

Outerbridge Sound

Chapter 14 - Megafauna

“There was that thing, where the attentive waiter turned up to be attentive at just the wrong moment. Not his fault, waiters everywhere seemed to be the pawns of a minor uncaring god. Their entire lives spent arriving at just the wrong moment.”

Σ

With the TV news people from every nation on the planet, roaming around Jannsen. Michael Chavez couldn't have chosen a better moment to open his chapel, his Church of Miracles. Nothing could be done to hide or remove the wrecked cruise ship, even if they'd wanted to. There it lay, still in the deep-water berth, its anchors still in place. Burnt out for the most part, its keel now touched the bottom, as it leaned to port at an angle of about thirty degrees. There were gouges and toothmarks on that wreck, which were impossible to put down to any kind of natural disaster.

“The official death toll is fifteen hundred and twelve.” J Outerbridge had told him. “The final total will be much higher and I can't see them being able to find all the dead.”

A polite way of saying the creature had been witnessed eating some of those it had pulled apart. The north to south current was strong too, in that part of Jannsen. The chances of every family getting their loved ones back to bury, was very small. There had been offers from the international community. Not just medical supplies, but help in investigating the damage to the Golden Promise cruise ship. The passengers and crew had come from just about every nation in the world and the world wanted answers.

“As you can imagine, London aren't keen on every foreigner with a rowboat turning up to help. Leaving aside wounded national pride, there are security issues.” J had gone on to say. “It would be quite easy to ban the opening of your chapel, but no one wants that. No embarrassing suggestions though Michael, no pointing a finger at anyone. In short, no rabble rousing.”

“Of course J, I had no intention of doing anything like that. I want to bring people together, not drive them apart.”

Which might end up being easier said than done. Michael had stood by the road, waving a greeting to those who arrived for the grand opening. Three regulars from Rum Runners arrived on bikes.

“Great idea Michael, getting us organised. Now we can make them tell us the truth about Judy Gosse. Poor kid, she was only twenty.”

One of them had yelled, before going into the newly erected chapel. His chapel looked like a squat fat portacabin, because a lot of it was the reused sides of a portacabin. His boat repair guys had made a few more windows in the sides and his wife had done her best to brighten up the inside. To Michael though, his Church of Miracles still looked like a squat fat portacabin.

“It is what it is.” He muttered. “It will have to do.”

Several local businesses had donated money, while a home furnishings shop had given enough tables and chairs to make the inside comfortable. He'd had enough donations to buy a decent looking cross from a mail order company that specialised in ecclesiastical objects. Michael was daydreaming as the Jeep pulled up, wondering if the cross was too big for his chapel.

“Looks like a good turnout, the car park is half full already.” Said Mark Coulier.

“Thank you, thank you both for coming.” Said Michael.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Said Bill Carr. “Please ask about where your congregation have seen the creatures. They’re likely to talk here, about things they’ll never tell us.”

“Of course, I will, anything to help.” Said Michael.

His congregation, he’d liked that phrase. It wasn’t going as he’d expected, more getting organised against the creatures, than praising the lord. Michael could live with that though; his wife had followed a similar path. Lola had organised the women she knew and not just the coffee morning set and the ladies that did lunch. His wife knew the summer residents and the women who worked in the local government.

“Men are fine, but it’s the women who get things organised.” She’d told him. “I’ll bring in the women I know to your chapel and they’ll tell their friends, who will tell their friends.”

It was more secular than he’d hoped, but the car park was filling up. It might well be that God was testing his faith again and he was happy with that. It might be that his purpose was to get people into his chapel, where they could organise. It wasn’t what he’d hoped for, but if it was God’s will.

“Welcome to the Church of Miracles.” He yelled. “All are welcome.”

They were cheering him, even old man Morris, who always moaned about him charging too much to repair his boats. Michael waited by the road for a good ten minutes after the time the meeting was due to start. When he entered the chapel, it was about two thirds full. Not bad for Janssen, he’d probably got more bums on seats that morning than Rum Runners. Michael stood at a table his wife had covered in flowers. Behind him was the cross, which was too large. Beautiful, a work of art, but definitely too big.

“Behind me is a cross, but all faiths are welcome.” He said. “Believe in one God, many Gods, or no God at all. You are still very welcome in this chapel.”

They cheered him, actually cheered him. It was nice to be respected as a local businessman, but no one had ever cheered him before.

“Yes Michael, the time has come to get organised.” Shouted the regular from Rum Runners.

They’d all heard about the miracle in the sea close to his boatyard. If not from him, the story had gone right round the island. Ilaria with the SHP people had even interviewed him and recorded everything. He wanted them to hear it again though, in his chapel.

“I want you all to hear about the miracle, that caused me to build this chapel. It happened close to here, just a short walk along the beach.....”

~ ~

Fred Zinner was alive, so he wasn’t going to complain about anything. He’d seen Betty die, but despite walking right towards the monster he’d survived. He knew someone on Janssen was starting up a chapel, a Church of Miracles. Fred didn’t see it that way, no miracles, sometimes shit happened and sometimes it didn’t. He’d been one of the lucky few to escape from the burning cruise ship. Luck was the key to who’d lived, dumb luck. He was currently sat beside the coast road, looking at the wreck of The Golden Promise. A pretty blonde girl called Emily was with him. One of the people making a TV show on Janssen, she had a camera aimed at him. Pretty or not, he’d have probably told her to clear off, if it hadn’t been for the offer of a cash payment, more if they used the recording on the show.

“Firstly Fred, I have to ask about your injuries. How are you doing ?” Asked Emily.

“Fine would be an overstatement, but I’m doing alright. A doctor from the navy stitched me up and treated the burns. Not complaining, I’m just lucky to be alive.”

The girl ran the camera over his left hand, which now only had three fingers and a thumb. All hidden under a massive bandage.

"I don't remember when I lost the finger, stress I guess." He said. "I walked away from it though, even if it was with one less finger and a badly burned leg."

"Are you being looked after Fred ? I know some survivors are being housed in tents. You seem to have been lucky, I heard you've a room in a villa just outside Tilburg. Is it nice ?"

"Yes, as I said, I'm not complaining. The people of Jannsen have taken us into their homes. A few young people with no injuries are in tents, but there aren't many of them. There aren't that many survivors to be housed. I keep hearing fifteen hundred died, but that can't be right. They've spread us about, all over the island. We talk though.....There are less than two hundred survivors. Two hundred out of over three thousand, you do the math."

"I believe they're giving the number of confirmed fatalities." Said Emily. "Are you saying they might be hiding the true numbers ?"

"Of course they are, it's obvious."

"The important thing is that you're on the mend." Said Emily. "Have you a few words for your family back home ?"

"I've already called home a few times. Look.....This place isn't safe, I keep hearing there are more of those monsters, maybe lots more. The guy with the chapel put out a flyer saying these are the same creatures that almost wiped out everyone on Jannsen, just after the first world war."

"You're well-informed Fred. That is one idea we're looking at for the show. Could you describe the creature that attacked the cruise ship ?"

Emily looked so young, far too young to be risking her life on Jannsen. Fred wasn't sure if talking to other survivors helped, or drove the anxiety in deeper.

"There are enough descriptions already." He said. "You people have filmed the tentacles at the sound, when one of those things crushed your boat. A few people have seen that single eye, so full of hate. It's not a stupid dumb beast and it hates us; I think it hates everything."

"Why do you think that, Fred ?"

He would have held the girl's hand if she hadn't been holding the camera. She was so young and after Betty dying, he felt protective, maybe a little over protective.

"You haven't looked into that eye Emily." He said. "The owners of Golden Promise have chartered a ship to take home all but the most severely injured. I'll be on it and I will never come back to Jannsen. There's something evil here Emily, you should leave too."

"I have a job to Fred, but I will be careful."

No good, he hadn't intended to, but he leant forward and held her hand, causing the camera to wobble about.

"Listen to me.....You have to leave Jannsen, or you'll be killed." He said.

~

~

Sam Hardwick had brought his passport and driver's license, just in case the ex-CIA guy asked him to see them. He'd brought Nicki with him; they'd arrived at the dockyard jetty on her bike. She was going to know everything, so she could give Oscar Grimm the get the hell out of Dodge command. For all Sam knew it might not be like the movies at the end, he might not be one of the few survivors. There had to be another responsible person known to Oscar, someone he could trust. He'd considered Ilaria, but all his instincts had told him to pick Nicki. Obviously deep down he hoped the monster turned out to be great for a TV show, though a let down in real life. Every other show he'd made had been like that, though he had a feeling Outerbridge Sound was home to something far worse than he could even imagine.

“The Daphne looks too clean and well maintained.” Said Nicki. “A real giveaway that she’s not what Oscar Grimm claims her to be.”

Her imagination was going crazy of course, so was his. A real-life ex-CIA guy with an ex-military crew. Then there was The Daphne, that looked more like a covert navy vessel, than a cargo ship. In all the films Sam had ever seen, the CIA guys had never been pleasant, or honest. Always the last guy standing, after double crossing everyone else, even the woman who’d loved him. Sam was willing to bet Nicki was currently thinking along similar lines.

“Are you Sam ?”

A woman on the deck, looking down at the jetty. A thin woman with a nice smile, which didn’t fit any of the stereotypes he’d been expecting.

“Yes, I am and this is Nicki Outerbridge.”

“Great, come aboard..... I’m Rana by the way.”

Rana had an accent he couldn’t place, but if pressed, would have guessed as Bulgarian with a touch of French. She took them below decks, past a lot of doors with no numbers or signs on them. It seemed that if you belonged on The Daphne, you knew where everything was. The office she took them to wouldn’t have shamed the CEO of a multinational.

“Sam’s here boss.” Said Rana, as she left.

Oscar Grimm, assuming it was him behind the desk, looked.....If pushed Sam would have said he looked like a sales guy. Not one selling anything useful of course. A digital currency sales guy, who talked you into investing in something ending in coin, that was guaranteed to go bust within a year. It was the smile, which looked false. And the expensive shirt, which didn’t belong on a cargo boat.

“Hi Sam, I’m Oscar Grimm.....Yes, my name really is Grimm.”

A bit of a cliché, Oscar had an American accent. A trace of something else, which Denise would have recognised with ease.

“This is Nicki Outerbridge.” Said Sam. “We brought ID, just in case you need it.”

“No, I’ve seen you both on the TV news and Twitter when we were last in port. My crew will recognise you too and know you’re part of the group we’re here to pull out of the crap, should the worst happen. Would you like coffee by the way ? Excuse my manners, we rarely get visitors.”

“Yes, that would be lovely.” Said Nicki.

Sam knew what she meant; it had been a hell of a week. His staff seemed to need a lot of hand holding recently, so it was nice to relax and be offered coffee. Oscar opened the door and yelled for coffee. Nicki leant towards him and whispered.

“Austrian.....I’d bet anything Mr Grimm was born in Austria.”

Coffee and biscuits were grounding in an almost universal way. Sam remembered a bank manager who only ever agreed to a decent overdraft facility after two cups of Colombian coffee and a few chocolate digestives.

“I’d like Nicki to be my backup.” Said Sam. “If anything should happen to me, she needs to be able to give the pack up and get out of town command.”

“Yes, I actually recommend you tell quite a few of your people the password you’ve come up with. Tell everyone if you like, but tell them when having to run for your lives, seems almost inevitable. Tell your team too soon and they’ll find a reason to stay close to the dockyards.”

“Yes, now you’ve said it.....That makes sense.” Said Nicki.

“I have done this sort of thing before, though usual desperate people running from unpleasant people of one kind or another.” Said Oscar. “Did you come up with a password ?”

“Megafauna.” Said Sam.

“Ahhhh, huge beasties....How appropriate. I’ll make sure all my guys know. We’re not the cops though, or the military. If someone arrives on deck saying they’re SHP, we’re not going to refuse to take them. As long as we have room of course, we can’t get everyone on Janssen to somewhere safe.”

“We’ll tell everyone their safety relies on keeping the password a secret.” Said Sam.

Coffee was finished, there wasn’t a lot left to say, yet Oscar seemed intent on keeping the small talk going. Eventually he had to say what was on his mind, just to fill an uncomfortably long silence.

“It’s real isn’t it ? The beastie I mean, the megafauna. I have a slight tingling at the back of my neck, Rana feels it too. I think if you’ve been through a lot of trouble, you can eventually feel it coming.”

“Yes, it’s real.” Said Nicki. “Nothing you’ve seen on TV is faked; the monsters really do exist.”

“Think of something huge, smart and pissed off.” Said Sam. “Not that I want you to think twice about staying here to help.”

“No, I’ve been paid and I do have a reputation for finishing the job.” Said Oscar.

“Will you help if we’re attacked ?” Asked Nicki.

“That’s not in my agreement, but it depends on the location and the circumstances. No guarantees, though my people will help if they can.”

~ ~

Denise Scott had known the moment would have to arrive eventually. In her own mind she saw nothing wrong in going out with Callum occasionally, while having a relationship with Florence. Going out with, that wonderful phrase that usually meant staying in with, to get naked and sweaty. She still loved Callum in a way that she couldn’t have described to anyone, or been inclined to explain. The problem was that after being inseparable for a while, she was now sleeping with Callum once a fortnight, or so. Den looked through the window of the Trattoria Amalfi and Callum was already there. He looked such a tragic figure, sat alone, sipping at a glass of beer.

“It has to be done.” She muttered. “It really has to end tonight.”

Callum had been complaining about not seeing much of her. Den could deal with that; she’d dealt with a similar situation before. It was different now though; she saw her future as being with Flo. There was a nightmare scenario constantly at the back of her mind. A journalist might discover she was still seeing Callum and make a huge thing out of it. In that scenario, she might end up losing Callum and Flo. The Italian restaurant was their favourite place for romantic meals, birthday treats and anniversaries of one kind or another. Callum loved the place, so he should be at his ease, relaxed and happy. Sadly, she was about to spoil all that.

“Sorry, am I late ?” She asked.

“No, I was early.”

It had to be face to face, no dumping him by text or email. A friend of hers had dumped a guy publicly on social media, but they’d only been seeing one another for a short time. Callum had been a friend first, before becoming a lover. She owed him a proper goodbye.

“I fancy the veal, as long as you’re not going to walk out if I order it ?”

“No, I’m much more mellow these days.” She said. “Order whatever you like.”

There had been a time, it had been Callum’s birthday. She really had screamed at him and threatened to leave, because he’d ordered veal. Now she barely recognised that version of herself.

“You can choose the wine.” He said.

They muttered to each other about several wines, before choosing Asti Spumante, as they always did. The Trattoria Amalfi had a lot of good memories, choosing it as a place to break up, might have been a mistake. By the time their food arrived, Den was already feeling close to tears.

“Martin at work is finally going to retire.” Said Callum. “I’ve been told I’m likely to get his job.”

“Brilliant, another step up the ladder.”

Den left it until after they’d finished their main course, just in case there was a huge row, with one of them stomping off into the night. She didn’t have much experience with such things, but she had friends who constantly talked about the nightmare of bad breakups. The problem wasn’t just that Callum was a nice guy, she really wanted to keep sleeping with him, once a fortnight, or so. As that might mean losing Flo, he had to go, even though it would break her heart.

“I got you something.” He said.

He reached behind, rummaging in a pocket in his jacket, which he’d put over the back of the chair. For one dreadful moment, she wondered if he might be about to go down on one knee, a small box with a ring in it, in his hand. No, he put a paperback book in front of her.

“I know you like her.....I’m sure you mentioned wanting to read it.” He said.

“I did yes.....Thank you.”

Callum was good at things like that, remembering the small things, the things that mattered. One day he’d be the perfect husband for some lucky woman, but not for her. The dessert trolley arrived and they both went for something that resembled black forest gateaux, as they always did. Coffee followed and as she guessed would happen, the dreadful conversation had been left until the final mouthful of coffee.

“I asked to meet you here for a reason.” She said.

“I guessed you had.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not pregnant.”

A silly joke, but at least he was smiling.

“There’s someone else Callum, someone I want to be with.” She said.

“I did wonder, we see so little of each other now. Who is he ? Do I know him ?”

And so it came, the moment she’d been dreading. He wasn’t the sort to start shouting, but he might. Not that she needed to tell him anything, though she’d invited him there with the intention of telling him everything. Den wasn’t ashamed of loving another woman, she just wasn’t keen on the entire restaurant hearing about it. She looked into Callum’s dark brown eyes and hoped he didn’t react too badly.

“It’s not another man Callum. I’ve been seeing Florence, my old friend from college. It’s become more than just friends now, much more.” She said.

There was that thing, where the attentive waiter turned up to be attentive at just the wrong moment. Not his fault, waiters everywhere seemed to be the pawns of a minor uncaring god. Their entire lives spent arriving at just the wrong moment.

“Would you like anything else ?”

“No, just the bill please.” She said.

Callum was looking down at the table, or at the other customers, anywhere but at her.

“Florence the MP....There was that mention of you being seen with her, in one of the Sunday papers. You said they’d hint at anything to hurt her.” He said. “You told me it was all tabloid crap.”

“I know I said that.....It was a lie. I’m so sorry, I never intended to hurt you. To be honest I care for you and it was nice to see you both. Incredibly selfish, but nice.”

“But now it’s not so nice ?” He asked.

The waiter was fast, or the minor uncaring god had decided to give her a particularly awkward night. The bill was placed in front of her, on a nice shiny metal tray.

“Can you give us a moment, please ?”

“Yes, of course.” Said the waiter.

She still loved Callum and would probably always love him, a little. The look of hate in his face was torture.

“To be truthful, I could have happily carried on going out with you both.” She said. “Life isn’t like that though; it demands choices from us. The only way Flo and I have a chance of a long-term relationship, is if we never see one another again. I mean it Callum, not even a birthday card.”

“I’m not a child Den.” He yelled. “I know what we’re through means. I remember those nights when I tried to touch you, only to have you move away from me, as though I was some sort of monster.”

That was it, they’d just become the Trattoria Amalfi’s unofficial entertainment. Every eye was looking in their direction, but pretending to take no notice. Callum put on his jacket and walked out, though not before shouting at her, just before the door closed behind him.

“You.....You can fuck off Denise.....Just fuck off.”

It could have gone better, or on the other hand, it could have gone much worse. By the time she’d paid the bill, no one was looking at her, she’d ceased to be interesting. Den picked up the paperback on the way out, the latest offering from her favourite author. Keeping it would be what Sam called bad Feng Shui. It would sit on her bookshelf, mentally torturing her every time it caught her eye.

“The problem is.....I will always love him, just a little.” She muttered.

She was tough when it was needed, she’d never contact Callum again, even if they both lived to be a hundred. There was a large council litter bin close to the restaurant. She held the book above the bin, intending to drop it in. It was impossible to let go of it. Mental torture or not, Den knew that book would be on her shelves forever.

The yellow light of a cab caught her eye, so she flagged it down and after thinking about it for a few seconds, she gave him Flo’s address. She’d call her on the way to ask if it was alright to turn up out of the blue, though Den was sure it would be.

~ ~

Paris found it addictive in a weird kind of way. Whenever she wasn’t needed by SHP, she would use her bike to get to the coast road, where it curved around and was at its closest to the wrecked cruise ship. Sometimes science guy came with her, though he currently had more work to do than he could handle. All on her own, she sat on her bike, just looking. Rubber necking some might call it, she couldn’t help being drawn to that dreadful place.

“You wouldn’t think anything could damage something that huge.” Said the girl.

Probably not one of the staff on The Golden Promise, the girl looked a little too young. A tourist most likely, travelling with her family. She had a few small plasters on her arms and a large dressing just visible under the front of her T shirt. Large dressings usually meant a wound that had needed stitches. The plasters and dressings had become almost a uniform, marking out the survivors of the disaster, as clearly as if they wore badges. The girl had recognised her, Paris now recognised the half smile and posture of those who’d realised who she was.

“I still can’t get my head around it.” Said Paris. “I come here several times a day, and it still feels....unreal. Were you onboard the ship ? Of course you were, I can see the plasters.”

“My family were lucky, we all survived, but some.....We’ve been warned about talking to journalists. They said it might delay the compensation payments.”

“What’s your name ?” Asked Paris.

“Tessa Miss Ferland, though everyone calls me Tess.”

“Paris, call me Paris. They always tell people not to talk to the news people after a disaster, though I’ve never heard of anyone having their compensation slowed down if they did. I’m off duty, just someone like you, trying to make sense of something that makes no sense.”

“You won’t tell anyone what I tell you ?” Asked Tess.

“No, I give you my word, one girl to another. Check me for a wire if you like.”

Tess laughed and the half smile became a full smile.

“Alright, I guess it can’t hurt.”

“Tell me Tess, tell me what happened to you and your family ?”

Paris listened to the girl describe what she’d listened to others describe, the same description repeated on the morning, midday and evening news, on every station. The huge strong tentacles that had rocked the cruise ship about as though it was a toy. Jannsen with its general lack of modern communications, didn’t suit the world’s media. The journalists arrived full of enthusiasm and most of them left again quite quickly. People weren’t interested in pictures of a dead ship anyway. On most news bulletins they still used the films taken by various people in the SHP team, her included. Sam had told anyone who could use one, to take a camera and film the stricken ship.

“Trust me, this is going to be the story of the decade.” He’d told them. “Something to tell the grandchildren about.”

Paris had mainly filmed flames and running people, but Emily had caught the moment a young man had been ripped in two. Not that the news bulletins had ever used that. Paris kept listening to Tess, hoping talking about it helped the girl. In truth she knew listening helped her more than the girl.

With every telling of the dreadful event, it felt more real, more....Manageable.

“Oh, that awful eye.....It seemed to be staring at me, hating me.” Said Tess.

“A lot of people I talk to have said that, Tess.” Said Paris. “I wouldn’t take it personally, this....Creature is just a huge animal of some kind.”

“You might be right, but how about the smaller creatures ? Are they it’s children, do you think ?”

Paris didn’t need to think about it, none of the other survivors she’d spoken to had mentioned smaller creatures, nor had anyone on the news bulletins. It might be Tess imagining things, though it did make sense.

“Did you see the smaller creatures hurting people.” Asked Paris.

“Yes, I thought one was going to hurt my dad, but the ship moved and.....I don’t remember exactly how we escaped. The next thing I knew, we were in the ocean and swimming for the beach. I saw those smaller ones though, lots of them. Terrible monsters, ripping the passengers apart with those wicked claws. They were the ones eating people, not the thing with the huge eye.”

The girl was upset and asking was a betrayal, in a way. It wasn’t just Sam’s show she was thinking of, Tess had seen things no one else had reported. She had to risk Tess, telling her to take a hike.

“I have a camera in my bag Tess.” She said. “What you saw is important, it matters. Can I get the camera out and record you talking about it ?”

“You’re sure it won’t stop us getting compensation ?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Alright then.”

Paris recorded forty minutes of Tess describing the terrible things that had happened to some of the passengers the young girl had seen killed. It was a hot day on Jannsen, Paris had applied a lot of sunscreen before leaving the villa. Yet she found herself shivering after the camera was turned off.

~

~

Nicki wasn't really avoiding Vince, despite his mum accusing her of being a stalker. It was just that Vince had once known where Jack's treasure was hidden, he'd actually seen the treasure as a small boy. Then there had been the accident while out on a boat and Vince had lost a lot of his childhood memories. Nicki hadn't been able to resist pestering the boy, the information had to be in his head somewhere. It wasn't even the potential for wealth that attracted her to finding the treasure, at least not entirely. She was wealthy and likely to inherit even more wealth one day, lots more. It was just the whole treasure hunt thing, no one can resist a treasure hunt. After June had threatened to get a court order to keep her away from her son, Nicki had tried her hardest not to be seen in the same room as Vince.

"She tried to get my boy to see a hypnotherapist." June had yelled at Sam.

Nicki had and at the time, it hadn't seemed a strange or creepy thing to suggest. The memories were probably still in Vince's head and a little hypnotic regression might flush them out. She'd even found out from her brother, that the doctor on The Sheffield was qualified hypnotherapist. Then Sam too, had begun shrieking about her being a stalker and she'd tried to forget about Jack Benevide and his damned treasure.

"Are you alright Vince?" She asked.

Not stalking, definitely not stalking, Vince was obviously upset. He was sat watching something on an SHP laptop, something that was making him cry. He was in Ilaria's room, who was out on some weird adventure with Dom. The two of them were always up to something. Nicki wouldn't have known Vince was in there, if he hadn't left the door open.

"So much blood." Said Vince.

She liked Vince; he was a local after all. There was only a small population on Janssen, everyone tended to know everyone else. It formed a bond; some would call it a tribal bond. Nicki couldn't help touching Vince, running her hand across his damp cheek.

"Oh Vince, you shouldn't be looking at that, it won't be good for you." She said.

The raw and unedited recordings from The Golden Promise had been deliberately kept off the terminals in the lounge. They were bloody, terrible and Sam had no intention of giving the unedited version to the news media. Emily, tiny blonde Emily, had recorded the worst of it. She'd gone deep into the burning vessel and filmed the worst horrors in a corridor deep in the bowels of the huge ship. Nicki didn't know how Emily could have seen all that and still function. Nicki reached for the laptop to turn it off.

"No, leave it.....The pictures are bringing out memories of the day I was hurt." Said Vince.

"But they're dreadful."

"I know.....I keep seeing that day. There was blood then, lots of blood. I was hurt, but someone died. I'm not sure who, though I know they were once my friend. Someone was killed Nicki, I'm sure of it."

"If you think it helps, just don't let Ilaria catch you in her room."

"She went to the caves with Dom, they'll be away for hours."

Deductive reasoning, empathy, Vince had it all. He wasn't really that unintelligent, though he'd never win any prizes. There was something about him though, as though something in his head was wired up wrong. Nicki had an idea that just about no one was going to like. They were guaranteed to question her motives. Vince was watching the bloody carnage, occasionally twitching. Could she suggest it again, dare she? Luckily Vince had the same idea.

"It's like seeing something out of the corner of my eye." He said. "The therapist you mentioned, do you think he could help me?"

“Yes, I do Vince. He owes my brother a favour, though I don’t know why. I can definitely get him to see you for a consultation. I’ll come with you to ask your mum, but it has to be your idea. Do you understand ?”

“Yes I do, and it is my idea.”

“Good, keep telling June that, or she might try to get me arrested.”

Ilaria D’Andrea wasn’t the sort to flout the rules. Actually, she was just the sort to do that, though she didn’t want to admit it. After the destruction of the cruise ship and the huge loss of life, Sam had decided against filming in the caves, Jack’s caves as they’d become known. Worse than that, he’d banned anyone from entering the caves.

“It’s fairly obvious these creatures are now more active.” Sam had told her. “I’m sorry, but I can’t risk anyone’s life by allowing further exploration of Jack’s caves. We can think again if things calm down a bit.”

Luckily Dom was as keen on ignoring the ban as her. A no entry sign had been put up outside the Benevide family grotto and a few layers of dayglow tape strung across the entrance. It was all quite impressive and gave the impression that the grotto was a crime scene. None of it stopped them, or even slowed them down.

“A thousand-dollar deposit, for this old thing.” Said Dom. “We can’t damage it or I won’t be able to eat for a month. Even worse, no beers at Rum Runners.”

He was talking about the kayak they’d sort of hired. Why anyone on Janssen would need a kayak was a mystery, there were no rivers and such craft weren’t designed for the open seas. But the new lady, Kate Russo had a friend, who knew someone, who had a sister....With a kayak hanging on the rear wall of their garage. Sadly, the woman who owned it, had picked up on the gossip, about the way SHP tended to be the death of every boat they borrowed. A thousand-dollar deposit had been demanded, with Dom paying most of it.

“I know Dom, what a bitch. We have the boat now though. Soon we’ll know if we’re any closer to Jack’s famous treasure.”

“Does it feel different to you now.....Down here I mean ?” He asked.

“Don’t start that Dom, not now. We’ll cross the lake and then we’ll know if it’s treasure or as Sam said, an old tin can. With luck we’ll be home in an hour, two at the most.”

It needed two of them to carry the kayak on their shoulders. It looked authentic, the sort of things Inuit tribes people might well have gone hunting in. Whether that made it better and more reliable though, they’d soon find out. By the time they reached the edge of the underground lake, they were both, as usual, damp and caked with mud. They put the kayak on the ground.

“Alright.....Time to splash the water and make tons of noise.” Said Dom. “If nothing comes to bite us, we’ll carefully cross the lake.”

“Half an hour.” She said. “We’ll make enough noise to waken the dead, then wait for half an hour.”

“Fine.” Said Dom.

They splashed about and shouted; Dom even banged a rock against the cavern wall. Then they waited and nothing showed up to see what all the noise was about. If the smaller creatures really were carrion feeders, as science guy thought. They obviously weren’t feeling particularly hungry. Ilaria looked at her wristwatch a few times and gave it forty minutes.

“Alright, let’s do this.” She said.

The kayak was awkward to get into and neither of them had used one before. By the time they were both in the boat, it and them were fairly wet. Dom paddled, aiming them towards where her flashlight was showing the tantalising reflection from something shiny, probably metallic.

“It’s a long way, further than it looked.” Said Dom.

“I’ll paddle coming back.” She replied.

It was dark and water kept dripping on her from the cavern ceiling high above. By the time they reached the other side, Ilaria was dreading the return journey. She was wet and feeling very uncomfortable, the humidity had to be off the scale. There was a small muddy beach though, just about large enough for them to drag the kayak out of the water.

“Look.” Said Dom, aiming his light along the beach.

Footprints in the mud, lots of them. Not human footprints, or anything recognisable. Whatever had run over the mud, had left deep gouge marks.

“Well, that’s not encouraging.” She said.

“They could have been made months ago.”

There weren’t any choices about where to go, the narrow gash in the rocks was the only way off the muddy beach. A few yards inside the narrow passageway, they found what had been seductively glinting at them for so long.

“Well, at least it’s not an empty bean tin.” Said Dom.

Ilaria picked up the watch on a chain, from where it looked to have been left deliberately. A large watch made of incorruptible gold, which had been placed on a natural shelf in the rocks. The front cover had to open in some way to see the clock’s face.

“Oh, my hands are muddy and I can’t see a catch.” She said. “I’ll play with it when we get back to the villa.”

Ilaria dropped the watch into a pocket and turned around. Dom was gone, no sign of him at all. He’d been so close she’d felt his breath on the back of her neck. It was impossible for him to simply vanish, yet it had happened.

“Dom.” She yelled.

She looked everywhere, including up. No sign of Dom Trecca anywhere. He had to be messing with her, trying to wind her up.

“You’re in trouble when I find you.” She shouted.

It was a relief to find the kayak still where they’d left it, though Dom wasn’t with it. Ilaria looked around and saw Dom only a few feet away. He was bloody and she could see dreadful wounds through the holes that had been ripped out of his clothes. She had that moment of disbelief, it couldn’t be Dom lying there, nothing could happen to Dom.

“Fuck.” She muttered.

She hadn’t seen the creature and only noticed it when it moved. Grey skin and lying in grey mud in the dark, it only really seemed to exist when it moved. Large, it managed to pick Dom up in its jaws, as though he was a child’s toy doll. It couldn’t have been scared of her, maybe it wasn’t used to light in the cavern. It leapt away from her, still carrying Dom. A splash that sent ripples across the surface and it vanished into the underground lake. Ilaria ran to the water’s edge, moving her flashlight over the water.

“Dom.....Dom.....Dom.”

Eventually she stopped calling to him and simply stood there for some time, looking at the water.

~ ~

