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‘Coffee madam?’

‘Yes, please,’ said Ruby.

‘And for you sir?’

Ruby and Seth were sitting at the long table in the officer’s dining room of the Divine Vessel for their first breakfast on board. The ship was still in Shanghai but they were due to leave later that afternoon. Next to Ruby, at the head of the table, sat Margaret. The chair opposite Ruby was empty and so were the next two but then at the end sat the chief engineer and opposite him the chief officer. Ruby poured herself an orange juice and offered some to Margaret who declined with a shake of her head.

‘Coffee madam?’

‘Oh yes, please,’ answered Margaret. ‘Do you have any cream?’

‘Ah um, yes, yes here is the milk.’

‘No. I want cream, I always have cream when I’m out.’ Margaret stated, looking over at Ruby to see if she was listening.

‘I’ll ask cook,’ said the steward and scurried out of the room. Seth poured himself some muesli and Ruby sipped her coffee.

‘I haven’t introduced myself properly,’ said the chief officer, and Ruby and Seth looked up, recognising the man who had welcomed them on board last night. He smiled widely showing off his white teeth and healthy gums, as if to remind them of their first meeting. ‘I am the chief officer, very pleasing to meeting you.’

They returned the greeting. ‘Where are you from, Chief?’ Seth asked.

‘Originally I was born in the Faroe Islands, but I am living in Norway for most of my life.’ Oddbjørn Ballengrud’s tanned freshly shaved head seemed to glow

in the light pouring in from the nearby window and his indent looked like a crater on the surface of some strange orange planet.

‘Cream, madam.’ The steward rushed in holding a small jug, handed it to Margaret and then hovered around the table.

‘I am the chief engineer. Hello. Where are you travelling to?’ Andre Valov wiped his mouth on the back of his hand depositing some particles of muesli into his lap and extended it to Seth.

‘New Zealand. Ruby has some relatives that we are going to visit and then we’ll head home I guess.’

‘Ah, New Zealand, fantastic country. Very British.’

‘I lived there for many years,’ added Margaret.

‘Really?’ Ruby turned towards her and continued to eat her Cornflakes.

‘Yes.’ There was a pause in the conversation as the table politely waited for her to elaborate, but she didn’t.

The steward, clearly a little agitated took this moment to ask ‘Would like eggs? We have fried, scrambling or Mongolian.’

‘What’s Mongolian?’ asked Ruby.

‘Oh, you know, with rice and mutton.’

‘Fried,’ they both answered together.

‘And you madam?’

‘I’ll have fried too, just for a treat.’ Margaret always felt it necessary to explain her food choices. The steward rushed out. On the other table, in the corner of the dining room sat the third officer and his wife both happily eating huge piles of mutton and rice.

‘Excusing me,’ said the chief officer before delicately wiping the corners of his mouth, and then leaving the room. The chief engineer got up shortly after and followed him.

‘They all want frying eggs,’ said the steward.

‘But I’ve done all this rice,’ moaned Geral.

‘Well, cook, that’s what they want.’

‘I can’t understand it. It’s no way to start the day.’ He cracked six eggs out onto the hot plate and wiped his hands down his apron, covering his ever increasing belly

in grease, and let out a long sigh

‘You no yourself,’ commented the steward.

‘I feel shit, Rudy. I really do. I went to first aid last night about this eye infection. He said it was conjunctivitis and gave me some drops, but it is worse this morning.’ Geral turned round to face Rudy. His eyelids were both swollen and there was a thick discharge around his left eye. Rudy grimaced with an open display of disgust.

‘It no look good to me.’

‘I know. If the captain sees me like this there’s no way he’ll let me cook so...’

‘Geral no! I no cook again.’ He jiggled his small frame up and down worriedly and shook his wrinkled walnut like head. Rudy had a lot of nervous energy that kept him super skinny although he ate every meal like it was his last, gulping it and shovelling it down. He looked as though he were wearing the skin meant for a bigger man and it hung in dark folds around his jaw, and beneath his eyes. If you were to ask him he would show you the surplus skin that gathered above his knee caps, and scrunched around his arm pits like a too big sweater.

‘I know Rudy...’

‘It too much work for one man, and now, and now we have three passengers too. I cannot!’ Rudy shook his head again, the additional skin lagging a fraction behind the movement of the rest of his head.

Geral handed him the three plates with the fried eggs on. ‘Don’t worry, I’m sure it’ll clear up soon.’

‘Where’s the toast?’ asked Margaret as her fried eggs were placed in front of her.

‘You want toast? Of course madam,’ said Rudy and put two slices in the toaster in front of her.

Margaret looked down at her plate. ‘It’ll be cold by the time he’s done that,’ she said quietly leaning over to Rudy, but not so quietly that everyone didn’t hear. Rudy smiled awkwardly at her. They ate their eggs in silence.

‘Coffee madam?’

‘Yes,’ said Margaret. ‘I really can’t do anything until I’ve had a couple of cups of coffee of a morning.’

‘Oh. I only like to have one cup,’ said Seth ‘I don’t think it’s all that good for you.’

‘Well, I find it keeps me regular,’ Margaret retorted, quite obviously offended or annoyed at Seth’s coffee habits. Ruby coughed as she tried to stifle her laugh. ‘Well, what are you planning for today?’

Ruby looked, up still recovering, ‘Oh I think we’ll start work.’

‘Oh. You’ll be in your cabin all morning then?’

Margaret’s voice sounded sort of disappointed to Ruby. ‘How strange’ she thought ‘I mean we’ve just met the woman.’

‘Yes, well, we don’t know. I mean we don’t how or when we are going to work. We are just looking forward to the quiet, you know getting away from it all.’

‘Oh I hate that. I like to be busy, doing things. I like to feel useful. I’m going to have a wander around, see what’s happening,’ Margaret paused and looked at the couple. They looked back, feeling like they have either just been told off or offended, not sure of which.

‘Well, er, have a nice morning then,’ Seth ventured after the short silence.

‘Oh, I will,’ said Margaret and left the room.

Seth looked at Ruby. ‘Oh my god, it’s your mother!’

Ruby laughed. ‘Cheeky fucker, it’s yours!’

On the wall of the mess room was a huge map of the world. It was a special map as although it clearly showed all of the countries of the world, it only showed their ports and harbours. So, there was no Beijing and no Paris and no Moscow among others. Ruby was looking at it after breakfast. ‘It’s an interesting way to look at world don’t you think Seth?’

‘Yes. It is how I have to see the world,’ said Captain Nemo. Ruby turned around quickly.

‘Good morning Captain, I didn’t hear you come in.’

‘I’ll show you the route we are taking.’

Seth joined them.

‘We are in Shanghai now and this afternoon we will set sail for Busan in South Korea.’ The captain traced a line with his finger across the Yellow Sea. ‘We should

arrive midnight tomorrow, depending on the weather. From there we will sail to Osaka and then Yokohama, where incidentally, I will be leaving the ship. This will take about a week and a half and then it is thirteen days to Auckland. This ship then repeats the journey.'

'So, we'll have a new captain?' asked Ruby at the same time that Seth asked 'Do we stop anywhere on the way to Auckland?'

'Yes, a Finnish captain I think and no, no the ship doesn't stop. You may see land if the weather is very good, on the way here I saw the very tip of the Solomon Islands, but that's unusual. There isn't any birdlife either, so the ship is quite alone.'

'Ooh how exciting,' said Seth.

'Exciting? I don't know about that.'

'What kind of cargo will we be picking up Captain?'

'All different kinds. Most of it containerised so the weather won't delay us. On our last circuit whilst in Bluff in New Zealand we had to pick up a load of paper but it was raining so the ship was delayed about six days. It'll be mostly cars in Japan, they're very popular in New Zealand, but the rest I don't know. You'll have to ask the chief officer, he's in charge of the cargo. He'll show you around if he has time.'

'And er, um, is it possible to see the engine room too? You know find out how it works and all that?'

'Seth! That's a bit cheeky'

'It'll be good for our work,' Seth said under his breath.

The captain ignored them. 'Certainly, please speak to the chief engineer.'

'Ah, yes, we met him at breakfast, where's he from? I found his accent hard to place.'

'He's Russian, but he speaks excellent English. I'll have to go. We are preparing to leave. I just wanted to make sure you knew the route we are taking. I spoke to the other passenger and she seemed completely unaware that we were stopping South Korea or Japan.'

'Yes, she mentioned that to us last night,' called out Ruby.

'I blame the Chinese agents, they charge a fortune

and never do their job properly,' said the captain as he headed for the door.

'Oh, but they explained everything to us...' Ruby's voice trailed off as the captain disappeared down the corridor.

'Come on, let's get to work,' said Seth and Ruby followed him up to their cabin.

Thank goodness he knows where our cabin is, thought Ruby, all the floors look exactly the same to me.

The Divine Vessel left the harbour late. The autumn sun was nearly setting as it pulled across the wide channel. All the small Chinese boats overloaded with gravel, bricks and washing machines skirted around her almost capsizing in her wake. She felt contented with her new cargo and passengers but anxious to make up lost time. The tugs said goodbye after a couple on hours and finally, close to midnight, the pilot left and she sailed happily into the swell of the Yellow Sea towards South Korea.

Ruby woke at around two a.m. Opening her eyes she wondered what had disturbed her. 'Seth,' she thought 'fucking Seth'. His snores were regular and very audible. It was not the first time she had been wakened by his night time noises. She swung her legs over the bed and stood up. 'Might as well have a wee,' she thought 'Now that I'm up'.

Suddenly she felt the carpeted floor move taking her stomach with her. They seemed to pitch for what seemed ages, then pause and pitch back. 'Fuck,' she thought 'We're moving. Of course.' She had momentarily forgotten that she was on a ship and when she had gone to bed that night the ship had been hardly moving in the protected channel. But now they were on the Yellow Sea and things were not so calm. She lurched over to the window and pulled the curtain back, Seth moaned and let out a large snore followed by a hissing sound as he released the air. Ruby could just make out the white tips of the waves as the black sea rose and fell around the ship. She furrowed her brow.

'It's all coming true', she worried 'we are in a storm. Oh shit, shit, I knew I shouldn't come.'

Then she discovered why she had really waken up as she ran to the bathroom lurching with the movement of the ship. 'Oh God,' she said 'I'm going to be sick.'