

Chapter Nineteen

“No—I will not have him in my cabin!” Reijo slammed his cabin door shut in the face of the first mate who was standing in the passageway with Toivo and his belongings.

...bunk with Toivo... never in hell...

Reijo was not about to bunk with his archenemy. Since he was returning to Finland to rejoin his Home Guard unit, he could have had free passage and a hammock with the other thirty-eight men in the cargo hold returning to Finland to enlist; but he didn't want to spend twelve days that way—his pride wouldn't allow it. He had paid for his passage, even though that had left him with less than a dollar and he would have to walk home from Helsinki.

The first mate had a dilemma; there were only two cabins for paying passengers: the one with the tall angry Finn, and the one with the crippled angry American from *The New York Times*. He knocked on the journalist's cabin door and resolutely opened it, surprising Denny who was placing a dozen or more bottles of gin in the top drawer of the cabin's bureau. Denny glared at the intruders at his door.

“What the hell do you wa...” was all he got out before he was interrupted.

“Mr. Arnold, this passenger *will* be traveling with you.” The first mate's voice left no room for discussion.

“I was promised a private cabin! The ship's agent said—“

“Ship's agents say a lot of things, Mr. Denny. This is not the Queen Mary, it's a freighter with very few passenger cabins and—“

“—and you can put him in somewhere else! I’m not sharing my cabin!” Denny started to shut his cabin door, but the first mate held it open.

“*The New York Times* does not own this ship, Mr. Arnold. You *will* share your cabin with this man! Take the top bunk,” the first mate ordered Toivo and then stalked off, having had his fill of passengers for the day.

“Hey, come back here!” Denny hobbled on his crutches out from his cabin and into the passageway to stop the first mate—who slammed a hatch shut behind him, ending the discussion once and for all.

As Denny stood in the passageway and collected himself, Toivo placed his rucksack and mirror ball on the cabin’s top bunk.

“Whoa, cowboy, I want that bunk!” Denny protested, feeling abused by life and having had enough for the day.

“Well, you can’t have it,” Toivo said, feeling abused by life and having had enough strife for the day as well. “He told me to take it.”

They glared at each other, neither yielding.

The *Sisy* had now reached the rough seas of open water and the ship began to roll. Denny lost his balance and fell onto the small sofa beneath a porthole against which an occasional wave now splashed ever so softly.

Denny grimaced and reached for a bottle of gin in the bureau’s top drawer, took a swig—but almost choked as Toivo pulled in his cart from the passageway. “What the hell is that?”

“My work. Paintings. You got a problem with that?”

“What are you so torn up about?” said Denny, who clearly was the more injured of the two.

“Why? Are you writing a book?” Toivo surprised himself with his caustic tone of voice.

Denny took another swig, and then offered Toivo the bottle. “Want some gin? Cures just about anything. Broken hearts. Shattered illusions. Name the problem, gin can handle it. Here, have some.”

But Toivo didn't want anything cured just then.

"Tell you what—" Denny reached into his pocket and took out a coin that he expertly flipped in the air; it was a trick coin with heads on both sides. "Want to trust your luck? Heads I get the top bunk, tails you do."

"I don't believe in luck," said Toivo who seldom in life had had any—except when Kerttu was in his arms and then he knew that he had more of it than anyone else in the world.

"Well, let's put it this way then, I want that bunk and I intend to get it." Denny seldom gave up and made no beans about it.

"What about what I want? I hardly ever get what I want and now I want this bunk!" Toivo had the intensity of one who would do anything for a sign that he had some kind of control of his life—any kind of control.

"Why is that goddamn bunk so goddamn important to you?"

"It's no more important to me than it is to you!" yelled Toivo as loud as he could.

In the next cabin, Reijo banged on the bulkhead for quiet. Denny told him where to go—rapping back on the bulkhead with his bottle of gin. He then took another hefty swallow and watched as Toivo hung the mirror ball at the foot of the top bunk and began to unpack his rucksack.

Denny's bottles clinked against each other in the bureau's drawer as the freighter plowed through the angry sea.

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Denny awoke from a drunken stupor, wiped gin and saliva from his chin and commented to no one in particular, "... great... wonderful... excellent... another fabulous day..."

Toivo, who with closed eyes was smelling Kerttu's scarf, blissfully remembering better times, so resented being returned into his sordid new Now that he nearly grabbed Denny, but restrained himself and exploded with: "Don't

you ‘great wonderful excellent another fabulous day’ me! I didn’t want to be with you either, but this is the way it is! Get over it! We’re stuck with each other so let’s make the best of it! An’ I feel bad enough without your snide comments—so make a damn effort here, okay?!”

“Okay.” Denny let the moment linger, and then again offered Toivo the bottle. “Sure you don’t want a drink? No? Okay. You don’t mind that I have one, do you? You’re not a religious zealot, are you? Good, then life can go on in its customary fashion, which is me getting drunk whenever I can, for which I thank you and the horse you rode in on.”

Denny knocked back another swig and sighed with satisfaction; he would soon be back where he knew he’d be safe—Oblivion.

He reached for another bottle, busied himself peeling off the bottle’s label with his thumbnail while watching Toivo wipe the dust off mirror ball with the sleeve of his jacket; each totally preoccupied with that to which they were most beholden.

“So, d’you think there’s going to be a war?” Denny slurred.

He liked to ask questions; it was the best way he knew to establish an upper hand and keep others at bay.

Toivo looked out the small porthole at the glittering ocean—from behind a cloud, the moon peered at him. “I don’t know,” he responded, although to some extent he did. He had avoided the details of the conflict between Finland and Russia ever since Esa first brought it up.

When Toivo walked away from his childhood home and the nearby village—seeing Finland disappear in the distance, he had with all his youthful might embraced the goal of becoming an American; he had given his whole being to America!

All his dreams were anchored in America—yet he had a peculiar and unexpected emotional attachment to the land he had left, Finland, the land where he had lost his

childhood and so much of his innocence: the land in which he remembered little joy.

He now regretted the scant attention he had given the political details that others had studied and debated, details that might now put the coup de grâce on his Dream of America—a dream that was now but a memory.

“Wars are always about borders,” Denny continued, feeling the gin: its comforting anesthesia rushing rampant through his veins, loosening his feelings. “It’s always been that way. They move the borders here, there, everywhere. Since the beginning of time, the big boys have had their sandboxes in which their not-so-tin soldiers have fought and bled at their master’s whim.”

Denny sipped some more gin to further loosen his speech and thoughts. “Borders determine influence and influence determines power. Wars are at times about other things too, but always about borders and power.”

In the silence that followed, Toivo could almost taste what Denny had said about power and war; a bitter feeling of helplessness spread from the pit of his stomach and consumed him with a premonition of even more dreadful things to come.

“Do *you* think there will be war?” Toivo could hardly ask the question.

“Oh, yeah.” Denny knew he had the young Finn worried. “Too many have talked about it. Finland is a crumb for the big boys, a mere pawn in the game. It’ll happen. It’s in the cards; it’s just a matter of time.”

Denny saw anxiety in the face of the young Finn—it was time to move in for the kill.

“So, how do you feel about fighting and maybe dying?”

“Depends what I am fighting for.”

“Them,” said Denny.

“Them?”

“Yes, them—the people whose faces you see in the news.”

Denny could see from the expression on Toivo’s face that he now controlled the balance of power in the cabin.

Again he held out the trick coin he had used so many times to bring seemingly unmanageable situations under his control. “Okay, wanna flip the coin about the bunk?”

“I told you I don’t believe in luck!” hissed Toivo, who was quite unnerved by what Denny had said about fighting and dying.

Denny lost his temper. “What the hell do you believe in then?”

“This.” Toivo held up his middle finger.

“Same to you. You a proctologist or an asshole?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” said Toivo, who himself didn’t; the separation from Kerttu was tearing him apart.

“Try me.”

“I’m not feeling very happy and don’t want to talk any more!” Toivo snapped off the light, climbed up into the top bunk and lay there cradling his mirror ball, listening to the blows dealt the *Sissi* by increasingly heavy seas as she plowed onward into the Atlantic.

He pulled Kerttu’s scarf out from his pocket, held it to his nose and drifted in her scent.

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In a Brooklyn boarding house, Kerttu lay sleepless on her bed in a very small room. The landlady had been unfriendly at first. Times were still bad and she knew well what young women could get up to: she had lost a daughter to the attraction of men, booze, reefer and heroin in the jazz clubs of Lower Manhattan.

But after Kerttu had shown the landlady a month’s rent, she had become most helpful; there had not been anything she had not been willing to do for the miserable young woman.

After many hours of tossing and turning, exhausted from weeping and worrying, Kerttu fell into a restless sleep.

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In Chicago, Mr. Biederman lay awake in his bed. It had not been a good day; it was Sayde's *jahrzeit*; sixteen years since his wife passed away and he had had no one to talk to all day. He thought of his Sayde and their years together; wondered if she missed him as he missed her; if she ever looked in on him—if she knew they would soon be together again.

... *Sayde... shayna Sayde...*

And then he felt that stinging pain again; it began in his chest, went through his left shoulder and into his left arm where it lingered and throbbed until he took the deep breaths that made it go away.

... *Sayde... meyn shayn royꝛ... Sayde...*

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