

Chapter Nineteen

The *Sisu* tossed about like a cork in a rushing creek; swells gripped the ship, raising and lowering it at will. Toivo and the life vest-clad Denny stood with Reijo and others at the *Sisu's* leeward railing. All pretended to admire the scenery: the force that shoved the *Sisu* up, up, up, atop enormous waves as they clung to the rail, feeling as if they were floating in space and their stomachs no longer belonged to them before slamming the ship down into the water bowels, buckling their knees and sending signals of nauseating panic to their brains—even though there was nothing left in them to vomit. The men simply stood there, spent and humiliated, united by their inability to withstand Nature's might—though she had not even tried all that hard; the swells she delivered were relatively small compared to those she was capable of.

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At the boarding house in Brooklyn, Kerttu and the landlady were having tea. A needy person, the landlady felt she had regained the daughter she had

lost, while Kerttu was grateful for the maternal fussing. When she learned that Kerttu awaited a passport—which could take weeks, if not months—and that she had dreams of dancing on Broadway, she called her son, a stage manager in a cabaret on Manhattan’s Lower Broadway. He arranged an audition for Kerttu the following day.

The landlady had an ulterior motive: she thought Kerttu would make a fine daughter-in-law—much better than any of the floozies her son had brought home.

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Aboard the *Sisu*, Denny crutched away from the leeward railing in an effort to occupy his mind with something other than his nausea. He found the hatch that led from the deck into the engine room and motioned for Toivo; Reijo joined them, uninvited.

They stood on the top landing, looking down into the engine room, astounded by the cacophony of whirring, slamming, banging, and hissing—and the sinewy stoker shoveling coal from an enormous bin into the *Sisu*’s flaming boiler.

Denny took a swig from his ever-present bottle of gin and yelled, “It’s like a god damn inferno down here!”

“Now you’ve seen it. Let’s leave!” Toivo jerked opened the hatch—but was knocked aside by Reijo, who slammed the hatch shut and grabbed Toivo by the shirt.

“Don’t you try to ignore me, Rembrandt!” The bout with seasickness had debilitated Reijo; it had shaken his belief in his invincibility. He now wanted his

manhood back—how he regained it was not important.

“Get your hands off me! Leave me alone!” Toivo was not in the mood for a confrontation with Reijo.

“Something bothering you? Can’t accept that she deliberately missed the boat? That she’s too good for you? That you don’t deserve her?!”

“Hey, hey! What are you talking about?” Denny’s interest was piqued by Reijo’s hostility.

“Stay out of this! It doesn’t concern you! ” Reijo cautioned Denny, and then leaned into Toivo. “Got you pissed off, do I? Want to erase me like you would a drawing, huh? Don’t want to admit I was right, do you?”

Reijo held up his left hand with the middle finger extended and continued to taunt Toivo, even through his wheezing. “Here! Let’s go! Let’s see if you’re a man or a mouse!” He wagged his extended middle finger like a hook in Toivo’s face.

Toivo snapped—he too felt debilitated; he wanted reaffirmation as a human being and man; inflamed with rage, he locked his left middle finger with Reijo’s.

The two antagonists began to pull and twist—trying with all their might to straighten or break the other’s finger. Their fingers remained firmly interlocked—neither combatant was willing to relinquish his grip.

The standoff continued. They glared at each other; their fingers ached; neither noticed that the *Sisu* now rolled and pitched in increasingly heavier seas that made it difficult for Denny to maintain his balance; each one completely absorbed in the other—nothing else mattered.

Smug to be holding his own against the much bigger man, Toivo sneered at Reijo.

Frustrated by his failure to subdue his smaller opponent, Reijo slapped Toivo's face hard with his free hand. Toivo reeled in pain and surprise before slapping Reijo back as hard as he could.

They glared at each other, clamping down even harder on the other's finger, savagely slapping each other's faces—harder and harder!

Entranced by the brutal confrontation, Denny nonetheless flinched at the *crack!* of the slaps.

Reijo groaned with frustration, clamped down on Toivo's finger with all his might—and broke it!

Toivo's breath whooshed out of him in pain and shock; he dropped to his knees, cradling his injured left hand and rocking back and forth as he tried to suppress a moan.

Reijo smiled, snatched the bottle of gin from Denny and contemptuously waggled it in front of Toivo.

“Want some, Rembrandt?”

Toivo ignored the bottle, rose to his feet—and challenged Reijo with his uninjured right middle finger.

Reijo grinned and handed the gin bottle back to Denny.

Again, the two men interlocked their fingers. They twisted; they strained, but to no avail—again, it was a standoff.

Toivo erupted with pain and rage; the savage in him was unleashed; he clamped down on Reijo's finger with all his might—and abruptly snapped it!

Reijo stifled a scream when he saw Toivo's satisfied smile.

Toivo grabbed Denny's bottle, took a swig, and offered it to Reijo.

“Want some, Shostakovich?”

Cupping his injured finger, Reijo refused the drink and spit at Toivo.

“No passengers allowed in here!” an angry voice yelled from below. The boiler stoker bellowed. “Get out or I’ll call the Chief Engineer!”

Reijo opened the hatch with his good hand—the wind-whipped sea roared; a gust of wind caught the hatch, ripped it from Reijo’s hand, and slammed it hard against the bulkhead.

Heavy rain and foamy torrents of waves hit them as they stepped out on deck.

The sea was rising and falling—and the *Sisu* was no match for its power; the ship tossed and turned at nature’s whim, barely making any headway; at times its single brass propeller whirled high above a cresting wave.

An enormous wave gripped the ship and forced her high as she had ever been. Toivo, Reijo, and Denny could feel themselves grow heavier and their legs compress under Nature’s force; they grabbed for a precious bit of bulkhead and for a moment the three were poised, triumphantly safe —until Denny lost his balance and fell just as a large wave broke over the ship’s bow.

The wave surged aft, engulfing all in its way—including Denny. Although antagonists, Toivo and Reijo were instantly united by instinct and concern for their shipmate; they hurled themselves into the foaming cascade and caught Denny with their broken hands as

he was being sucked out into the Atlantic, desperately holding on to his crutches.

They both cried out. Their broken fingers were shattered, their pain was enormous; they almost let go, but somehow found the strength to endure, held on with all their might under the wave's enormous tow and pulled Denny back on deck.

They propped Denny up, felt the bones in their broken fingers pierce their flesh—and did not care that Denny shook them off and stalked away on his crutches.

Another wave broke over the *Sisu's* bow; this time, Toivo and Reijo went their separate ways.

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In her room at the boardinghouse in Brooklyn, Kerttu sat by the open window and wrote the first of many letters to her Toivo.

A pigeon landed on the windowsill, tilted its head cunningly and cooed at her.

Kerttu managed a smile.

The pigeon abruptly flew off; a few downy feathers fluttered in its wake. Kerttu reached for one; it eluded her.

... *Toivo*...

Kerttu wept—as she had already done countless times that day.

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