wasn’t quite convinced of his sincerity as he didn’t even look at her, just stared

straight at Professor Morrello.

This is really bad, she thought, we could be in big trouble now, I wish Seth hadn't said anything.

'Yes,' she said. 'Actually now I feel terrible, not having said anything at the time. I bet you feel the same Seth?'

'Don't worry my dears.' Professor Morrello suddenly spoke. 'You weren't to know who it was. It's all done now, there's nothing you could do.' He smiled at Oddbjorn, 'I remember seeing an accident in California, just before I came here. A man was driving on the freeway and er, oh, what do you call it? Um...'

Ruby stared at the Professor.

'Um, er, on the freeway, er...'

Ruby nudged Seth under the table. The Professor's large bulbous forehead appeared to be moving, pulsing even. He took neatly pressed handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped it.

'Er, he was driving a, er, um...'

He wrinkled his nose rather like he was sniffing something and blinked his watery grey eyes several times.

'Are you ok?' Ruby enquired gently.

'Excuse me,' Margaret said loudly. Everyone turned round, apart from Ruby, who was still staring at the Professor. His head had stopped pulsing now and a large swelling had developed on the left side of his forehead making his left eyebrow more raised than the other. She might have been almost amused at this sight if it hadn't look so painful.

'Er, hello,' Margaret peered round at Ruby. 'Excuse me.' This time her voice was a little strained. Ruby turned around slowly. In front of Margaret was a large bag of sticky sweets, a pile of chocolate bars, a bag of nuts and some dried fruit. It created quite a nasty heap of confectionary. 'I have an announcement to make.' She paused again and tried to catch everyone's eye. Oddbjorn wrinkled his nose several times and then appearing quite disturbed at this and put his hand over it. 'Today is my birthday.'

'Happy Birthday Melanie.' Professor Morrello was the first to congratulate her. Everyone else followed in

their congratulations and Seth even leaned over and gave her a peck on the cheek, well he had intended to but Margaret moved her head at the last second and he landed her one on the chin.

Ugh, thought Seth, prickly.

Margaret then pulled her bag onto her knee and started retrieving miniature bottles of alcohol. She had Kalua, Bailey's, Crème de Menthe, Cherry Liqueur and her favourite Crofts Original (which is a kind of English Sherry).

'Please help yourselves,' she said.

'I'm sorry, my dear,' Professor Morrello addressed Ruby, 'I'm afraid I forgot what I was saying.'

'Please, don't be shy.' Margaret was unscrewing a Sambuca bottle and emptying it into her coffee. Seth picked up a chocolate just to be polite, but he really wasn't in the mood.

'Don't worry Professor,' Ruby tried to reassure him. The bulge in his forehead had moved to the centre now raising both eyebrows in the middle. She thought it was best not to press the matter as it seemed to encourage the lump.

'Come on, let's have a little party!' Margaret looked at Andre and then at Oddbjorn.

Andre smiled at her and mopped his brow again. 'I'm afraid madam that I have work to do, so I'm not able to join you.'

'Me also,' said Oddbjorn and he pushed his chair away ready to leave.

'But, I'm sixty-three today. Come on, relax a little, get in the mood.'

'I am truly sorry not to be able to celebrate such a great age with you, but...Good evening Captain.' Oddbjorn turned to greet Captain Pimento, who had just entered the officer's dining room.

'Good evening everybody,' said the captain.

Seth quickly looked from the captain to Ruby and back, and she returned his horrified expression. They both knew, straight away, it was the driver of the car that Captain Nemo had supposedly jumped in front of.

'Well,' Margaret said loudly, 'I'm sure the new

captain will join me.’ She opened another bottle, Crème de Menthe this time, and poured it into her now empty coffee cup. ‘Won’t you Captain?’

‘Shall we go up to the deck now Chief? I feel ready to meet the crew after my little nap,’ said Captain Pimento staring straight at Ruby. ‘We’ve met before, madam.’

‘No, no, no I don’t think so.’ Ruby stuttered.

‘I think that we both know that’s not true. Come on Chief, we’ve got work to do.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Oddbjorn as he followed the Captain out.

‘Well, how rude,’ Margaret said indignantly. ‘Captain Nemo would have joined like a shot. Ha ha, like a shot, get it?’

Andre smiled weakly at Margaret. ‘That, I think, was part of his problem. If you will excuse me...’

‘Where’s that sailor, you know, the dark one?’

Ruby coughed uncomfortably.

‘If you all will excuse me. Goodnight. Thanks Rudi.’ Professor Morrello got up and left the room.

‘Is no problem, sir.’ Rudi was just finishing tidying the last of the dishes away and disappeared into the kitchen.

‘Which sailor?’ Andre answered.

‘Goodnight.’ Seth said quickly seizing his chance and the couple left.

‘The curly haired one, you know, funny accident. Cute buns. He’ll join me for a few if you boring lot won’t.’

‘Ah, Millian.’

‘Yes, Mr million dollars, that’s him.’

‘I’m afraid he didn’t return to the ship at Yokohama. I suppose you might say he’s gone AWOL. Good night madam.’

Margaret opened the small bottle of Croft’s Original and took a swig. ‘What about you Rudi?’ she called out to the kitchen.

‘I no drink madam, it no good for Muslim man.’

‘Well bugger the lot of you.’ Margaret noisily pushed the sweets, chocolates, dried fruits and miniatures back into the bag on her lap along with a few pieces of cutlery and attempted a stomp back to her room.