

DEATH ON THE DANUBE

by

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Otto stood leaning on the polished wood of the deck's safety rail with a glass of red wine in one hand staring into the darkness listening to the water flowing past below. It was quiet out here away from the noise of the dining room and the objectionable 'Major' whose table he shared with six other passengers. Of course, he was not a real 'Major', Otto had surmised. If he behaved as he did whilst serving in HM Forces his battalion, regiment or whatever would have mutinied. Of course, some people pampered to him and joined in his crudities and sarcastic comments but most were totally put off by his rumbustious, objectional nature. The Major was a rotund man, without being obviously fat and probably in his early sixties. His mainly bald head had remnants of grey hair each side and he sported a large grey moustache. When away from public areas he chomped on Cuban cigars not really caring who was walking past when he exhaled the smoke. He was the type of person who liked the sound of his own voice and always strove to be the centre of attention, putting down anyone who tried to better him. His continual boasting had grated on Otto and the last straw was at the dinner table that evening.

He was sitting, adopting the air of 'lord of the manor' in his light grey slacks and navy-blue blazer with its polished brass buttons. As with most of his conversation, it drifted towards the subject of women and how they all swooned over him.

"I find that hard to believe" challenged a young attractive and outspoken woman at the same table.

"That's what they all say when they've seen and felt it" he guffawed.

"I think I'll give it a miss" she replied, not displaying any sign of embarrassment.

"Don't worry" he replied loudly. "You wouldn't even get in the queue."

"What a relief!" she countered, and rose from the table excusing herself.

"Stupid bitch" he muttered as she walked off.

At that point Otto also excused himself and left the table with his glass of wine saying he needed some fresh air.

"No stamina, the younger generation. Too much namby-pamby" was the parting comment Otto heard as he made his way to the door out on to the deck.

When he came to think about it, the idea of a cruise never really appealed to him but the thought of sailing down the Danube through the Iron Gates Gorge and on to the Black Sea had some sort of attraction. It also included an excursion to Transylvania and the castle of Count Dracula – all tourist stuff of course - but he had enjoyed reading Bram Stoker's classic novel and was looking forward to absorbing the atmosphere of the Count's 'home'. Of course, there was also the possibility of meeting other 'singles', preferably of the opposite sex and with similar interests to his own.

They had boarded at Budapest and had recently passed through Mohacs and Osijek. It was now Day 2 and already he was beginning to wish he had not bothered. There were plenty of small cliquey groups, who were not very receptive to 'outsiders', and most of the 'couples' were either young romantics or geriatrics. The few 'singles' he had noticed seemed more interest in befriending the same sex. Really disappointing!

The soporific effect of his fourth glass of wine and the cool evening air made him think about returning to his cabin to read his book

before turning in for the night. He straightened up and looked up and down the deck, hoping that he might find someone to talk to; then noticed the figure several yards away also leaning over the rail staring into the darkness. *'Where did he come from?'* Otto thought. *'He wasn't there just a moment ago.'* The figure had its back to Otto and appeared to be wearing a long black cloak, which he was sure had a ragged bottom, with a hood. The image of a tramp came to mind. Otto swallowed the rest of the wine and stepped back to place the empty glass on a small table between two deck chairs before hesitantly approaching the curious figure.

As he got closer, he had that strange Déjà vu feeling, noticing now how tatty the man's cloak actually was. "Excuse me" Otto said "but ... have we met before? Only ..."

"Yes, we have, Otto" came the raspy reply from the cloaked figure who didn't bother to turn around.

Otto was momentarily taken aback but soon realised who it was even as he posed the question *'How do you know my name?'*

The figure finally turned its head and Otto was staring into a skull. The lower jaw started to move up and down. "Hullo Otto."

Otto's heart sank. It was the grim reaper. "Grim! What are you doing here? You're ... not here for ... me again, I hope."

"No such luck" came the raspy reply.

"Why do you put it that way?"

"Because I was looking forward to you joining me."

"That's a relief."

Grim turned his whole body revealing the large scythe he was holding with his bony phalanges.

"I bet you thought that I was about to jump overboard" Otto continued.

“Wishful thinking perhaps but, as I said, I’m not here for you.”

“Then why are you here? There is no one dead on board this ship.”

There was a sudden commotion as another door to the dining area opened and the well inebriated ‘Major’ emerged from the noise within singing bawdy ditties, staggering his way towards the stern of the ship. The door slammed leaving just the sound of the Major’s off-key singing.

*There was a young lady from Tooting
Had all the lads passing by, hooting.
One dropped his pants and showed her his dick.
She floored him by putting her boot in.*

Otto twisted his mouth as a sign of disapproval.

“It’s okay” Grim replied. “Someone’s going to pop off very soon.”

“How would you know that? Still, you were waiting for me the last time we met, weren’t you?” Otto continued, recollecting his hospital stay following his accident a few years back.

“That was a clerical error” Grim rasped.

“And this one isn’t.”

“No.”

Music and noise broke the peaceful night as the door opened again discharging a throng of singing and dancing people who made their way in different directions along the deck. A few danced their way up towards the bow of the ship whilst others hovered just outside the door. Otto was not aware of anyone particularly venturing towards the stern where the Major was still sounding off. The reaper pulled out a mobile phone with his free bony appendage and

touched the screen. Otto could see it was a digital clock counting down the time. It was nearly zero.

"Any ... moment ... now!" Grim rasped.

Suddenly there was a distant splash from the stern of the ship followed shortly after by a scream. Someone yelled out "Man overboard!" followed by a lot of commotion. The ship's siren sounded followed by the engines being put in reverse momentarily before the ship came to a stop. Searchlights came on as crew members quickly lowered boats into the illuminated waters below. Other passengers began to emerge from the dining area to lean over the deck rail futilely looking for whoever had fallen overboard.

"Not much hope of them finding anyone in the dark, unless the Major calls for help."

Otto did not know why he assumed it was the Major but considered it was the most logical, with the man stumbling his way in that direction a few moments before and drunk as a coot. Grim didn't correct him.

"He can't call out because he's dead" Grim rasped.

"How do you know ... oh, that's why you are here."

"Correct."

"So how did you know that he was going to die, Grim?"

"It's preordained."

"Like fate."

"Yes. Fayte messaged me a few weeks ago to tell me that the Major's time was nearly up."

"You speak as though 'fate' is a person."

"She is ... a person; but not in the way you know."

Otto scratched his head. "Now you're confusing me."

The grim reaper shifted himself and put his phone away. "Be that as it may, you will have to excuse me for a moment. I have a soul to collect."

"A soul!" Otto exclaimed. "Surely ..."

"I'm sorry" Grim interrupted, "I really must be going." He hesitated with a thoughtful look on his skull (if skulls can have facial expressions). "But hang around. I won't be too long. I have some knowledge to impart about this particular death." He started to move off with his bony feet clonking on the wooden deck. Otto wondered whether anyone else could hear the clonking.

"I'll contact one of my assistants to take over the and say that I have some other urgent business to attend to."

He clonked off while Otto was intrigued to find out what the reaper had to say.

The attractive outspoken woman who had been sitting at the same table appeared beside Otto. He glanced at her, suddenly aware how stunningly attractive she was. Otto felt a little nervous with such a beautiful woman standing so close to him. She was dressed in a long flowing pale pink gown with ruffled sleeves and a low neckline and wearing - a very alluring perfume. Long auburn hair fell to her shoulders.

"I hear that the Major has fallen overboard" she commented in a soft, dry emotionless voice.

"I didn't see who it was but ... (Otto was about to say 'the Reaper knew' but stopped himself just in time) ... I assumed it was him when I saw him staggering along the deck. Quite tragic, don't you think?"

"I'm not being callous but it was no great loss. I've never known a more objectionable, chauvinist and misogynous man."

"What about his family?"

"He hasn't got any ... surprisingly!"

They stood in silence staring in the direction of the stern.

"Do you think he just fell in or was pushed?" Otto didn't know why he made that statement but had an inkling that the death wasn't quite what it seemed from Grim's last comment.

The woman turned and stared at him. "Why on earth would he have been pushed! I know that a lot of the other passengers didn't like the man but murder? I don't think anyone would go to those lengths. Bit of an overkill, if you don't mind the pun."

Otto heard the clonking sound returning. He glanced at the woman for her reaction but she didn't appear to be aware of the bone-steps. She sensed him looking at her. "What?"

He felt a little embarrassed. "I'm Otto by the way. We didn't seem to get the chance to introduce ourselves at the dining table, probably because the Major dominated the conversation."

She laughed and offered Otto a smooth long fingered hand. "Penny" she said. "Short for Penelope of course, but I hate the name."

"Pleased to meet you, Penny."

"Pleased to meet you too, Otto."

Otto could now see Grim approaching holding his phone to the hole in his skull where his ear would have been. Penny obviously couldn't see or hear the reaper. Reluctantly, Otto felt that he had to get away from her to find out what Grim wanted to say. He could hardly talk to death in her presence!

"I'm not being forward or anything but are you travelling with others, Penny?" he asked nervously.

"No" she replied. "I'm a freelance travel writer. You?"

"Also alone."

"Trying to escape from the world."

He looked at her. "Why do you say that?"

"As a travel writer I study people and noticed that you were travelling alone. When I saw you leave the dining room, I thought to myself '*There goes a man who is looking for answers*'."

"Very perceptive" Otto replied. "Perhaps"

Grim was now staring at Otto with his eye sockets, drumming his phalanges on the wooden deck rail

Penny noticed his hesitation. "Perhaps I should leave you now. I can sense that you have other things on your mind and would rather be alone."

Otto sprang to the defensive. "No. I don't want you to go. It's just that ..."

"It's okay" she said, soothingly. "We'll get together again. Something makes me think that I will enjoy talking with you." She paused for a moment. "Breakfast at ... nine? We might be able to enjoy a day together in Osijek."

"Of course" Otto replied eagerly. "I look forward to it."

She gave him a peck on the cheek. "Night, Otto."

"Goodnight ... Penny." He watched her glide back towards the dining room, touching his cheek where she kissed him and with his heart pounding."

"I thought she was never going to go" rasped Grim grumpily, coming up to Otto.

Otto turned to face the skull with its clenched teeth and said "You wouldn't understand" then looked away.

"Till death do you part" mumbled Grim.

Otto glanced at the skull again.

"What?"

"Oh never mind. It's just a saying."

"Hm. Anyway it's 'Till death do US part' not 'YOU part'"

"Whatever" muttered Grim.

They both walked back over to the deck rail, resting their arms on it and staring into the silent blackness below. The ship had stopped and dropped its anchor. Crew members had lowered boats into the water to search for the Major as searchlights played on its surface. It was not long before they heard a shout that the Major's body had been found.

"Lucky the river isn't flowing very fast" Otto commented, "otherwise the body could have been swept out of sight".

He turned sideways to face death. "So, what is it you intend to tell me about the death of the Major?"

"It was murder."

Otto released his other hand from the rail. "Murder? How do you know?"

"We always know the reason for a death" Grim replied. "We have to enter it into the log book."

"What if it was an unexplained death?"

"No such thing. All deaths have an explanation."

"I suppose you're right." Otto paused. "Sometimes we are unable to establish a cause in spite of our technology."

"One of your 'death wishes' I guess."

Otto nodded. "So why are you telling me this? I can't imagine anyone murdering the Major even if he was disliked and humiliated nearly everyone he came into contact with."

"You should know human nature better than me."

"Well, I don't know about that. The behaviour of some humans can be completely illogical and unpredictable. You must know that. Look at Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, Vladimir Putin – all vicious dictators with genocidal tendencies."

Grim moved away from the rail. "Look Otto, I didn't come to talk to talk about dictators and deaths. I just wanted to pass on that snippet of information."

"What am I supposed to do about it?"

"Whatever you like." He pulled out his phone to check the time. "I really must be going now. I have another soul to collect."

Otto grabbed Grim's lower arm holding the scythe and caught his fingers between the radius and ulna. "Ouch!"

Grim helped Otto extract his fingers.

"No, wait! We can't let whoever did this get away with it otherwise it will probably be recorded as an accidental death."

"I expect the Major deserved it. I believe he was disliked by a number of you people."

"That's not the point. People can't just go around murdering those they dislike. It would be anarchy if we allowed it."

Grim sighed. "Just let sleeping dogs die ... sorry, lie."

"I can't, Grim. One can't just walk away from this. You'll have to help me track down the guilty person. In the morning the police will come on board, question everybody and remove the body. The murderer will get away with it."

Otto heard a clacking sound and guessed, from the very audible rasping sigh, that Grim was getting rattled.

"If you don't want to help me, at least give me a clue of some sort."

Grim moved back to lean over the deck rail drumming his phalanges irritably on the wood. The sound was so loud Otto thought that the whole ship must be able to hear it, but the few people wandering around seemed oblivious to it. A young kissing couple arm-in-arm were coming towards them.

Grim tuned to face Otto; his lower jaw clacking as his teeth met.

"Oh, okay. I'll just let the office know I am going to be delayed." He pulled out his phone and started poking the keys.

The couple were now passing by them.

"There" said Grim, putting his phone away. "Done."

"Thanks" said Otto, without thinking.

The couple stopped and glanced at Otto. The man looked at him questioningly with a look of annoyance. "I beg your pardon?"

Otto felt embarrassed. "Oh, sorry, nothing. I was just thinking aloud. I ... er ... was looking for ... er... inspiration ... and it suddenly came to me."

The annoying look disappeared. "I thought you were being sarcastic" the man said.

"No, no, not at all. Sorry to alarm you."

The man shook his head as the couple walked off, Otto was sure he heard the woman mutter "Weirdo" followed by laughter and

something she said ending with 'Alan', which Otto assumed must be the man's name.

"You need to be careful what you say and when" Grim clattered laughingly.

"How can I, when you turn up at awkward moments and start conversations."

Grim stared at Otto with his sockets. "Hang on now; don't start blaming me. You asked for my help in tracking down a murderer."

Otto realised that he wasn't being very reasonable. "Yes I did. Sorry. So ... what evidence is there to suggest that the Major was actually murdered?"

"He was pushed."

"Oh great! How am I going to be able to prove that, let alone find out who did it?"

Grim propped his scythe against the deck rail raising each point by using the phalanges on his left skeletal hand.

"Firstly" he said, raising his fore-phalange, "you need to start building a picture of the Major from your observations of his behaviour during the cruise."

"How? I hardly knew the bloke and have only been on the same table as him twice."

"Secondly" Grim continued, ignoring Otto's response and raising his middle phalange, "you need to talk with all the passengers."

"Grim, do you realise how many people are on this boat? It will take me ages ... and how do you think passengers will react, to me just another ordinary passenger, going around asking *'Did you push the Major overboard?'*"

"Oh don't be so dramatic. You know what I mean: a subtle approach as in idle conversation. The Major's death will be a major talking point. It's amazing how open people will be about their feelings or impressions of someone after they're dead. So, finally," Grim

continued, raising his ring phalange, "you will ... what are you staring at?"

"Is that a ring on your finger?"

Grim glanced at the phalange. "Of course it is. Why do you ask?"

Otto continued to stare at it. "It looks like ... bone."

Grim shook his hand, the bone ring rattling against the phalange. "Of course it's bone. I can hardly wear a metal ring can I?"

There was a rattling sound and something fell on the deck with a clatter.

"Bugger!" a raspy voice said.

Otto looked down and saw the bone ring lying on the deck. He bent down and picked it up, handing it to Grim. "Yours I think".

Grim took it from Otto and put it back on his phalange. "Thanks, Otto."

"Did ... er ... someone give you the ring?"

"Yes. My mother."

"Your mother!"

"What's wrong with that?"

"A bit unusual one might say."

"To you maybe."

"Is your mother still ... around?"

"You were going to say *alive* weren't you?"

"Well, not exactly."

"Actually, she is in hospital for a hip replacement."

Otto was getting confused. "Is she ...?"

"Like me? Yes. She had a creaky bone and they identified the problem as her hip joint". Grim thought for a moment. "Would you like to visit her?"

Otto didn't like the idea of wandering through a ward full of skeletons.

"Um, no, not really. I don't think ..."

"Oh, sorry. I forgot. You aren't dead yet are you."

"Well I hope not. I'm not ready to die yet."

"It's a shame really."

"What? That I'm not ready to die?"

"No, no; that you are declining to visit her. She was really looking forward to meeting you."

"How would she know anything about me?"

"What I told her about our last encounter. I told her that you were a charming man and ... actually, the whole family would like to meet you."

Otto imagined a family picture showing Grim with a wife, parents and two smaller skeletons.

"Do they ... er ... get about much?"

"Some of them."

"What about your father?"

"No. He won't make any effort to meet you. He suffers from IBS."

"IBS?"

"Idle Bone Syndrome."

Otto sighed. "Anyway, getting back to ..."

"Of course, the Major. As I was about to say, the third thing you need to do is to examine the Major's body."

Otto was gobsmacked. "How the hell am I supposed to examine the corpse of the Major? I will be asked why I want to examine the body of a man whom I don't even know and is not even a relative."

"That's your problem" Grim replied. "Let me just say that you will find something very interesting, but you'll have to hurry before his corpse is removed."

Otto went quiet, tossing things around in his mind and starting to have second thoughts.

"Perhaps you're right."

"About what!"

"Let sleeping dogs die ... lie."

"Maybe Meph's can help you."

"Meths? Why would drinking meths help me?"

"Mephistopheles, idiot."

"Why him?"

"Well, you just asked how *hell* can help."

"Just a figure of speech."

Grim stroked his chin with his bony hand. "You are right though."

"About what?"

"We can't pretend it was an accident."

"Why not?"

Grim was showing signs of impatience, drumming his bony phalanges on the deck rail again. The habit was beginning to irritate Otto. "Do you have to keep doing that?"

Death ignored the comment. "A few moments ago you told me that you couldn't just ignore it."

"No. Perhaps you're right."

Grim mumbled a rasping response. "Your flip-flopping will be the death of me."

Otto looked up at the skull facing him. "But you are ..."

"Alright, alright" Grim rasped irritably. "Just make up your bloody mind. Either you want help or not. I am a busy ... person, so don't go wasting my time."

Otto looked away. "Sorry, Grim."

III

Their discussion was interrupted by the sound of a motor launch approaching. Otto stepped up to the rail and saw the boat approaching with a searchlight in front.

"It looks like the police are here already."

People were emerging from the dining area and wandering over to the deck rail. Shortly the politzei appeared, some of whom were dressed in plain clothes. One of them instructed, in perfect English, for everyone to return to the dining area. Otto noticed that a plain clothed member of the group was carrying a large black leather bag. Grim, aware that Otto was staring at the person, rasped "The pathologist".

Otto thought and hoped that this might provide the opportunity to view the body of the Major.

Once all the passengers had been gathered in one the lounges the Captain announced that the politzei were first going to interview everyone; the ship would be berthed at Novi Sad until it could be released by the authorities. Until then, unfortunately, excursions for the day would be cancelled and no one would be permitted to disembark. He apologised and offered to discuss individual travel plans and itineraries and check with the travel company on options available, should anyone rather not continue with the cruise. Otto realised that he would have to move fast before the Major's body was removed from the ship and taken ashore. The pathologist had already disappeared. As he made his way towards one of the exits, intending to follow the man, one of the policemen hurried over to him.

"Excuse me sir, but where are you going?"

"I think I've got a bad migraine coming on."

The man hesitated. "Well, if you wouldn't mind answering a few questions you can return to your cabin ... directly."

"Sure. I understand."

The questions were pretty standard – did he know the deceased? Where was he when the Major fell overboard? Was Otto aware of anyone who might have wished the Major harm? Having responded to the officer's satisfaction, Otto was allowed to leave the room. He noticed a few members of the crew in the bar getting refreshments for the passengers. As he passed by, one of them indicated a tray on the bar containing an assortment of drinks. Otto selected an orange juice.

"Nothing stronger sir?"

"No thanks. I have a migraine coming on. Er ... is there anywhere that can I get some medication?"

"The infirmary sir."

"The infirmary. Isn't that where they have would have taken the Major's body?" Otto asked, as casually as he could.

"Yes, I heard that the pathologist is conducting a quick preliminary examination. They will probably conduct a post-mortem once they have the body ashore."

The man gave Otto directions to the infirmary, which he soon found.

Fortunately, there was no one around so, with his ear pressed to the door for a few seconds listening for the sound of voices, Otto carefully opened it and stepped inside. He found himself in a small waiting area with a desk facing the door. Behind the desk, mounted on the wall, was a small cabinet with a large green cross on it. Otto assumed it was a medicine cabinet. A short corridor off the room led to a number of cubicles. He heard the muffled sound of two people talking as he entered the corridor passing an office on the right from

which the sound of the discussion emanated. Luckily, the door was closed. Quickly he started checking the cubicles and found the Major's naked body on its back in the third one. It was a repulsive looking corpse – fat and hairy. Working as fast as he could, Otto examined the body, struggling to roll the cold corpse enough to check its back.

The first thing he had noticed was a reddish line across the front of the upper torso suggesting that the Major might have been thrust against a horizontal bar. Further observation revealed bruise marks just above both ankles as though someone had gripped them hard. He took out his phone, quickly took photos of the bruising and returned it to his pocket just in time, for a voice behind him said "What are you doing here?"

Otto swivelled round. "Is this the chap who fell overboard?"

The man, wearing a white overall, ignored Otto's question. "I repeat. What are you doing in here?"

"I came to see if I could get something for my migraine?"

"The dead don't dispense drugs" the man said straight-faced. "I still want to know why you are in this cubicle. You should have waited in the waiting area."

"There was no-one around. Then I heard voices and thought that someone might be in one of the cubicles, so ..."

"Never mind" the man snapped. "Just get out and have a word with the medical officer. He will probably give you something."

Otto thanked the man and found the medical officer now seated at the desk in the waiting area writing in a large book. He looked up when Otto entered the room.

"What are you doing here?"

Otto explained again why he had come to the infirmary.

"Why didn't you knock or ring the bell?"

"The door wasn't locked so I just walked in. I ..."

"Oh never mind" the officer snapped.

Eventually, Otto was handed some tablets which the officer took out of the cabinet on the wall.

"Take two with water and no more for at least six hours. Now clear off."

Otto returned straight to his cabin before he drew any more attention to himself. He opened the cabin door and saw Grim lying on his bed looking at his phone. His scythe was laying alongside him. The skull turned to look at him as he entered.

"Well?" he rasped.

"Why don't you make yourself comfortable" Otto replied sarcastically.

"I am."

"How did you get in?" Otto immediately realised that it was a stupid question.

"That's a stupid question" Grim replied.

Otto put the container with the tablets on the bedside table and sat on the chair in the room.

"What's that?"

"Tablets for the migraine I haven't got."

The skull looked puzzled. "That doesn't make sense."

"It was my excuse to get into the infirmary to examine the Major's body."

"And?"

"I found suspicious bruising on the upper torso and around the ankles."

"Conclusion?"

"Well, ... in ... my ... opinion ..."

"Come on, come on; it's not difficult to work out what happened."

"It's alright for you. You said yourself that you always know how deaths occur. Anyway, I think he was pushed violently against the deck rail, then grabbed by the ankles and tipped over into the water."

The clattering sound that followed was Grim clapping its bony hands. "Well done, Otto. You'll make a detective yet."

"Oh shutup."

Grim sniggered, but it sounded more like snorting. "I suggest you get back upstairs and start asking questions."

"I'm supposed to have a migraine."

Grim pointed a bony phalange at the tablet bottle. "You have tablets for it you told me, even though you don't have a migraine."

"They don't work that quickly. Anyway, it would look odd, me going around asking what everyone thought of the Major after they've just been questioned by the politzei. I will have to seek a more subtle approach."

Grim lifted himself up and turned, supporting himself on his humerus-radius-ulna joint.

"You could start with that gorgeous brunette you were trying to pull."

"I wasn't trying to 'pull' her, as you say. It was she who came up to me and ..."

"Oh come on, Otto. I bet you wouldn't mind interlocking bones with her."

Otto frowned and screwed up his nose trying to imagine how two humans could 'interlock' their bones.

"How would she know anything about the Major?"

"Your memory is short. Perhaps you are losing your mental faculties and can fulfil your promise to join me."

Otto became alert. "I am not losing anything and I never promised to join you."

“Oh. That’s a shame.” Grim sat up on the bed. “I was beginning to get excited.”

Otto’s mind had switched to thinking about Penny. “About this woman, her name is Penny by the way; how can she help?”

“She’s a travel writer, knows all about you and, if I guess right, certainly knows a lot about the Major.”

“Hm, maybe you are right.”

“I am right.”

“Clever, aren’t you.”

“Cleverness is in my bones.”

Otto shook his head. “So, how am I supposed to ...”

“I’ll engineer it. Just make your way to the upper passenger deck towards cabin 13, which she occupies.”

Otto got up and headed towards the door. “How will I ...” he started to say, turning round. Grim was no longer on the bed or even in the room. Otto was determined that one day he would ask how Grim managed to appear and disappear at will.

IV

As instructed, Otto made his way to the upper passenger deck. To avoid making the 'chance' meeting look too obvious, he hung around the staircase, but not too close, hoping to see when Penny appeared. The wait was not long as he recognised the bottom of her dress when she appeared at the top of the stairs. He moved away and stepped into the empty lounge opposite the corridor where cabin 13 was. As she stepped off the last step, Otto walked casually out of the lounge towards the stairs. Penny turned her head and stopped.

"Otto, fancy seeing you here?" She looked over his shoulder. "What were you doing in an empty room all by yourself?"

"Oh, hi Penny. I was just trying to grab a few quiet moments in the lounge."

"Is your room on this deck as well?"

"No, the next one down."

She looked a bit quizzically at him. "So, you like sitting in an empty room by yourself?"

"I was contemplating."

"Contemplating what?" She laughed.

Otto had to get off the subject of contemplating.

"Funny we should meet up here. Are you about to call it a night?"

"No, no" Penny replied. "One of the crew told me that he heard rattling coming from my cabin and thought that maybe something had come loose. I can't imagine what it might be but thought it best to check."

'So that's what Grim was up to' Otto thought, just managing to suppress a grin on his face. "You don't suppose it could be an intruder, do you? I'll accompany you if you wish."

"Oh, that's very kind of you, Otto; but shouldn't we call a crew member?"

Otto took Penny's arm and they made their way to her cabin. "No need for that"

"I didn't notice you in the dining area, Otto. Were you interviewed by the politzei?"

"Yes, but I developed a migraine so they let me go to the infirmary to pick up some tablets."

"Oh, sorry to hear that. I presume you are okay now, as you seem quite bright."

"Yes, fine thanks."

As they reached Penny's cabin, she fished her key out of a small pearl studded handbag and inserted it into the lock. Carefully, she turned the handle and began to slowly push the door open. Otto stepped forward and pushed it fully open, stepped inside and found himself in a small lounge. Looking around, his first thought was that it was certainly more luxurious than his cabin.

"You're brave," Penny said, just barging in like that. What if someone had been hiding behind the door?"

"Your cabin door was locked so ..."

"The intruder could have climbed in through the window. It does open, you know."

Otto walked over to the window.

"Bit of a risk, when he or she could have slipped and fallen into the river."

"Hm. Well, as you are here and were kind enough to check my room, do you fancy a drink?"

Otto suddenly felt a little nervous in the presence of this beautiful woman.

"Most kind of you Penny. That would be nice; but I don't want to put you to any trouble."

She closed the door and walked over to a small cabinet.

"There's not a great choice. The minibar is quite small."

"Anything is fine thanks."

She rummaged through clinking bottles.

"Wine? Gin? Vodka?"

"Wine is fine."

"Red or white?"

"Red please."

"I am still wondering what the rattling was" Penny said, as she handed Otto a glass and a small bottle of wine from the minibar. "They said it was like someone shaking a bag of bones."

Otto pictured Grim jumping up and down or shaking himself to make his bones rattle. "How did you get on with the police interviews?"

Penny poured herself a vodka, topped it up with coke and sat on the bed with her legs outstretched. "Oh, pretty straightforward. I have many questions of my own but thought it best to keep quiet. I didn't want it to appear that I'm poking my nose in."

"What do you make of the Major's death?"

She lifted her head up and looked him straight in the eyes. "What do you mean?"

Otto hesitated. "As I said just after it happened, I find it difficult to believe that he just 'fell' overboard, bearing in mind how high the deck rail is ... unless he climbed over it. Anyway, that wouldn't explain ..."

He stopped, realising that he was talking too much.

Her suspicions were raised now. "Explain what?"

"Well, when I went down to the infirmary to pick up some tablets for my migraine there was no one around so I wandered in to find someone and came across the Major's body in a cubicle."

"What?" There was a look of incredulity on her face.

"He was lying there naked where the pathologist had been examining the corpse for any signs of foul play"

"And ..."

Otto described the marks on the front of the body above the waist and the bruises on the ankles.

Penny was leaning forward with wide open eyes. "So, do you think he was ..."

"Murdered? Yes."

She flopped back banging back of her head against the headboard.

"Ouch!" She rubbed her head. "I know he was an obnoxious man and upset many people but that was really a cover for other problems he had."

Otto became alert. "Other problems? What sort of problems. It sounds like you already know a lot about the man."

"I do."

"A travel writer and a psychologist?"

"Yes ... well I do have a doctorate in psychology but I don't advertise the fact otherwise I would have every Tom, Dick and Harry asking me to analyse them and provide an excuse for lecherous males to make passes at me."

"All, no doubt, saying how much you are helping them and could they see you more often and offering to take you out to dinner."

She laughed, rather sexily Otto thought.

"You've hit it the nail on the head" she replied. "Anyway, since the start of the voyage the Major has obviously been the subject of many conversations some of which I have overheard and others in which I have made a few discrete enquiries. I have therefore been able to build a sketchy profile of the man."

'Thankyou Penny' Otto thought. Now he would not have to start asking other passengers awkward questions to develop his own profile of the man. All that remained was for him to try and trace the other passengers' movements prior to the Major's death and whether any of them had any grudges against him.

"So have you managed to find out what was the Major like: his background, family life, what he did in the army?"

"He certainly appeared to have a reputation. For example, he never served in the forces. He desperately wanted to but was rejected as being 'unsuitable for training'."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not absolutely sure but when he was young he was doted on by his mother – apparently there was bit of an Oedipus complex. His father was an officer in the army and known as a disciplinarian. He tried to 'toughen' his son up but went about it in the wrong way by ridiculing and humiliating him and treating him like a squaddie. In fact he treated both of them like squaddies."

"What, his wife as well?"

"Yes, and he denigrated his son to other officers and NCOs to the extent that the recruitment panel developed a very negative image of the lad. Needless to say, when he went before the recruitment panel he was so nervous that he broke down and ... well, hence the decision to reject him."

"So, how come ..."

"He ended up with multiple personalities. On the one hand he adopted his father's habit of belittling people and upsetting them. When his father was away, his mother, aunts and his mother's friends spoilt and doted on him."

"No siblings then."

"No, and the result was that he thought he was God's gift to women. It is said that he was quite popular at school and had a knack for drawing others to him and join in his type of comedy; but sometimes I feel that it was because others feared him. I would say he probably preferred the company of women, read a lot of military history and saw himself as a noble Prussian officer with woman fawning on him. He loved wearing uniforms and usually took jobs where he had to wear one – be it a doorman, security officer or some other official position. On occasions he used to attach medals and ribbons, which he obtained from an antique shop, to his uniform and proudly walk around town with them, until he was spotted by one of his employers

and told to stop wearing them. He was always very generous with friends but never married. Most relationships were short-lived; girlfriends found him too overpowering."

Otto was listening intently to Penny's unbelievably intimate knowledge of this man, wondering how she managed to learn so much about him.

"How come you know so much about him?"

"Most of my information came from a Dutch couple I overheard talking about him."

"How fortuitous."

Penny hadn't finished. "He soon adopted the title 'Major' and became known as 'The Major', partly from his detailed knowledge of military history. You could say he was like Marmite - love him or hate him."

"So does it mean that of those who hated him, one of them could have taken it as far as murder?"

"I wouldn't go as far as to say premeditated murder; more like the result of built-up tension and anger with the timely opportunity to shut the man up."

"So the challenge now is to try and find out who might have had a reason to bump him off."

Penny looked at Otto and narrowed her eyes. "If I didn't know better, Otto, I would say that you are intent on trying to solve the probable murder of the poor old Major."

"Well, if I don't, no one else will bother. It will be recorded as an accidental death and the guilty party will get away with it."

"True enough, but surely the police know their business and will also be suspicious of the marks you described on the Major's body."

"Let's face it Penny, the body will shortly be taken off the ship and the cruise allowed to continue for both economic and political reasons."

"And the incident logged as an accident, as you suggest." Penny sighed. "I suppose there must be many unsolved crimes and sometimes I guess the reason for a death is never found."

"The reason is always known."

"What makes you think that and who would have that knowledge? I know plenty of cases where people die for no obvious reason."

"The Grim Reaper knows" Otto replied with a smirk on his face.

Penny burst out laughing.

"The Grim Reaper? You said that as though it is a real person or being."

Otto didn't laugh but could hardly say that Grim **was** a real entity and that he had had conversations with it ... or him. He felt a nudge on his right elbow and turned his head, looking up. Grim was standing there shaking his head slowly.

"Careful what you say" death rasped.

Otto glanced at Grim and then looked over at Penny. She, of course, couldn't see or hear death. Otto was still wondering why it was only him who had the ability to see and talk with death. Maybe because he had had that near death experience when he was in hospital following his accident. That now seemed to have changed to a 'close to death' situation. That worried him.

"Something wrong?"

Penny's question drew Otto's attention back to their discussion.

"No, no." Otto replied.

"It's just that I noticed you seemed to be momentarily distracted as though someone was standing next to you."

"Oh, I was just thinking of how to proceed from here. Maybe I could start by talking to the group who were seated with the Major at dinner last night."

"Like you and me."

"Yes, there were eight of us."

"Most of the tables were for groups of eight but there were a few tables for two and four."

Otto felt a bit despondent. "It's going to take ages; and what sort of approach should we take? We can't just go around asking everyone what they thought of the Major. Any ideas, Penny?"

"I think I may be able to help there" Penny suggested pensively. "Let me give it some thought. As a travel writer I think people might be more willing to talk to me, or us, particularly if I say that their comments may be published."

"True enough" agreed Otto. "If you don't mind me saying so, I think in your case most of the men will only be too eager to chat with a very attractive woman."

Penny smiled alluringly but did not show any signs of embarrassment. "You flatter me, Otto."

"True though."

"Thank you."

Penny slid off the bed, stepped over to the cabin wardrobe and took out an electronic notebook.

"Now, who was sitting at the Major's table?"

Otto put his hand to his chin. "Let's see. Apart from you, me and the deceased there was that elderly couple Len & Ann, the middle-aged couple Heather & Gwyn and that strange fellow Ronald who kept arguing with the Major. As far as I remember the Major ripped everyone to shreds apart from the elderly couple."

"Probably because they didn't say much, thinking it wiser to not participate in the exchange of insults."

"Yes, I think it unlikely they are guilty of murder. Most of the time they sat there shaking their heads and were visibly relieved when the Major left the table. They told me that they are on this cruise celebrating their Golden Wedding Anniversary."

"That's nice, but I agree with what you say; so we'll rank them as a low with a score of 1 and we'll give a score of 5 for those more likely to have perpetrated the crime."

"Sound good."

Otto watched Penny start tapping away on her notebook, looking at her delicate hands with red painted manicured nails.

"What about you and me to start with" she ventured.

"Ooh, a five is my guess?"

Penny chuckled. "If that were the case, I don't think we would be undertaking this analysis."

A clattering of a jaw prompted Otto to glance at Grim, who was still standing next to him, laughing.

"It's not that funny?"

Penny looked up. "I only meant it as a joke. You're being too serious now."

Otto looked down with his eyes closed and lips pressed together.

'Bugger' he thought. *'Opening my big mouth.'* "No, no. I was just thinking that it wouldn't be funny if either of us did it whilst trying to find someone else on the boat to blame."

She looked at him quizzically. "You're not making much sense, Otto. Do you feel alright? Perhaps your migraine is returning."

"Yes" Otto responded quickly. "I do feel a bit light-headed" he lied.

"Shall we leave it for now?" She asked, with a look of concern on her face.

"No. I'll be okay. I'll just take a couple of the tablets."

"Is that wise? You have just had a glass of wine."

Otto held up the glass. "I haven't drunk much of it?"

Penny put the notebook on the bed. "I'll fetch you a glass of water."

"Thanks."

She took another tumbler from a tray on top of the minibar and went into the bathroom as Otto took a strip of tablets out of his pocket and popped one out. He did not really want to take the tablet, so

pretended to swallow it and surreptitiously slid it back into his pocket.

"Are you sure you are okay to continue?"

Otto glanced at Grim, who was still standing beside him.

"Sure. I am not going to die."

Grim put his 'hands' or phalanges together as in prayer, nodding eagerly.

"Die? That sounds a bit dramatic" Penny commented.

"Figure of speech."

"Not normally in that context I would say."

She sat back down on the bed and picked up her notebook. "Right, you and me."

"Zero" Otto stated.

The elderly couple?

"Zero."

"What about Heather and Gwyn?"

"They were the, let's say, overweight couple who always went up for seconds."

"The Major kept referring to them as 'Tweedledum and Tweedledee'."

Otto and Penny recalled laughingly the snippets of the dialog between the Major and the couple -

Heather: You're not particularly slim yourself, with that belly of yours.

The Major: At least it's all out front, not like you two spinning tops. Can you get up if you fall over?

Gwyn: We have each other for help and support, unlike you who has to lay there like a beetle on its back with legs wriggling in the air until someone comes to help – if anyone comes at all.

The Major: So do you two just roll around until you bump into each other?

Heather: As you noted, we are all-rounded so rarely fall over, unless someone pushes us, for example. You, on the other hand, must be 'front-heavy' and in the habit of toppling forward quite often.

Gwyn: So would you float or sink if you fell in the river?

Ronald: Maybe someone will test that out one day.

and the exchange of insults and ridiculing continued throughout most of the meal.

"I don't see Heather and Gwyn committing murder" Penny said. "They seemed to quite enjoy the ridiculing banter."

"Hm, but I did detect a hint of malice" Otto countered. "I would still rank them as a 2."

"Okay, I'll go along with that. What about that guy, Ronald? Did you note the statement he made about falling in the river?"

"Yes, and throughout most of the dinner he was looking daggers at the Major and a couple of times he told the Major to 'shut his mouth'."

"He wasn't the only one who appeared angry at the Major's behaviour."

"I think we need to 'circulate' amongst the other passengers to try and find out who hated him the most."

"Yes, I agree." Penny closed her notebook and climbed off the bed.

"How about ranking Ronald as 3 or 4."

"3, I would say."

"I would have said 4 but I'll give him the benefit of the doubt."

Penny re-opened her notebook and keyed in an entry for Ronald. She then closed the notebook. "Ready?"

Otto and Penny left her cabin, with Grim in tow, making their way back to the dining room, which had now been reorganised for an evening of Line Dancing, along with an instructor. The politzei had gone, apart from one in plain clothes, who was sitting at the bar chatting to the barman and watching those dancing, those trying to dance and those just sitting around talking, drinking and eating snacks.

"It looks like they have finished interviewing but I doubt all the passengers will be here" Penny suggested.

"I wouldn't normally be" Otto added. "I hate line dancing but will tolerate it under the circumstances."

Penny glanced around the room and saw a group of passengers talking to the captain. Otto noticed her watching them.

"What are you staring at, Penny? Hadn't we better get started?"

"Y-e-s ... but I have an idea. Excuse me a moment."

She walked off towards the group.

"Penny?"

The captain noticed the glamorous Penny approaching and lost interest in the group around him. He muttered an apology to them.

"Would you all excuse me please, there is someone I must talk to."

He moved away from the gathering and stopped with his feet together as they met.

"Ah, Captain Sturmitz." Penny held out her hand, which the captain took, kissing the back of it and bowing slightly in the process.

"A pleasure to meet you miss?"

"Penny" she replied.

"And you can call me Otto."

Penny responded lifting her eyebrows. "What a coincidence"

"Coincidence?"

She turned and nodded in the direction of the other Otto. "My fellow passenger over there is an Otto as well."

Otto was standing at the side of the room next to one of the doors that opened onto the deck.

"Ah, yes." He was staring at Otto. "He looks as though he is talking to someone standing next to him but there is no one there."

Otto was indeed talking to someone – Grim.

Grim had also watched Penny approaching the captain. "She's a clever girl."

"Yes, she is" agreed Otto.

"She would make a good addition to my team."

Otto turned his head towards the grim reaper. "She's too young to ... die, or 'join your team', as you say."

"No she isn't. We have all ages joining us; from babies to really old people who hang on to life far too long. So long in fact that they are not much use to us."

"So what do you do with them?" Otto started to chuckle. "Turn them into bone meal?"

"Don't be so crass. That would be cannibalistic. Besides, we don't 'eat or drink' as you know it."

"What about babies? What do you do with them?"

Grim shifted his posture.

"Rather than just making stupid comments and asking ridiculous questions would you please fetch me a chair."

"A chair? What do you need a chair for, when you are ..."

"I've got achy bones."

Otto got up and, without really thinking, approached a table occupied by a group of people arguing. He could not help overhearing the topic of their conversation – the Major!

"Excuse me please, but is anyone using this chair?"

The group stopped talking and turned to look at him.

"Go ahead" replied a rather plain short-haired brunette, who was seated with her back to Otto.

The conversation resumed as he picked up the chair and carried it back to place it next to him.

"He was an asshole" someone commented. "An arrogant, rude man with no thought for anyone else."

Otto wished he could hear the ongoing discussion but the background music was too loud. He heard a creaking sound as Grim sat down.

"My God, your bones are creaky aren't they."

"Old age" replied Grim.

Otto looked down on the chair.

"What are you talking about, old age?"

"I was quite old when I joined the team. I was always very fit, but that didn't help much."

Although Otto didn't notice, two people in the group were watching him. One was a balding man with a thin face, who leant over to the woman next to him.

"That man over there."

"Which man?"

"The one that has just taken the chair."

"What about him?"

"He placed the chair next to him, didn't sit on it and now keeps looking at it as though there is someone sitting on it."

The woman looked past the people sitting opposite her.

"Strange fellow. I guess there must be some reason for what he is doing."

They both returned to the table conversation. Otto, meanwhile was making a mental note of all the people at the table. There were six of them.

The other person watching him was the captain. He was suddenly aware of Penny's voice.

"Captain Sturmitz?"

"Oh, sorry ... er ... Penny. I was just watching your friend Otto."

Penny turned round to see Otto standing next to a chair watching a group of passengers chatting amongst themselves at a table close to him. "What about him?"

"He's just taken a chair from that table near him and placed it beside him but didn't sit on it."

"Perhaps he fetched it for me."

"He keeps looking at it as though he is talking to it."

Penny was quick thinking. "He has ... memories."

The captain switched his attention back to Penny and nodded slowly.

"I understand. Now, how can I help you?"

"Well" she began. "I am a travel writer and am fortunate in having many of my articles published in widely circulated travel magazines such as '*Travel the World*' and '*Classic Cruises for the Travel Crazy*'."

"Ah! Then you must be Penelope Hammond."

Penny nodded. "That's me."

"I have indeed read many of your articles Miss Hammond, Penny. Most impressive. So, how may I be of assistance?"

"As you are no doubt aware, one of the key methods of marketing a service is to obtain as much positive feedback as possible; and if individuals enjoy their experience, most will be more than happy to share their impressions."

"True; so I presume you want something from me, which is why you approached me in the first place."

"You are correct Captain Sturmitz."

"And I thought it was my charm and, dare I say, good looks?"

"I will not deny that you certainly are a charming and handsome man, Captain, but I will come straight to the point."

"Which is?"

"A list of your passengers, ages and occupations."

"That's a tall order and against European data protection laws."

"I realise that and you have my word that the passengers will not be aware that I possess their details."

Captain Sturmitz was hesitant. "So why do you want this information and how do you intend to use it?"

"Merely to group people into categories of those more likely to provide feedback on the cruise. I will also ask about their ages and professions, to tally with your list, but of course that information will be entirely voluntary. I will return the list to you of course once I have completed my interviews, the results of which I will share with you."

"Hm. I will be taking a great risk losing my job if anyone became aware that I had passed you this information."

"No one will ever know that you provided me with it. I don't see any reason why your name should be mentioned"

There was a long pause before he finally replied.

"Okay, I trust you but I have one condition."

Penny laughed.

"Only one?"

"For now."

"Which is?"

"You have dinner with me."

"You're on."

Otto was watching Penny conversing with the Captain. *'I wonder what she is talking to him about'* he was thinking. *'She is wasting valuable time.'*

He was interrupted from his puzzled thoughts by the rasping voice emanating from the skull next to him. "Why is your girlfriend chatting up the Captain?"

Otto felt a little annoyed "I don't know. Trying to find out who tipped the Major overboard, maybe. Anyway, she is not my girlfriend."

Death sniggered at Otto's firm denial. "I'm sure she is not asking the Captain that. He wouldn't ..."

At that moment Penny walked off with the Captain towards one of the exits. Otto found himself feeling jealous; silly thought really, considering that he had only recently made her acquaintance.

"Where is she going now ... with him?"

Grim cackled. "You're jealous aren't you." he rasped.

"No I'm not" Otto responded hastily.

"You fancy her don't you."

Otto couldn't deny it but Grim was obviously goading him.

"Don't worry, she'll be back shortly" death added.

To Otto, it seemed a lot longer than 'shortly'; but she eventually reappeared without the Captain and, noticing that Otto was still where she had left him, came over quickly to join him with a satisfied grin on her face. Otto couldn't help himself. "Where have you been?"

Unfortunately the statement came out in an accusatory tone and, fortunately, Penny didn't take it that way. She laughed.

"Ooh, do I detect a hint of jealousy Otto? If I didn't know better ..."

"No, no" Otto quickly responded., interrupting her. "That came out the wrong way. What I meant was ..."

She grabbed his right hand. "Don't worry. I know what you meant."

The touch of her hand excited him. It was a very warm and gentle touch from the smooth soft skin of her hand. "Now" she said excitedly, "I have something to show you." She looked around the room and spotted an unoccupied table in a corner. "Come. Let's go sit at that table over in the corner."

Grim raised himself off his seat and followed them. There were two chairs at the table but Otto, without really thinking, had picked up Grim's chair and took it with him. Penny didn't notice until he put the chair down by the table. A questioned look appeared on her face.

"Why have you brought that chair with you? There are already two here."

Otto struggled to think of a reason for bringing the chair along.

"I ... er ... thought that ... er ... the Captain might be joining us."

"Why would you think that?" Penny laughed.

"Because you seemed to be discussing something important."

"I was merely asking him how he could help me write a report on his passengers' impressions of the cruise."

"I thought ..."

She moved closer to him and whispered in his ear. "I have a list of all the passengers including their ages and professions."

Otto looked her straight in the eyes. "That's a big risk for him, isn't it?"

"It's okay. We can use it to help identify who might be capable of murder then interview the most likely suspects."

The rasping voice interrupted their conversation.

"All you need to do is first find out who was on deck at the same time as the Major."

"How are we supposed to do that?" Otto replied, again without thinking.

"By asking the right questions" Penny replied, thinking that Otto's question was in response to her suggestion, rather than the Grim Reaper's.

"That will take too long" Grim said.

"That will take too long" Otto repeated, now aware that this was developing into a three-way conversation in which one person, being Penny, was unaware of the presence of the third person, namely Grim.

Otto now repeated what Grim had proposed. "Don't we just need to find out who was on deck at the time of the murder?"

"Of course" Penny agreed. "By talking with them."

"I can tell you who was on deck" Grim rasped.

Otto responded again without thinking. "You can?"

Penny looked curiously at him. "Of course I ... I mean **we** can. I'm not doing this alone you know. After all, it was your idea."

He had to respond quickly before she picked up on his rather odd responses. "What if someone lies to cover themselves?"

"By phrasing questions carefully I am sure we can come up with a definitive list."

"You are certainly confident."

"It's part of my job - sorting out fact from fiction."

"I can certainly identify a few people who I know were on deck at the time."

"Me too."

Penny opened up her notebook and turned it on. She then took a folded photocopied passenger list from her handbag.

"Fortunately" she said, "Captain Sturmitz requested that all passengers wear a name tag to encourage interaction. That may help us, even though the name tags will display Christian names only. Some people object to others knowing their full name."

"How many passengers are there?"

"One hundred and fifty."

Otto sighed. "We can't interview one hundred and fifty people. We haven't got the time. We have to filter them out."

Penny rested her elbows on the table and propped her head up in her hands. "Hm, that is rather a lot."

Otto pulled the notebook towards him and opened up the spreadsheet Penny had set up. "Let's start with the ones we know were on deck at the time. Even though we can't put names to them for the moment we can suffice with a description." He thought for a moment, then started typing.

"From our table I know that neither Len and Ann nor Heather & Gwyn were out on the deck. They were still sitting at the table talking amongst themselves when the politzei arrived. I did, however, notice Ronald emerge from the dining room not long before the Major went overboard. Oh, and a young couple walked

past me at one point. I think she called him 'Alan', but somehow I think it unlikely that they did it."

"Well, that's a start: seven people, excluding us, of whom only one, Ronald, is a possible suspect."

Penny took the notebook back from Otto and started typing. "I can add a few more from when I left you and went back inside."

Penny noticed that Otto was looking rather glum.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"We're never going to know definitively who was on deck when the Major copped it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the murderer will of course deny having been on deck or may have managed to slip out and back again without being noticed."

Penny stopped typing.

"Now you're playing devil's advocate. I thought you wanted to solve this case."

Otto got up from his seat. "I do, but am also trying to be realistic."

The grim reaper nudged Otto. "Don't just keep talking about what you are intending to do; just get on with it."

"I think the best thing we can do is to just get out there and start interviewing the passengers" Otto said determinedly.

Penny looked up, surprised. "That was rather sudden." She shrugged and closed the notebook. "Let's get started then. Here is what I suggest."

She proceeded to outline how they should conduct their 'survey' on passengers' impressions and opinions of their cruise experience, covering organisation, excursions, crew members and, more subtly, fellow passengers. Most passengers usually returned to the same table at mealtimes, particularly at dinner, so the would-be-detectives concluded that identifying at least one person on each table should enable them to filter out who might have ventured out on deck when the Major met his maker.

Penny dug a small notepad out of her bag and gave it to Otto. "Use this to make notes about the people you talk to. I'll use my notebook" she said. "Hopefully, most people will prove cooperative." She thought for a moment. "Tell you what; say to them that if they can give you feedback they will be entered into a draw for ... a £100 voucher towards their next holiday."

Otto glanced at her. "But isn't that ..."

"Don't worry" she added. "I will fund it."

"Who do I say is conducting the survey?"

"Er ... *Pennywise Travel Surveys*."

"Is that what your business is called?"

Penny grinned. "No, of course not ... but it sounds impressive don't you think?"

"Yes, I suppose it does." She stopped for a moment looking straight ahead at nothing in particular. "Hm, it does sound good doesn't it. *Pennywise Travel Surveys*. Maybe I could set up my own company and get commissions to write reports for travel agencies or bureaus." She shook her head. "Still, enough dreaming. Let's get started."

VI

They departed in opposite directions to tackle the ship's passengers. Otto glanced around the room wondering where to start. Grim nudged him.

"Start with that couple over there" he rasped, pointing at a table close to the door to the deck. "They have been sitting there all evening and haven't moved."

Otto approached the couple, who were now alone; the other members of the group having wandered off.

"Good evening ...", he glanced at their name badges, "... Joe and Mabel."

The couple looked up at him. "Hello" Joe replied.

"Are you enjoying the cruise?"

"Yes thanks" Joe replied hesitantly, with a hint of suspicion.

"Allow me to introduce myself" Otto continued. "I and my colleague, Miss Penny Hammond, work for Pennywise Travel Surveys. We are gathering travellers' opinions of river cruises and this one in particular."

"Right ..."

"I was wondering if you would like to take part."

Joe was looking suspicious but Otto quickly went on to describe the background and objectives as per Penny's instructions. The mention of the holiday voucher persuaded them.

The couple were in their fifties and were very forthcoming, providing the names of all their fellow diners. They were not particularly aware of the Major and his behaviour and confirmed that no one had left their table, even when the man fell overboard. Having taken a note of the couple's contact details for the £100 draw, and the names and descriptions of the others on their table, Otto moved on to another table, as directed by Grim, and so it went on

After about an hour and a half Penny came over to Otto. "How are you getting on? Found any suspects?"

They found and sat at an empty table where Penny was able to match most of the names that Otto had collected to the list provided by Captain Sturmitz.

"Wow, you've done well Otto. Anyone would think that you've had help from someone. Anyway, I have also been chatting to some of the crew. Fortunately, they are under instructions to try and keep tabs on passengers' movements so that in an emergency ..."

"Which means" interrupted Otto "that you are now going to tell me that ..."

"You've read my mind. They think that there were about fifteen people on deck, including us, when the Major went overboard."

"Okay. That narrows it down. Us two plus the young couple that passed me just before we were instructed to return to the dining room means we just need to identify eleven."

Penny showed Otto her spreadsheet, which listed five names highlighted in red. "These remained in their cabins during the evening." She pointed to the names in turn. "This couple had stomach problems; probably something they ate during the last excursion. These two are a honeymoon couple and asked if they could eat in their cabin."

"I wonder why" Otto sniggered.

"It doesn't take much imagination."

"What about the fifth person?"

"Apparently the couple had a row and the wife remained in their cabin."

"Oh dear. I bet she was hungry."

"Her husband did ask the catering staff to take her some food. So, going back to the eleven, I have managed to identify another three. What about you?"

“Five.” At the back of Otto’s mind were two other tables that Grim had pointed out to him. “But I know of a couple more tables of which we haven’t approached the occupants.”

Penny stared at him. “I know I’m pretty observant but your powers of observation are uncanny. Are you psychic or something?”

“I’m a people watcher.”

“Well we’re all a bit like that aren’t we but in your case it seems that you have a photographic memory.”

Otto ignored the comment, not wishing to dig himself into another hole. Penny continued. “How many tables have you managed to cover?”

“Eight.”

“I was told that seventeen tables had been set with eight places per table. I’ve done five, so that leaves two more, excluding the other two you have just mentioned. Let’s go and find someone who was sitting at each those and then get together to analyse the results.”

Otto rose from his seat. “I’ll see you back here.” He wandered off.

Penny scanned the room and noticed a member of the staff serving drinks to a group of people. She recognised him as one of those serving around the time the Major had died. She wandered over to him.

“Excuse me, but it’s Juan isn’t it?”

The bronzed waiter turned to face her. “Si Señorita. Can I help you?”

“I do hope so” Penny gushed. “I’m conducting a survey on behalf of *Eurocruise*, your employer” she lied, “and I would appreciate your help in profiling some of the passengers.”

Juan hesitated for an instant. “I will do my best to help you ...?”

“Just call me Penny.”

“Are you employed by Eurocruise ... Penny?”

“No, I’m freelance journalist and offered my services to Captain Sturmitz who cleared it with Head Office.”

“So what does your survey entail?”

Penny proceeded to outline what she and Otto had agreed for their survey, without mentioning anything to do with the Major.

"So how can I help you, Penny?" Juan asked, after she had finished.

"Well, my colleague and I have noticed that most passengers sit at the same table for meals and we have managed to identify someone from each of the tables bar two."

"When are we talking about?"

"Dinner. Last night."

"Ah yes. The night of that terrible accident."

This provided an opening for Penny.

"I heard it was suicide. Strange that no one was able to stop him. There must have been dozens on deck at the time from what I have heard."

"Fifteen, to be precise."

Penny expressed a casual interest. "Really? How would you know that?"

"It is our job to know where everyone is in case of an emergency."

"But how can you keep tabs on so many people?"

"It isn't difficult and I have a keen eye ... years of practice."

"So, do ... you ... know...?"

"Who was on deck at the time?"

Penny feigned casual interest. "You actually know that?"

"Of course."

"Did you tell the politzei?"

"Of course, but all those who were on the deck denied seeing anything."

"So was it an accident?"

"I presume that will be the conclusion of the politzei."

Penny went quiet.

"So, returning to the reason you approached me ..."

"I don't suppose you could tell me who was on deck."

Penny noticed a suspicious look cross Juan's face.

"Why would you want to know that?"

"I think it would be interesting to find out how they felt being so close to someone who had just ... fallen overboard. They might think that they could have saved him."

Juan hesitated. "Hm. I can, but ..."

"But what?" Penny asked, guessing what the answer was going to be.

He smiled disarmingly. "But only if you join me for dinner."

"But you are on duty, aren't you, Juan?"

"Not tomorrow night, and I can arrange for a private dinner. It will be interesting to share life's experiences, Penny" he added, grinning. Penny knew exactly what Juan wanted to experience. She would have to play her cards very carefully. Juan gave her the other thirteen names.

Meanwhile, Otto had wandered up to a tall thin bald man wearing a grey suit sitting at one of the tables by himself reading a book. Otto introduced himself and broached the subject of the survey he was helping to conduct on behalf of the charming Penny, pointing her out conversing with Juan. The man didn't look up but slowly put the book on the table and glanced in the direction that Otto had indicated. He returned his attention slowly back to Otto.

"I have no interest in your survey" he replied, looking over the top of his wire-framed spectacles with a morbid expression.

Otto was taken aback by the curt reply.

"What about the other members of your fellow diners? They might be interested."

"I have no idea and don't really care."

"Well, some might be interested in participating; so ... perhaps you could help me by pointing out one of your group."

"Not **my** group and, no, I cannot help you." He picked up his book.

"Now, if you will excuse me."

Otto thought how rude the man was. For some reason he pictured the man without his spectacles and thought how much he resembled

Grim, apart from the skin that appeared to be stretched over his skull. Even his eyes were buried in deep sockets.

The man looked up, obviously annoyed that Otto hadn't gone away. "Well?"

Otto didn't reply; but just as he was about to walk away, the man indicated a group over to his right. "You might like to talk with that elderly woman over there in the grey trouser suit. Now, if you don't mind."

Otto didn't bother to thank the misery and walked over to the grey woman who was having a heated discussion with several passengers.

"An objectionable, self-centred misogynist and I for one don't believe he will be missed."

"He was alright" came a reply from a short tubby woman.

"After what he called you" the grey woman replied loudly in return.

"I don't take any notice of what people say" tubby replied, "even when comments can be construed as offensive. People who behave as he did are missing something in their lives. They need to project an inflated ego to hide a deep, inner fear. I had a very low opinion of him but I would never wish the man dead."

"Even the grim reaper would cast him aside" added a well-built muscular man in light blue shorts and a gaudy T-shirt, both of which looked too tight for him.

Otto felt a nudge on his right arm and saw Grim standing next to him shaking his head.

"No he wouldn't" Otto said.

The whole group turned to stare at him.

"He has a place for everyone" Otto added.

"You a mate of his or something?" Blue shorts asked in an offhand manner, laughing in mockery.

Otto decided to go along with it, thinking back to when he first met the Grim Reaper in hospital. "Actually, yes. I was very close to death once."

Grim sniggered, the sound reverberating inside his skull.

"Lucky he didn't chop your head off with his scythe then" Blue shorts retorted.

"The Grim Reaper doesn't actually cut off the heads of the dead. The scythe is merely a symbolic instrument to demonstrate his function; that is, in collecting or reaping the dead's souls akin to reaping corn."

A young man, wearing a light grey T-shirt sporting a printed red skull, chipped in with a broad Scottish accent. "Yih a real barrel of laughs, er ..."

"Otto" Otto replied.

"... Otto" echoed Red Skull.

"Seriously though" Otto continued. "What did most of you think of the Major?"

"Why are you so interested in the man?" Blue shorts asked.

"Sorry, let me introduce myself. I am Otto and working with another of the passengers, Penny Hammond."

He once again went on to explain about the survey that he and Penny were conducting on behalf of *Pennywise Travel Surveys*. "Penny is particularly interested in human relationships and couldn't help overhearing comments made regarding the Major. Most passengers on these trips normally get on well together, apart from harmless little digs, but in the Major's case it appears that he was tolerated by most but despised by many."

"He was a bit obnoxious but pretty harmless if you ignored the barbed comments" quipped Blue Shorts.

"As long as one didn't let it get to you" added Red Skull.

"That's right" echoed tubby. I have always been this shape (*she lifted her arms to attract attention to her size*) and have been at the receiving end of digs all my life. I have learned to live with it and treat comments from people with the contempt they deserve. I don't judge such people but pity them."

"I concur" agreed Red Skull.

“People like that, don’t deserve to live.” The comment came from a middle-aged man in cream-coloured shorts with a Hawaiian T-shirt standing with his wife, also wearing identical shorts and a Hawaiian blouse with a VERY low neckline. Both were heavily sun-tanned with signs of wrinkling due to spending too much time sunbathing. Otto pictured them in years to come with shrivelled-up skin over skeletal bodies, not looking particularly unlike Grim, except for the ragged black cloak. He pictured them walking around, each with a scythe.”

“Meph’s would welcome those two” Grim muttered. “They would make a great advert for Hades.”

Otto nodded in agreement.

Grey woman came back in with a barbed comment. “Hang him up by his balls, I’d say.”

Thin man, standing just behind grey woman suddenly cut in.

“Mildred! No need for that sort of language. Particularly in company” he added quietly.

The woman flicked her head round. “Oh shut up Oswald, you boring old prude.”

Thin man appeared to lower his head in shame and slunk back a bit. Otto felt sorry for him.

A short tubby man with a short tubby wife chirped up in a squeaky voice. “I heard he fell overboard but I bet someone gave him a helping hand.”

“Oh don’t be so stupid, birdy” grey woman responded. “As if anyone would contemplate committing murder just because some fat arse was being obnoxious.”

Thin man gave her another disapproving look but kept quiet this time. Otto seized the opportunity. “Oh! Were any of you ... er ... on deck at the time of his ... unfortunate demise?”

“No. None of us” was the choral reply.

“Do you know of anyone who might have been on deck?”

“No” they all replied in unison.

"So exactly why are you so interested in what happened to the old fart ... Detective Otto?" Blue Shorts added, with obvious sarcasm.

"Does your Grim Reaper grant you a remission?"

At that, they all burst out laughing, some nearly falling off their chairs. Blue Shorts was beginning to annoy Otto, and he felt that he wasn't getting anywhere with this bunch of loonies; but he thought he would have the last word.

"Actually, yes. I met Grim, that's what I call him, a while ago and we made a pact. I help him and he helps me. I act as his agent."

He felt a bony phalange poke him in the ribs as Blue Shorts laughed in a manner that sounded like he was having trouble breathing. The rest of the group also fell about laughing with tears in their eyes, so Otto decided to make a quick exit hoping that they would forget about the draw. Fortunately they did, apart from Blue Shorts who was about to challenge Otto on the subject but Otto pretended not to hear and moved quickly away.

"You're sailing close to the wind, aren't you?" Grim rasped.

"Oh come on, Grim. Who is going to believe that you actually exist? Everyone treats you as a joke."

Grim's skull drooped. "Oh, thanks."

"Sorry, I didn't really mean that. Some people actually do fear you."

Grim's skull brightened up. "Glad to hear it. I like to put the fear of death into people's minds. I like hearing them shout out "*I don't want to die*", which is when I make my grand entry and say to them "The hell you are" and give them my deathly laugh."

"That's not very nice of you, Grim. Anyway, some people actually welcome you, particularly if they have been suffering."

"Only joking. After I have reaped their soul we have a little discussion about their future plans in Paradise ... or Hades, wherever they choose to go."

Otto thought back to his previous encounter with Grim, when the Grim Reaper outlined the pros and cons of Paradise and Hades. Fortunately, he did not have to make the choice on that occasion.

VII

"Otto!"

He swung round to face Penny standing just behind him. "Oh, Penny! Er, how are you getting on? I'm afraid I haven't made any further progress."

"You needn't worry on that score." Grinning, she waved a sheet of paper, with something written on it, in front of his eyes. "I have the list of passengers who were on the deck when the Major went overboard."

"Wow! Where did you get that?"

"Juan" she replied, placing her notebook on the table.

Otto was feeling a tinge of jealousy again. "Who's Juan?"

"A waiter."

"That's good of him; but why would he give you that?"

"I made a deal with him."

Otto tried to joke to hide his feelings for her. "So what does he want in exchange?"

Penny decided to play along with Otto's obvious jealousy. "A favour from me."

Otto was now getting irritated. He felt a nudge from Grim.

"She's teasing you" he rasped; but Otto could not help himself.

"What sort of favour does he want?"

"He's taking me out to dinner."

"How does that work if **you** owe **him**?"

"That was his condition for providing me with information I was seeking. He's obviously hoping that it will lead to ..." She paused purposely. "... to something else." She was watching Otto's expression.

"Hm" he responded. "I didn't think"

"I've also got a dinner date with Captain Sturmitz."

Otto's face went blank. "And what will that lead to?"

He felt another nudge from Grim. "Now she's really goading you" he cackled, "and you are falling for it."

Otto couldn't help himself again. "No I'm not."

"Not what?" Penny asked, with a quizzical frown on her face. Then her face broke into a grin. "Oh, I see. Do I detect a hint of jealousy? You needn't worry you know. I can look after myself." There followed a slight pause. "Besides, we are only business partners and I have no wish to ..."

"S ... sorry" Otto stammered. "I didn't wish to imply anything. You are such a ... lovely and er ... beautiful woman that I don't like the thought of anyone taking advantage of you."

Penny laughed. "You probably won't believe this but one of my hobbies, if you can call it that, is Martial Arts."

Otto's expression changed to one of surprise as he looked her up-and-down. "What? You?"

"Don't look so surprised. Looks can be deceiving. Having been the object of many lecherous advances since my college days I responded to an advert for self-defence classes run by a charming gentleman: Yasuto Kuamo."

Otto cheered up. "Wow! That is certainly impressive. Have you ever ..."

"Yes, on a few occasions. I usually tend to bring it up in casual conversation but unfortunately, for some suitors, I'm not always believed."

"Ask if she's ever killed anyone."

Otto nudged Grim hard to shut up.

"Ouch! It's alright for you. You've got flesh to cover your bones."

Grim pulled up the sleeve of his tatty coat. "I bet I've got a bruise there now."

Otto shook his head, thinking to himself. "*Bruise? How can one bruise the bone of a skeleton.*"

He was suddenly aware that Penny was looking at him quizzically.

"Are you okay Otto? Only you look far away as though ..."

"Sorry. I'm fine Penny, thank you."

"I notice that sometimes you appear deep in thought ... like there was someone else with us."

"I have always been a deep thinker, Penny, and like to bounce ideas around ... sometimes out loud."

It was a silly statement and Otto hoped that she would believe it. She did ... or appeared to.

After a momentary pause she placed the list from Juan on the table.

"Getting back to the task in hand, we now need to review this list, along with the people we have already interviewed, and attempt to filter out possible murderers."

At that moment Captain Sturmitz came up to their table and clicked his heels. "Miss Hammond?"

Penny looked up. "Ah, Captain Sturmitz. How can we help you?"

"Please excuse me for interrupting your conversation but I believe, Miss Hammond ..."

"Penny, please."

"I believe we have a dinner date ... Penny."

"Of course" she replied, and turned back to Otto. "Enter the names into my notebook, you know the password don't you, and see if we can narrow it down to the most likely."

"Sure. Will do" Otto replied, taking the list from her.

She blew him a kiss, which he found touching, as she walked off with the captain.

Otto picked up Penny's notebook and decided to work in his cabin where he would not be disturbed. He had just risen from his seat when a short well-built Italian-looking man approached him with a pleasant smile. The man was dressed in a well-tailored dark suit, white shirt and black bow tie. He had a small moustache, short black greased hair across his head and he was carrying what appeared to be a glass of whisky or some other sort of spirit. Otto thought he

looked like a mafioso boss; more so when he spoke with an Italian accent.

"Meester ..."

"Granthum" Otto answered, "and you?"

"Riccardo. Riccardo Spinelli. You no doubt have heard of me."

"No, I haven't."

Riccardo looked annoyed as the smile disappeared.

"You-a and-a your lady friend-a have been asking questions, no?"

The tone of his voice sounded rather threatening.

"That's right. We are conducting a survey."

"You-a need-a to be careful going round-a asking questions."

Otto was annoyed.

"What do you mean Mr Spinelli?"

"Riccardo, please-a."

"Exactly what do you mean ... Riccardo?"

"Some-a people here think-a you are the politzei and-a feel-a uncomfortable with that. You understand-a me, no?"

Otto was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

"As I said, Penny and I ..."

"Unfortunately, people who upset-a other people tend to have er ... how shall I put it ... accidents. You know what I'm saying, no?"

Otto immediately thought of the Major. *Did he upset someone and ended up as one of the grim reaper's clients?* He was also wondering now whether it was advisable to carry on with their investigation. If Riccardo was a mobster and had the Major bumped off, perhaps he and Penny were in his sights. He decided for the moment that it was safer to back off.

"Sure ... Riccardo. We would never purposely upset anybody and note your concern."

Riccardo stepped up to him and patted him on the arm. "Ensure-a that-a you do my dear friend-a Otto. A pleasure to make-a your acquaintance." He turned about and walked slowly off to join another man, also attired in dark suite with a bow tie. Otto watched

them for a couple of minutes thinking that the other man must be Alberto Fellini, according to the passenger list. *'Did they have bulges under their jackets?'* he thought, as he made his way back to his cabin to review the data he and Penny had collected since the Major's demise.

===== " =====

Penny walked with Captain Otto Sturmitz to his private dining room. "How is your survey coming on, Miss Hammond ... I mean Penny? Have you found anything interesting?"

"We certainly have Captain Sturmitz."

"Otto, please."

"Of course ... Otto."

"Thank you, Penny."

They reached a door where a member of the crew was standing. He opened it for the two of them to enter.

"Thank you Dmitri. We are ready now."

Otto Sturmitz sat at the head of a long table which was set for two and laid with various dishes and fruits. Dmitri pulled out a chair to the Captain's right for Penny to sit on.

"Thank you ... Dmitri" Penny said, smiling.

Dmitri's expression remained serious. "Wine madame?"

"Yes. White please."

Dmitri didn't move, as though he was waiting for something.

"Do you have a Sauvignon Blanc?"

Dmitri approached a waist level sideboard and extracted a bottle of wine from a built-in refrigerator. "Chilean, madame?"

"That's fine, thank you."

Having poured out two glasses of wine he left the room, returning later with hot dishes. Otto began by asking Penny about the cruise and her background and went on to discuss her initial findings from the survey.

"I noted that your parting comment to your colleague Otto regarding the passenger list was 'to identify the most likely'. What did you actually mean by that?"

Penny had to think quickly. "We are giving the passenger with the most interesting feedback a one hundred pound voucher off their next cruise as a reward. We are reviewing their comments to identify the most likely winner."

That seemed to satisfy the Captain, so Penny quickly continued. "Most of the passengers were very complimentary regarding the crew" she said at one point. "And many mentioned Juan in particular."

"That's very encouraging" replied the captain. "Was there anything specific that was mentioned?"

"Attentive, polite, always willing to help. I have also found him extremely helpful." (She did not want to mention that Juan may have helped them home in on the Major's murderer.)

"I am so pleased. I shall have to find a suitable reward for him. He deserves it under the circumstances."

"Oh? Anything serious, if you don't mind me asking?"

"A major tragedy in his life. His mother committed suicide when he was very young."

"What! Why?"

"Apparently, she was seduced by a philanderer who made false promises. When she became pregnant, he dumped her and disappeared. As a result, she lost her job and lived in poverty trying to bring up her baby boy. Fortunately, a middle-aged couple who had tried to help her adopted the boy and brought him up as their own after she took her own life."

"How very sad. So where is his home?"

"The south of Spain."

"Andalucia?"

Captain Sturmitz raised his eyebrows. "Yes. How very perceptive of you."

"I thought I recognised the accent, having visited and stayed in the area many times. I just love the region; full of life ... love and the music, particularly the fandango."

"It sounds wonderful. I shall have to start visiting the area myself ... especially when you are there, Penny."

She threw her head back, allowing her hair to fall back over her shoulders, and laughed.

"When do you hope to complete your article, Penny?"

"I shall probably have the draft completed before the end of the voyage and will glad of any comments you might care to make."

"Thankyou. I appreciate that."

"And what about yourself, Otto? Where do you come from Deutschland? Oesterreich?"

"Trieben in Styria."

"Not a place I have heard of."

"Not many people have. My parents have lived there all their lives."

"Do you have a family of your own?"

"No." He leaned forward and stared into her deep blue eyes. "I have never met the right woman.

Penny looked away. "Likewise. I have never met the right man. Too busy working I guess."

"Men must be after you all the time. Yes?"

Penny had to change the subject.

"On occasions, but in most cases they want to settle down to marriage, or co-habitation bliss." She sighed. "But I'm not anywhere ready for that. Or even casual relationships" she added forcefully.

Otto took the hint and leant back in his seat.

The conversation continued easily between them, each talking about their travels and interests. They were interrupted by a tap on the door. The Captain lifted his head and looked towards the door.

"Enter" he called out.

A smartly dressed officer stood at the door. "You are required on the bridge, Captain Sturmitz." The accent was East European.

"Thankyou Pavel. I will be up right away."

"Sir."

The officer closed the door as he left.

Otto raised himself from his seat. "I apologise, Penny."

"No need, Otto. I have really enjoyed our conversation and the dinner. Thankyou." She also got up and headed towards the cabin door.

The captain took her hand and kissed the back of it, then opened the door for her to leave.

"Thank you for your excellent company, Penny. I have really enjoyed this evening."

"Me too" she replied, kissed him on the cheek and made a quick exit.

VIII

Otto turned on Penny's notebook and pulled up the spreadsheet she had created and started working on it. He entered the fifteen names onto a new worksheet and added extra columns for their findings. Top of the list, for completeness, was his own name followed by Penny's.

The third name on the list was the young man, Ronald Fynn, who was sitting on their table, along with the Major. Otto was sure he detected hate in Ronald's eyes when he lambasted the Major for the insults he was spouting out and described him as rude and arrogant. Otto marked him as a very likely suspect and ranked him 4 out of 5.

Next were a Dutch couple - Hans and Hilda Lodj. During their interview they became hesitant and vague when the subject of the Major's death was mentioned describing him as misogynistic scum. Otto had the impression that they were hiding something. He ranked them a 5 and made a note to make more enquiries about the couple.

The man in the Hawaiian T-shirt, Jon Pardoe or "Hawaiian man", was the sixth name and also very scathing about the Major. There was also a rumour about some sort of legal issue relating to the Major which Otto felt needed to be followed up. He ranked Jon Pardoe a 3.

Juan had made the comment that Hawaiian man was often in the company of Red Skull – Angus Mc Douglas, the Scot with a very broad accent and who had made the comment that the Major would be better off dead. Otto thought that maybe they were working in cahoots so ranked them both a 3 with a note to also investigate them further.

The next two were the young couple, Alan Thomas & Gale Evans, who had passed Otto whilst he was 'talking' with Grim. They were obviously too wrapped up with themselves to bother about a drunken passenger on deck, so Otto discounted them completely.

The next two gentleman were both strange and evasive. Juan said they were Russians and they certainly acted like KGB or FSB men. They seemed to avoid talking to other passengers and most of the time walked around in dark suits, white shirts and black ties and wearing dark glasses. Otto never liked talking with people who wore dark glasses during a conversation. One can glean a lot from a person's eyes. Otto also noticed that neither of them ever smiled and recollected his conversation with them.

"Good evening" Otto had said, approaching them.

"Yes?" one of them had replied, with a Russian accent.

Otto could not quite make out which one answered as they looked like identical twins – the same height, build and facial expression; the classic doppelgangers. He felt slightly nervous.

"Are you ... both enjoying the cruise?" Otto looked at each of them.

"Yes" they replied in unison.

"And ... er ... what persuaded you to select this particular cruise?"

"We are tourists" the one on the right replied.

Otto decided to persevere.

"Yes, that's what most people on this ship are" Otto replied sarcastically.

There was no response.

"By the way, I am Otto."

The two glanced briefly at each other.

"You are German?" asked the one on the left with a hint of suspicion.

"No. I am English." There was a long pause. "And you?"

"Russian" the one on the right replied.

Neither were wearing name tags so Otto risked asking their names.

"As I said, I am Otto; and ..." He raised his eyebrows expectantly.

"Igor" said the one on the left.

"Ivan" answered his companion.

"So, Ivan and Igor, what do you do for a living?"

"Why do you want to know?" Asked Igor.

"Oh, just curious to know what sort of people come on cruises. I am an IT Consultant."

The two of them spoke at the same time.

"We are journalists."

"Import/Export" added Igor."

They glanced at each other, then Ivan clarified. "We are in the media department of an import/export company. We issue press releases."

"What do think of the cruise so far?"

"You ask a lot of questions" queried Igor.

"It is not wise" added Ivan.

"Sorry" Otto quickly answered. "Maybe I should explain." He then described what he and Penny were trying to do and why.

"She is very pretty" Igor uttered blandly.

"Yes" Otto agreed. "So what do you think of the other passengers?"

"We have no interest in them" replied Ivan.

Otto found it quite amusing how Ivan and Igor alternately replied to his questions. He was quite relieved when they both, alternately again, pointed out a few interesting aspects of the cruise.

"And, er, did you hear about the Major?"

"Who is 'the Major'" Ivan questioned, unconvincingly.

"The man who was ... fell overboard."

Igor: "He was an evil imperialist."

Ivan: "He deserved to die."

"Do you know ... exactly what happened?"

Ivan & Igor: "No."

"No, I suppose not."

There was a brief pause during which Otto felt that the two Russians were staring at him through their dark glasses.

Otto felt it unnerving. "So, would you like to be entered into the prize draw?"

Igor: "No."

"Okay. Thank you for your time. Enjoy the rest of the cruise."

Ivan: "Poydem, Igor, Poydem" [*Come, Igor, let's go.*]

They both turned around and walked off. Otto watched them walk away and felt uneasy about the duo, particularly when they referred to him as '*an evil imperialist*' and '*deserved to die*'. Why would they make that comment? Maybe the Major was a spy. He ranked them a '4'.

Next on the list were the two Italians: Riccardo Spinelli & Alberto Fellini. Otto had felt threatened by Riccardo's comments earlier and thought it very possible that the Major might have upset the Italian who subsequently 'engineered' his death. He ranked them a '5'.

The last names on the list were the elderly couple Hugh & Marjorie Davis. He thought them most unlikely suspects so ranked them a zero. He closed down the spreadsheet to await Penny. Glancing at his watch he mumbled to himself 'Hm, Penny is a long time' and felt that tinge of jealousy again. A shuffle behind prompted him to turn round quickly.

"Oh, Grim, it's you!"

"Found out who did it?" came the raspy response.

"Well, I've narrowed it down to six possible suspects of which three rank most likely."

Grime seated himself next to Otto and glanced at the notebook. "Do you have a list of your suspects on that device?"

Otto moved the pointer back to the file. "Would you like to see it?"

Grim looked away with disinterest and leaned back. "No thanks. Anyway, you're way off."

Otto felt a bit annoyed. "How would you know? You haven't even seen the list."

"I don't need to." Grim replied, matter-of-factly.

Otto turned to glare at death. "Okay, clever sticks. Why don't you just tell me who did it."

"I can't. I told you I couldn't. We aren't allowed to interfere in human life and death issues."

"Why not?"

"Okay, let's look at this logically. You come to me and ask 'Who did it, Grim?' I tell you and you go to the police and pass the information on. The police then say 'How do you know? What evidence do you have?' You then say 'Death told me'. 'Get lost sonny' they reply. Do I need to go on?"

Otto pondered Grim's reply. "Just a hint?"

"No."

At that moment, Penny appeared approaching Otto. "Otto! How are you getting on?"

"Okay. How did your date with Captain Sturmitz go?"

"Just fine. He is very charming."

"Did he ...?"

Penny laughed. "Try it on? No. He was called away to the bridge so we had to cut our evening short." She switched her attention to the notebook. "Do you have a suspect list?"

"Yes" replied Otto, disconsolately, and moved the pointer to open up the spreadsheet.

Penny scanned the list. "That looks good."

"But we can never prove who did it, let alone identify the person or persons responsible?"

"Well we certainly need to narrow it down."

Penny thought for a moment. "I think I'll have a go at talking to the suspects. Maybe I can find out whether or not they had any dealings with the Major and what their relationship, if any, entailed."

"Be my guest, but you need to be careful, especially with the Italians. I had the distinct impression that they were trying to warn me off. In

fact, they may all be on the defensive if you start questioning them again.”

“It’s okay. It’s fortunate that they think you are my assistant, so I can take a different approach.”

“Hm. Okay. Best of luck. Do you have any more suspects?”

“No, afraid not; but I may be able to find out more from Juan when I join him for dinner.”

Otto glanced up. “Of course. You having dinner with him as well?”

“It was a condition of the information he gave me ... us. I did tell you, Otto.”

“Yes, I’d forgotten. Do you think ...?”

“He’s a real charmer” Penny interrupted, “but I can handle him.”

“When ...?”

“Tomorrow evening. He is off-duty.”

“Where will you be joining him? In his cabin?”

Penny ignored Otto’s cynical comment and turned her attention back to the list. “I may as well start now. I will work down your list in the same order.” She got up and turned to walk away but first stepped back and gave him a peck on the cheek. “See you later, Otto.”

“Yes. See you later, Penny. Be careful.”

“I will, don’t worry.”

As she walked off, the rasping started again.

“You can’t get over her can you?”

“Oh go to hell, Grim” Otto replied sourly.

“I’d rather not thanks. A bit too hot. It dries my bones out.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I do; and why don’t you admit that you really fancy her. It’s so obvious.”

Otto turned to face the skull. “Is it?”

“Yes. One can see it in your eyes. In fact it’s amazing how one can read a person’s thoughts by looking into their eyes.”

“That’s exactly my opinion too.

Grim stared at Otto. "Go on; tell me what I'm thinking by looking into my eyes."

"You haven't got any."

"Oh, I forgot. Okay; my sockets."

"They're empty."

Grim turned away. "Oh don't be so pedantic."

"Sometimes, Grim, you speak as though you are normal."

Grim looked affronted. "Are you suggesting I'm abnormal."

Otto's pointless conversation with Grim continued as Penny sought out Ronald Fynn. She found him at the bar chatting to one of the other passengers about horse racing. He turned as she approached them.

"Ah! It's the gorgeous Penny. I was chatting with your sidekick a while ago. I think he was probing for my opinion of that guy who fell overboard but I don't know why. I told him that I thought the man was rude and arrogant and no great loss to society. I think he did us a favour before someone decided to top him."

Penny laughed. "You didn't fancy helping him on his way then?"

"Lord no. I think the guy was more likely to end up a very lonely old man by driving people away. That would be far more fitting than a quick death, don't you think?"

"I agree" added his companion. "I couldn't help being aware of his behaviour even though I never conversed with him."

"Will you join us for a drink? What will you have?" Ronald asked.

Penny quickly made her excuses. "No. I was just on my way to talk to a couple regarding the competition. Thanks, anyway."

Ronald feigned disappointment. "Oh, that's a pity. I was looking forward to your company. It's not often a man has the opportunity to chat up such an attractive woman as you."

Penny started to move off. "You flatter me."

"Oh, by the way."

"Yes?"

"I made some very scathing remarks about the Major to your sidekick. I hope he doesn't think I tipped the guy overboard."

He laughed and returned to his discussion with his companion on racing horses.

Penny eventually found Hans and Hilda Lodj sitting alone; Hilda with a cocktail and Hans with a pint of lager or some other alcoholic drink. She now remembered that it was them that she overheard talking about the Major's past earlier on.

"Hans and Hilda isn't it? You don't mind me addressing you informally I hope?"

"Not at all" replied Hans. "Please do join us." He looked about and managed to catch the attention of one of the waiters. "What will you have ..."

"Penny" Penny replied.

"... Penny?"

"Oh, thank you. Just a wine spritzer please".

The waiter, with a tray in hand, nodded and moved off to fetch the drink.

Penny opened the conversation by asking them about the cruise and moved on to the subject of the competition and their chat with Otto.

"A charming gentleman" Hilda commented.

From the rest of the conversation, it transpired that they had known the Major before realising that he was on the same cruise as them. Their intense dislike of the man emanated from an incident involving their daughter. They didn't understand how she could have been attracted to him but apparently he had tried to seduce her and defrauded her of most of her savings. She had suffered a mental breakdown and was only just beginning to recover. Unfortunately, they have no way of getting back at him.

"How could she have been so gullible?" Hilda exclaimed.

"I could have killed him" Hans spat out.

“But we had to be around to support our daughter” Hilda said.

“She is okay then ... while you are ... here ... on this cruise?”

“Yes. Thankfully, she has a very good friend who has been so supportive in helping her to recover. In fact she insisted that we have a break, which is why we are here.”

“When I saw him on this cruise, my blood boiled” Hans said.

Penny noticed his hands clenched hard in anger.

The conversation ended on more cheerful topics and Penny left, convinced that neither of them were capable of murder.

The next two were ‘Hawaian Man’ (Jon Pardoe) and ‘Redskull’ (Angus McDouglas). They happened to be seated together with their wives playing cards accompanied by lots of laughter. The number of glasses and empty packets of nibbles on the table suggested that all four had consumed too much alcohol. Penny thought that in their state they were more likely to let their guard down and maybe admit more than they realised. Hawaian Man was initially reticent but he later revealed that he was due to appear in court for libel. He was an investigative freelance journalist and was approached by a number of women, and indeed some husbands, regarding the Major’s comments and behaviour towards the opposite sex. He published warnings in local papers and on the internet. The Major didn’t hesitate to take him to court.

“You must have been really angry” Penny suggested.

“Admittedly I was rather scathing with my comments but I was optimistic about the outcome” Jon had replied. “Anyway, it’s too late now. He’s dead, thank God.”

“I would have stuck a knife in him” Angus growled, in his strong Scottish accent.

“Or pushed him off the deck” Penny responded laughingly.

“No, seriously” Angus added, “particularly, as he made lewd comments to Jenny and Sarah”.

Penny looked at him questioningly.

"Our wives" Jon said, and introduced the two ladies.

"Why don't you join us, Penny" Sarah asked. "You can tell us more about this competition your friend Otto was talking about."

Penny accepted and Jon went off to fetch her a drink.

The rest of the conversation went well, as the group were more interested in talking to Penny than drinking, so slowly sobered up. By the end of it, Penny had ruled out both men as murderers. That just left the Russians and Italians.

It did not take Penny long to find the two 'FSB agents', as described by Otto. They were sitting together at a table, each with a glass containing a clear liquid. They were obviously having a conversation but their heads never moved as they sat there looking straight ahead. As she approached them, the two men stood up.

"The one on the left said "Dobryi vecher, gospozha".

His companion followed up with "Good evening madam." Then added "You will please forgive Ivan; unless, of course, you speak Russian."

"No apology needed" Penny replied. "And, no, I don't speak Russian but am interested in learning your language."

"Yes, your comrade Otto told us you are a travel journalist" Ivan stated with hint of suspicion.

Igor: "Have you been to Russia?"

"No, but I do intend to visit your country after I have learnt a few phrases in Russian.

The men casted sideways glances at each other.

Ivan: "Your reports will be favourable ... of course."

"Well I would hope so, from the little I have heard from people who have been there."

Igor: "They are tourists or business people who don't ask too many questions."

Penny was not intimidated. "But many people don't really get to know the country and the people. I would hope to ..."

Ivan: "Russians do not like journalists who pry into their private lives."

"That would not be my intention. I am merely interested in where they might have travelled and their impressions of other countries."

Igor: "Russians do not like to travel to other countries. We have all that we need in Russia."

"I thought ..."

Ivan: "Those that do, will only visit friendly countries."

"Such as?"

Igor: "Belarus, Turkey, Cyprus, Iran, North Korea and many others of course."

Ivan (chuckling): "If you ask too many questions, people might think you are a spy."

Penny could sense that the two men found her very engaging so felt confident about digging deeper. "Funny you should say that ..."

Igor: "Funny? What is funny about being a spy?"

"I meant 'interesting', because my colleague Otto said that you thought the Major was a spy."

In spite of the fact that she could not see the Russians' eyes, Penny sensed some discomfort on their part.

Ivan: "He was in Moscow last year ..."

Igor: "... and was pestering our patriotic women and asking too many questions."

"Yes. I have spoken to many people who found the man very objectionable and rather insulting towards women."

Ivan: "It is as well that he has been eliminated."

'Eliminated?' thought Penny. "I thought he fell overboard."

Igor: "A figure of speech, as you say."

Ivan: "We are not impressed, but not surprised, that someone could be murdered on a Western cruise."

Igor: "It would not happen on a Russian cruise ship."

"Is that why you are not interested in the draw?"

Ivan: "That is correct. We will be disembarking at the next port."

'*Job done*' thought Penny. "Well, I'm sorry to hear that. You have both been very interesting to talk to."

Igor: "You must join us in a toast to your success."

Ivan quickly got up and made for the bar.

"What are we toasting with?" Penny asked Igor.

"Vodka" came the reply from Ivan, behind her. He handed her a glass of the clear liquid and, along with Igor, stood together with glasses in hand. The three of them raised the vessels to their mouths.

Igor: "Vasheh zdorovye.

Ivan: "Your health."

"Vasheh zdorovye. Your health" Penny echoed, and copied the two Russians by throwing the glass of vodka down her throat ... a mistake. She coughed and her eyes watered as the liquid seared her throat. The Russians noticed.

Ivan: Please accept our apologies Miss Hammond. We should have warned you that Russian vodka has a very high alcohol content.

"That's alright" Penny gasped, I'll be okay in a moment.

Igor: "Let us know when you decide to come to Moscow."

"Sure. I will. Can I have a contact number or address?"

Ivan: "No need. We will contact you."

"But how will you know when I have arrived?"

They did not reply but just sat back down looking at her through their dark glasses. Penny knew the answer of course, so just smiled, turned and walked away.

IX

Penny made her way to the bar to get glass of orange juice as an antidote to the vodka when she was intercepted by Otto.

"Hi Penny, how are you getting on? Do you ..."

"A moment, Otto. I need to get something to sooth my throat."

"She speaks like me" Grim rasped, standing behind Otto.

Otto glanced over at the Russians from whom he had seen Penny walking away. "Vodka, was it?"

"Yes; and boy, was it strong. It was like drinking ethyl alcohol."

"I doubt you have ever drunk ethyl alcohol."

"Oh don't be so pedantic, Otto. You know what I mean."

There was a slight pause while Penny sat down close to him and opened up the notebook again. Otto could smell her perfume (and ethyl alcohol) with a warm feeling being beside her. The sensation dissipated

"Anyway, going back to your list of suspects, I doubt it was Fynn and I don't think the Lodjs, Pardoe or McDouglas did it by the way they responded and what they said. I agree with you about the Russians, even though they intend to disembark at the next mooring."

"They do, do they?" Otto added. "That's interesting."

"If they were intending to deal with him, I think they were too late. Someone beat them to it."

"The Italians?"

"Maybe. I still need to talk with them; but first I have that dinner date with Juan, so it will have to wait."

Otto jealousy surfaced again. Penny will have had dinner dates with both the Captain and one of the ship's staff but not with him. Maybe he was expecting more from their relationship than he cared to admit; not that he was actively wooing her. Their relationship was professional, in a sense, and maybe that was how far it would go, or how far she wanted it to go.

"Are you okay, Otto?"

The question shook him out of his thoughts.

"You've gone very quiet."

He looked up into her eyes. Grim was right. Otto could see that she knew his feelings towards her and was waiting to hear what he was going to say, but he couldn't pluck up the courage to reply how he felt. The moment passed.

"I'd better go and get ready ... and ... will see you later. Okay?"

"Sure" Otto replied, imagining Penny and Juan chatting and laughing over a glass of wine.

Penny walked off.

"Oh dear" rasped Grim.

"What!"

"Till death do you part. Isn't that what you guys say?"

"Oh very funny."

Grim chuckled.

"Anyway, we are not together so there will be no 'parting' as you say."

"Huh! Don't get uppity with me. I was only trying to help bring you together. If she were dead I would have been interlocking bones with her ages ago."

Otto again pictured two skeletons lying together like a giant bone puzzle where the challenge was to work out how to separate them without breaking any of the bones. He couldn't help smiling to himself and chuckling.

"So what's funny about that? It's no different from you two lying together."

"Except that our bones wouldn't be interlocked."

Grim turned away and cradled his skull in his right hand with his elbow resting on his femur. "Sometimes, Otto, I can't make you out. I'm sure that one day you will be the death of me."

Otto shook his head.

Death lifted up his hands, palms up. "What?"

"You and your deathly humour."

Grim's teeth clattered as he chuckled, but noticed that Otto seemed deep in thought. "What's up?"

"I hope Penny will be okay."

"Don't worry. I'll keep an eye on her."

"And how are you ..."

But Death had disappeared.

As Penny finished changing into a very alluring red dress, there was a knock on her cabin door. She opened it to see Juan standing there.

"Juan! Just in time. You can help me put this necklace on."

Juan just stood there wide eyed looking her up and down. "¡uau!" was all he could utter for a few moments and then complimented her. "Te ves encantadora, Penny."

Although she couldn't speak Spanish she gathered it was a compliment and turned around holding the necklace clasp behind her neck. Once he had fixed the neckless she turned back to face him arranging her long hair behind her. "Ready?"

"Of course." He stepped back to allow her to come out and closed the door behind her. "This way please."

Penny walked beside Juan as he led her to one of the lower decks and stopped outside his cabin. He opened the door and indicated for her to enter. She found herself in a large and, what she considered, a sumptuously decorated cabin.

"This is your cabin, Juan."

"Quite modest, really. It's just that I have served on this ship for many years and, let's say, acquired a good reputation for looking after our passengers, which have included many celebrities and people of influence."

"I am impressed and, if I may say, agree with the high opinion of your consideration, help and politeness."

"I thank you for that, Penny." He led her to a table laid out for dinner and pulled out a chair for her. "Please".

Death had followed them in and flopped himself on a sofa by a long window overlooking the River Danube."

"Can I get you a drink?"

"A white wine please."

"Sweet or dry?"

"Dry please."

Juan poured two glasses of wine for them and sat down opposite her.

"You are a very beautiful woman, Penny."

"Thank you, Juan, but I'm nothing special."

"But you are and I feel honoured to be able to entertain you tonight."

There were two plate covers on the table which he proceeded to lift, revealing two dishes which appeared to be chicken.

"Pollo al Ajillo" Juan said. "A traditional dish from ..."

"Andalucia" Penny finished.

Juan looked a little surprised. "How did you ...?"

"Could it be because you are from Andalucia?"

Penny noticed a momentary expression of suspicion on Juan's face just for a split second before he smiled.

"And how did you know that?"

"Your Captain told me; and, if you don't mind me mentioning it, I understand you had a rather tragic childhood."

"Yes, my mother died not long after I was born and I was adopted by a lovely couple who took me to live in Asturias – a wonderful part of the country. You must go there sometime ... or, I can always take you to see the magnificent scenery there including the Picos de Europa."

She smiled then turned serious. "How sad about your mother. What did she die of? Sorry, if I am being intrusive please tell me."

Juan purposely ignored the question. "Please help yourself to vegetables, Penny."

He obviously did not want to talk about his mother or the circumstances of her death, so Penny decided it best to drop the

subject. He did, however, make one comment with a trace of tears in his eyes. "I don't really remember much about her other than that she was a beautiful woman and, I am told, a lovely mother."

They both helped themselves to vegetables.

"Now tell me about yourself, Penny."

The conversation was animated and, at times, humorous when Penny described various incidents during her childhood, college days and early careers. It wasn't so much boasting but it was obvious that many boys and men were constantly after her and she always managed to get the better of them. Juan's early life seemed quite dull by comparison but he had been determined to make a success of his career in memory of his mother, of whom he learned a great deal from his foster parents. The subject of his mother's death and very early childhood never came up again but Penny couldn't help wondering about the gap in his life that he didn't want to talk about. He was always evasive when the subject came up. Something painful happened. What was it? Then there was the instance when she mentioned the Major's death. [This was the moment when the grim reaper became alert and sat up on the couch, observing and listening.]

"I was not on deck myself when the incident took place" he insisted, "but I did serve some drinks to some of the passengers who were there around that time." He paused. "That is how I remember who was on deck, like yourselves for example."

"Lier" Death rasped loudly.

Juan moved his head slightly. "Did you feel something?"

Penny looked about. "No. What was it?"

"It felt like ... a puff of icy cold air ... as though death was stalking us."

Penny laughed. "So why would death be stalking us. I know he paid a brief visit when the Major died but ...", she put a hand over his on the table, "... I hope he doesn't take you."

Juan responded by turning his hand over, lifted hers and kissed the back of it. "That is a nice thing to say, Penny." He paused a moment before taking her hand in both of his. "You know, Penny, you are the most beautiful woman I have ever met."

Penny withdrew her hand slowly. "That's very kind of you to say that, Juan, but you have already said that your mother was a real beauty herself ... and must have attracted many an admirer."

Then, a strange thing happened. Juan's face lost its smile as he took both hands off the table and stood up. Before he turned round with his back to her she was sure she noticed a look of anger on his face. He walked over to where he had left the bottle of wine.

"More wine, Penny?"

There was also a slight sharpness to his voice. She was about to ask if she had said something wrong but he shrugged slightly and turned back with the smile on his face and holding the bottle of wine.

"Just half a glass please, Juan. I don't want to get tipsy."

He filled the glass up. "Oh come on, Penny. It will help you to relax ..."

She felt a trifle annoyed. "I am perfectly relaxed, thank you."

"... make you more ..."

Penny was suddenly on her guard but kept her response friendly.

"More what, Juan?"

His response was to pull his chair up to hers sitting close to her. He took both her hands and gently pulled her towards him, moving closer.

"My dear Penny, I think I'm ..."

Penny pulled her arms back. "No, Juan. Don't say anymore." She raised herself from her seat, dropping the napkin on the table. "I think I had better be going."

Juan stood up and grasped her by the shoulders.

Death stepped over alongside them. "Leave her alone."

Penny's glass toppled over, spilling the wine. Juan quickly released her and put his hand on his cheek as though someone had just

slapped him. Penny saw a startled look on his face as he looked down at the fallen glass and spilt wine. She suddenly felt sorry for him.

“What, Juan? What’s wrong?”

He was shaking slightly and crossed himself. “Death is stalking me” he stuttered. “I can feel it. That icy cold blast again.”

“Juan?”

“I think maybe you are right. It is best that you go. Please accept my apologies.”

He looked at her with a pleading expression. “You won’t ...”

She placed her hand on his arm. “You are a very kind and thoughtful man, Juan. You will do well and I wish you luck in your career.”

She released his arm. “Thank you for a lovely evening. I will let myself out.”

As the door was closed behind her, Juan sat down with his head in his hands. “Oh madre, ¿qué he hecho?”

As it was late, Penny made her way back to her cabin thinking about the Major’s death and Juan’s fear of death. ‘*Death on the Danube*’ she thought to herself. She glanced into the bar as she passed the guest lounge and saw Otto sitting by himself, drinking. She was about to carry on to her cabin, but Otto must have sensed her presence because he looked up and stood up. He had obviously been waiting for her so she entered the lounge and joined him on one of the sofas.

“Drink?” he asked.

“No thanks. Just off to bed. I’m shattered.”

Otto looked concerned. “Are you okay? How did it go?”

“Fine” she replied. “An interesting evening ... and he was very gentlemanly.”

Otto’s expression relaxed. “Oh. Good. Glad to hear it.”

There was a long pause before Otto asked quietly “Did he say much? Anything more about the Major’s death?”

Penny wasn't really listening but looking down with her mind preoccupied thinking about the Major and Juan's fear again. "Death on the Danube" she mumbled.

This time it was Otto who behaved strangely. He looked at her with his mouth and eyes wide open and, without thinking, said "How did you know? Have you seen him?"

Penny looked up at Otto. "What? Have I seen who?"

Otto realised his faux par and, at the same time, felt a bony phalange poke him in the ribs.

"Idiot" rasped Grim.

"Ouch!"

Penny stood up and looked down at Otto. "What's up with you, Otto? You are behaving rather oddly."

"Sorry. Cramp."

Penny looked a bit irritated. "It's late and I really must get to bed. I'll aim to catch up with the Italians tomorrow; then we can review our findings and hopefully identify the most likely murderer."

"Then what?"

"Tomorrow's decision. Goodnight Otto."

"Goodnight Penny."

She walked off, leaving Otto a bit deflated.

"Serves you right" Grim sniggered.

"Maybe I'm being a bit too pushy."

"Yes. Just maybe."

Otto raised himself from his seat and made his way to his cabin.

It was a strange dream. One minute he was standing on the deck of a ship; the next minute he was falling towards a watery grave. Someone threw a rope down, which he managed to grab, and slowly pulled him back up. He managed to clamber back over the deck rail and stood up to thank the figure next to him, whom he presumed pulled him up. The figure was in a long black robe with a cowl that hid its face. The figure pulled the cowl back revealing a skull.

"I'm not ready to die yet!" Otto exclaimed. "I have to see Penny."

"Then get up" the skull responded and grabbed his shoulders between its phalanges.

Otto woke up feeling something bony grabbing his shoulder. He opened his eyes, staring into a skull. "Death?"

"Grim to you" the skull answered.

"What's the matter?"

"Penny's up and will shortly be making her way to breakfast. You'd better hurry if you want to join her."

Otto glanced at the bedside clock radio. It was 6.30. He leapt out of bed, showered, shaved and dressed as quickly as he could and made his way to the dining room. He met up with Penny entering the room with a few other early birds. She looked a bit surprised when she saw him.

"Otto! Good morning. What a coincidence. Anyone would think you knew that I was going to take an early breakfast."

"I couldn't sleep (in fact he had slept like a log). Did you sleep well?"

"Yes thanks. Still, maybe we can review the suspect list before ..."

They had sat down at one of the smaller tables and she was staring at the entrance.

"What's up?" Otto turned to follow her gaze and saw the two Italians entering.

The view was suddenly blocked by a waiter. "Coffee? Tea? Sir, Madame."

Penny looked up, recognising the voice. "Juan! Lovely to see you."

He bowed. "Lovely to see you too, Penny. You slept well?"

"Yes, thank you."

She turned to Otto. "Oh, Otto, this is Juan who has been helping us with our little project."

"Pleased to meet you, Juan."

Juan switched his attention to Otto. "And you sir. Would you like tea or coffee?"

"Yes, black coffee please."

"Of course; and you, Penny?"

Otto felt that he was being a bit too familiar, using her Christian name. There was also something familiar about Juan that reminded him of someone but a face or name wouldn't come to mind.

"Also black coffee, please."

"Certainly. "Would you like a cooked breakfast?"

"We'll have a look at the menu."

"Of course. I will be back shortly."

Otto thought he would go for the Continental.

Throughout their breakfast, Penny made side glances at the two Italians whom, she noticed, were continually talking to each other whilst frequently glancing over at Penny and Otto. On their last coffee, Otto suggested they retire to the lounge, or preferably either of their cabins, to review the list of suspects.

"Why don't you go ahead, Otto. I think the two Italians want to talk to me. My bet is that if you go now, they will come over and join me."

Otto felt a bit put out, and showed it. "Er, okay; if that's what you think." He got up. "I'll see you later."

Penny thought she had better to try and cheer him up. "Yes, Otto. You will."

As he reached the exit, Otto glanced back and noticed the two Italians get up and make their way to where Penny was sitting. *'She was right'* he thought to himself. *'This should be interesting.'*

Penny watched the two men as they approached her. They were wearing the same dark suits, white shirts and bow ties. When they reached her table, the shorter one spoke.

"Good-a morning Miss-a Hammond. May-a we join-a you?"

"Sure," she replied, "be my guests."

"I am-a Riccardo Spinelli and-a thees is-a my colleague Alberto Fellini."

"Pleased to meet you Mr Spinelli" she responded, and switched her attention to his colleague "and you Mr Fellini."

Riccardo took Penny's left hand and kissed the back of it.

"I am-a honoured to meet-a such a charming and beautiful woman."

"Thank you for your compliment Mr Spinelli."

"Riccardo, please-a; and my colleague – Alberto."

"How can I help you ... Riccardo? I presume you have a reason why you have come to talk with me."

"Very perceptive, Miss Hammond, and quite-a understandable."

Alberto leant over and whispered something in Riccardo's ear. Riccardo nodded and then waved his hand.

"Please excuse-a Alberto being rude-a in whispering in your company but-a he suggests we perhaps-a could take a walk-a on the deck for some privacy on a delicate matter."

"Of course" penny agreed, raising herself from her chair. "I understand."

As they left the dining room and walked along the deck, avoiding other passengers, Penny asked "So what is this sensitive matter you wish to discuss, Riccardo?"

At first he seemed a bit lost to know where to start, but Alberto took over.

"We understand that-a you are conducting a ...er... survey?"

"Yes."

"... about-a passengers' impressions of this cruise."

"Correct."

"And that-a your colleague, Meesta Granthum is-a helping you, yes?"

"That is correct, and the feedback is generally encouraging. I believe he has already spoken with you. Did he offer you the option of the draw?" Penny felt stupid asking the question when Riccardo waved it aside.

"How-a can I er put it" Riccardo pondered out loud whilst stroking his chin.

"Is there a problem ... Riccardo?" Penny glanced at the two men in turn.

"There need-a not be a problem, no?"

"Then what do you mean exactly?"

Penny surprised herself how calm she felt with a potential veiled threat that she knew was coming.

"Let-a us say that he was asking some-a, what you might call-a, sensitive questions."

"I do of course advise him of the questions he needs to ask but I need to have some idea of any 'sensitive' issues he needs to avoid."

Alberto joined in. "He was asking questions about the man-a who ... fell overboard."

"Oh, the Major."

"Si."

"He was the subject of a lot of gossip and, it appears, was not liked by many of the passengers due to his sarcastic and hurtful comments. So what is the issue?"

Alberto continued. "The man is known to us and he made many enemies."

"Right."

"So much so that many people wanted him ... how can I put it ...?"

"Out of the way?"

"Si."

"We believe he may not have just 'fallen' overboard."

Penny pretended to look astounded. "You mean he might have been pushed?"

Riccardo responded. "As I er said to Meesta Granthum. One should not ask-a too many questions. It can lead to, let us-a say, unfortunate events."

"You mean an accident?"

Neither Riccardo nor Alberto responded.

"I had no idea the Major was such a controversial character" she lied.

"Can you elaborate a little please?"

The two men glanced at each other and Riccardo nodded for Alberto to respond.

"This 'Major' as you call him is in fact Carl Roberto Aloysius Peterson, probably better known by his initials; no?"

"R-i-g-h-t" Penny responded slowly, trying not to laugh.

Alberto continued.

"Meesta Peterson has been around for a long time and wherever he er goes he is trouble, as you say. We know that quite recently he upset a lot of influential people in Moscow, you know."

"Which is why we think the FSB were after him" Penny interjected.

"Ah, we-a thought as much" Riccardo added. "We assumed that-a was the reason they are on this boat."

"Not for long though" Penny said. "They are disembarking when we next dock."

Ricardo nodded. "It seems that-a someone saved them the bother."

"We also know", continued Alberto, "that he was in Buenos Aires and just managed to get out of the country before local gangs paid him a visit."

"So what was he doing in all these locations?"

"Scams, ponzi schemes and always targeting innocent woman, some of whom he left pregnant. In fact there was well known instance many years ago when he was known to be in Spain; Andalucia I think."

Penny was suddenly very alert. "Oh, right. What happened?"

"He made a young girl pregnant who sadly committed suicide leaving a poor orphaned child."

"How dreadful. What happened to the baby?"

"We don't know."

"You seem to know a lot about him."

"He was in Sicily not so long ago and upset some of the family. We have been looking for him for some time, so his demise is somewhat fortuitous."

Penny was now convinced that these two men had disposed of the Major, but could she get them to admit it.

"So, ..."

Riccardo now took over again. "Now-a Miss Hammond you will have to excuse us, but allow-a me to leave-a you with some advice, no? You will not-a relate to anyone the conversation that-a has just taken place-a. We only agreed-a to provide-a you with some background to so that you would no longer need-a to pursue enquiries related to the Major. Now that he is-a no longer with us, the family can relax. So, no more-a questions please. Forget-a about the man. His life is not worth bothering about. Understood?"

"Perfectly Mr Spinelli ... Riccardo."

"That is good-a. You are a beautiful and intelligent woman who has a great-a future ahead of her. Let it stay that way, no?"

"Yes Riccardo."

The two men got off their seats and wandered off. Penny realised she was shaking a little. *'Talk about veiled threats'* she thought. Otto suddenly appeared and sat down next to her.

"Are you okay, Penny. You look a bit pale. What did the Italians say?"

Penny was expressionless. "Nothing much."

"I don't believe it. Did they warn you off or something?"

"Yes."

"So do you think they did it?"

"Likely, but we have to drop it now."

"But ..."

"We have to drop it, Otto."

"Okay, I get the message – too dangerous."

Penny looked a bit uncertain; deep in thought."

"What's wrong, Penny."

"Something is niggling me."

"Such as?"

"It's just that ... they didn't actually admit to murdering the Major."

"Well they wouldn't, would they."

"It's the phrasing Riccardo used – saying that his death was 'fortuitous'. I don't think they did it."

"You're confusing me now, Penny. If they didn't do it, who did?"

"I don't know; but ... it's something they made a point of saying."

"Go on."

"The Major's philandering lifestyle resulted in at least one death."

"Oh; whose?"

"A young woman in Andalusia whom he made pregnant and dumped. They said she committed suicide but didn't know what happened to the child."

"How does that help us?"

She stood up and started walking back and forth. "It's what Captain Sturmitz said that backs up what Riccardo told me."

"Which is? Come on, Penny, the suspense is killing me."

"I wish" muttered Grim, standing between them with his skull moving between Otto and Penny as they conversed. Grim was getting quite fond of Otto and was longing for him to die. Even better if Penny copped it as well; the couple could then have a skeletal wedding. He could ask his friend Mephistopheles if he could do a Bar-B-Q and they could always finish and enjoy a Walpurgisnacht just like Faust did many years ago. Meph's, as he is known as by his closest friends, could also supply the drinks – Meths. They would end up blind drunk but it would be fun.

His fantasy thoughts were interrupted by Otto trying to make him pay attention by poking him in his ribcage for a change. Penny was outlining what Captain Sturmitz had told her about Juan.

"Apparently, his mother committed suicide when he was very young. He also told me that she was seduced by a philanderer who made false promises. When she became pregnant, he dumped her and disappeared. As a result, she lost her job and lived in poverty trying to bring up her baby boy. Fortunately, a middle-aged couple who had tried to help her, adopted the boy and brought him up as their own; and, would you believe, all this happened in Andalucia?"

"So Juan is her son."

"Yes, and most likely the Major is his father. In fact, things that Juan himself told me concur with what Captain Sturmitz told me."

"Can we prove any of this? Surely Juan wouldn't have known or even recognised the Major."

"DNA would confirm the relationship but how could he have known he was his father."

"That's it!" Otto exclaimed.

"What?"

"Something that's been bothering me since breakfast."

"Which is?"

"Interestingly, when Juan approached us at breakfast I was sure that there was something familiar about him. Now it has hit me. He reminded me of the Major. Just an observation of course but we need something to link the two of them."

The three of them sat pondering what to do next. Grim was drumming his phalanges on the table which irritated Otto, but he could hardly tell him to shut up. It was so frustrating being the only one who could see and communicate with Grim. When Death actually exclaimed in his raspy voice "I am a witness to the murder!", all Otto could do was shrug.

Penny noticed. "You look fed up."

"You could try bluff" Grim suggested.

Otto picked up on it. "We could try bluff."

"Yes, but he could call our bluff" Penny replied.

Otto thought about what Grim said and decided it was worth a try.

"We can tell him there was a witness."

"But there wasn't one ... was there!"

"The Grim Reaper."

Penny laughed. "Oh sure. There he was in his long black robe, carrying a scythe and just happened to be wandering along the deck when Juan tipped the Major over the deck rail."

Otto didn't reply and just sat there expressionless.

"You're serious. You mean it, don't you?"

"Death was staring him in the face."

Penny laughed again. "You are actually going to tell him that death was a witness. I ..." She suddenly stopped.

"What."

"That's exactly what he said."

"What?"

"Not his exact words, but twice he said that death was stalking him."

Otto, of course, knew that Grim was in Juan's cabin with them.

"That's interesting. I think we should try that approach and see how he responds."

Penny leant back in her chair. "Okay. I'll arrange to meet him again and we'll take it from there. Meanwhile, I'm off to work on my report about this cruise." She got up, gave Otto a peck on the cheek and walked off."

"Okay, Penny. I'll see you later." He decided to go and collect a book from his cabin to read on the deck with glass of sangria.

XI

He did not see Penny again until lunch time. He sat at the usual table with the elderly couple Len & Ann, the middle-aged couple Heather & Gwyn and Ronald, expecting to be joined by Penny. Unfortunately, she was late and the two places normally occupied by her and, formerly, the Major were taken by Riccardo and Alberto, who insisted on sitting either side of Otto.

"Good-a day to you all" Riccardo said, as he sat down.

The other passengers all responded with '*Good days*' and '*Good afternoons*'.

"You are-a enjoying your-a cruise, yes?"

"Yes" they all responded. Some looked a bit nervous, whilst Otto felt a bit uncomfortable wedged between the two of them.

Riccardo noticed. "My-a apologies, ladies and gentlemen. I am-a Riccardo and-a thees ees-a my-a colleague Alberto."

Each of the others introduced themselves and visibly relaxed. While this was happening, Otto saw Penny enter the room and shrugged as she approached their table. Seeing there were no spare seats, she joined one of the other groups.

Most of the time, during the meal, the two Italians conversed with Otto in low voices, occasionally bringing other guests into the conversation which centred on the survey Penny and Otto were conducting. They did touch briefly on the Major's death as, from the comments they were making, Otto gradually began to agree with Penny's opinion that the two of them were unlikely to have murdered the Major. Heather and Gwyn became quite animated, asking questions about Italy and Sicily in particular.

"Please" Alberto had commented, "look us up if you do visit our island. We will give you a tour you will not forget."

They all wondered what that meant

Otto was glad when the meal was over and Riccardo and Alberto excused themselves.

"Mafia friends of yours?" Ronald asked sarcastically.

"Partners in crime" Otto answered, aware that Penny was approaching as everyone laughed.

"Hello Penny" Len called out.

"Sorry you weren't able to join us" Ann added. "We had those two Italians with us. Creepy."

"They're quite harmless" Penny reassured them. "Well dressed and very polite."

The others all nodded in agreement.

"Now excuse me if I drag Otto away."

"Your fancy man?" Gwyn said.

"Stop it" Heather added. "Don't embarrass them."

"It's alright" Penny responded. "We have business to discuss."

"The survey?" Ronald asked, insinuating something different.

"Exactly" Penny replied pointedly. "Otto?"

Otto got up and the two of them left the others gossiping amongst themselves.

"I've arranged to join Juan tonight ... in his cabin. He was a bit surprised, following our last encounter, ..."

"What happened?"

"Nothing that I couldn't handle." She smiled and nudged him.

"Anyway, stop looking out for me. You have a girl here who can look after herself."

"Sorry."

"Right. I will be going to his cabin at ten o'clock tonight when he finishes his shift. Leave it five to ten minutes before joining us. We will take it from there."

Otto nodded. "Okay. Let's wish us luck, or possibly suffer for a wrongful accusation."

After Penny had left, Otto had sat in his cabin thinking about the confrontation with Juan. What if it all went wrong and why would he admit killing the Major even if he did do it. Otto was beginning to regret their decision. Perhaps he should go and find Penny now to cancel the arrangement. He picked up his cabin keys ready to leave. "Will you just sit down and relax." The Grim Reaper was laying on his back on Otto's bed with his phalanges behind his skull. "It will soon be all over."

Otto glanced at him. "What are you implying? That Juan will admit he is guilty or that he might take us to court for accusing him of murder with no firm evidence?"

"I've had enough of this" Grim rasped, rising from the bed. "I really need to get back to work. I've just had a text from the departmental head telling me that there are departed souls piling up and why am I wasting my time helping a couple of the un-dead to solve a crime."

"The *un-dead*?" echoed Otto. "You make it sound like we are a couple of zombies. Anyway, you didn't have to hang around."

"Huh! That's rich! After all the help and support I have given you; not that I expect gratitude. A 'thanks' wouldn't go amiss."

Otto felt guilty. "Sorry; I didn't mean that. I do appreciate what you've done and ... yes, sometimes I wish we'd never started acting as detectives and left it to the politzei."

"Looking at it philosophically, it's only another death. People are born, people die and then they join our community to start a new career. If they perform well, they might get promoted and be issued with a scythe."

Otto looked Grim up and down. "What about the ... er ... ragged black robe?"

Grim chuckled, which sounded more like someone choking. He pulled the cloak around his skeleton. "Well tailored, don't you think?"

"That's a matter of opinion."

"Well, plenty of your people go around dressed like this."

"Sadly, yes. Many are homeless people; some are called tramps."

"We thought you all called it 'designer' clothing."

Otto chuckled and glanced at the clock by the bed. "Oops, time to go. Wish us luck."

"I'll come along if you don't mind. You never know; I could put the fear of death in him." He cackled one of his laughs.

Otto laughed. "You do that. It might be the make-or-break of him."

Otto and Grim made their way to Juan's cabin. On reaching the door they could hear animated conversation. Otto knocked on the door.

===== " =====

At ten o'clock, Penny had knocked on Juan's cabin door. Juan opened it and stepped back.

"Please come in, Penny." He closed the door. "So, what did you want to see me about?" He smiled. "Our relationship?"

"No" she hesitated. "Something ... delicate."

"That sounds ominous. How can I help?"

"It concerns your past and what happened on this cruise a couple of nights ago."

Juan tensed up. "Penny, I told you that I do not wish to talk about my past and it is none of your business. Also, what has that got to do with whatever happened the other evening – which is what exactly?"

Penny sensed the tension that was building up in him. '*Come on Otto*' she was thinking to herself. '*Hurry up!*'

Juan started towards her. "Now I know. You think I killed the Major. Don't you?" he added in a raised voice.

Penny was getting nervous but was saved by a knock on the door. Juan switched his attention to it.

"Who can that be? I asked not to be disturbed."

The knock was repeated, but louder. Juan stepped quickly over to it and threw it open to see Otto standing there.

"Yes? What do you want? I am busy."

"I think the three of us have something to discuss" Otto replied, as he walked in, closed the door and stood next to Penny.

"And what might that be?"

"The Major's death."

Juan stood there dumbfounded for a moment. "I think you had both better leave."

"We have a witness" Otto said.

"Impossible" he replied. "I know exactly who was on deck at the time of the Major's fall and where everyone was. No one could possibly have seen ..." He suddenly realised he was digging a hole for himself.

Penny got up and stepped over to Juan, taking his hands into hers.

"Juan, we know all about your mother, how she was seduced by the Major and left penniless with her baby. We know she struggled to cope and realised that it would be better for you to be looked after by a childless couple she knew. So, in depths of depression she took her own life."

Otto continued. "Speaking with other passengers, particularly the Russians and the Italians, we found out that the Major wrecked many lives in many countries and that these people among others were out to get him until someone did the deed for them."

Juan stood speechless, not knowing how to respond. "But ..."

"What we don't know is how you knew the Major was your father"

Otto said. "But I did detect a slight resemblance."

Juan calmed down. "I, also, overheard people talking about him and realised that this evil man was indeed my father and ... felt like killing him."

"Which you did" Penny said; then tried a bit more bluff. "We understand that the politzei are still investigating the Major's death and will be taking DNA samples from everyone on board."

Juan went on the defensive. "How would that help?"

"There were marks on his body. I saw them" Otto said.

"But his skin was covered up, so ... anyway, who is this witness you spoke about who claims to have seen me push him overboard?"

"Grim" Otto replied.

Penny looked across with a questioned look on her face. '*Grim?*' she thought. '*Who the heck is Grim? What is Otto playing at?*'

Juan looked puzzled as well. "Who is this Grim? I don't recall any passengers calling themselves *Grim*."

"That is not the person's real name of course. Call it a skeleton name. The person wishes to remain incognito for the time being ... until the politzei arrive."

Juan became panicky. "The politzei! No. Please. I can explain." He sat down and put his head in his hands.

Penny and Otto stood either side of him with one hand on each of his shoulders and waited for him to explain.

"You are right of course. That evil man was wholly responsible for my mother's death; that I know. She died a miserable death and, so I am told, pleaded for the Virgin Mary's forgiveness for abandoning me; but she knew of a childless couple who would after me and keep the memory of her alive. This, they did; and made sure that I would eventually find out who the evil man, my father, was."

"So when did you find out that the Major was your father?" Penny asked.

"I saw the passenger list and found out who it was. When I saw him I instinctively knew that he was my father. My suspicions were confirmed when I observed his behaviour and what others, particularly what the Italians, Russians and Dutch, were saying about him."

Penny and Otto were now feeling sympathetic towards the man and beginning to regret having extracted his confession.

"Believe me, we do understand, Juan" Otto said.

He looked up, glancing at each of them. "So, what are you going to do? Will you notify the politzei?"

Otto and Penny looked at each other and replied in unison. "No. You and your dear mother have suffered enough."

"The Major had an unfortunate accident" Otto stated, "seeing that he was drunk and leaning precariously over the deck rail."

Juan was obviously still worried. "But ... but what about the witness? This person called Grim."

"Death moves in mysterious ways" Otto stated.

Penny once again looked at Otto with a questioning look. "Isn't the phrase '*God moves in mysterious ways*'?"

"In this instance, no" replied Otto.

"He is right" agreed Juan. "Ever since the Major's ... er accident I have felt I was being stalked by death."

"It's what we call *The Grim Reaper*" Otto said.

"Ah" Juan said. "That's who you meant when you said there was a witness – that Death or God was the witness to my deed."

Otto noticed Grim glide over to lean over Juan, who shivered slightly.

"Once again, I feel that death is stalking me."

"Exactly" Otto confirmed and thinking '*You're right there*'.

Penny was wondering what the Grim Reaper had to do with their conversation and how it come into the conversation; but it seemed to have the right effect as Juan visibly relaxed.

"So, are you saying that you will not be telling the politzei what we have just talked about?"

"That is correct" Otto replied.

"Let's say that this conversation never took place" Penny added. She got up, gave Juan a peck on his cheek and headed towards the door.

"Goodnight Juan. We'll see you at breakfast no doubt."

Otto followed Penny out. "Goodnight Juan."

Juan was speechless. Once his visitors were gone, he sat down and cried. "Has sido vengado, mi queridísima madre".

Penny and Otto made their way back to their own cabins.

"Do you think we made the right decision, Penny?"

"Do you, Otto?"

"Yes" he replied without hesitation.

"So do I. The Major will be no great loss to society."

"And if Juan hadn't dealt with him, I know others who would have."

Penny smiled and nodded her head slowly. "And I think I know who you mean."

As they reached the deck where her cabin was located, she kissed him on the cheek. "See you in the morning, Otto."

As their eyes met, Otto took her head in his hands and kissed her on the lips. Not expecting it, she stepped back with a surprised look on her face. "Otto!"

Otto felt embarrassed. "Er ... sorry, Penny. I ... I didn't mean to do that."

She smiled. "Yes you did ... and it was a nice surprise. Goodnight, Otto."

She walked off down the corridor and turned to wave at him as he watched her open her cabin door.

Otto returned to his own cabin thinking about the kiss and her response wondering, albeit hoping, that their relationship might develop.

Grim was laying on his bed. "Does this mean that I can get back to work at last?" he rasped.

"Did we do the right thing?" he asked, ignoring Grim's question.

"You're the best judge of that, Otto. It's no skin off my back the decision you have just made." He glanced at the mobile he was carrying. "In fact the committee should be interviewing the Major right now."

"What will happen to him? Will he join your skeleton staff?"

"Most unlikely. If he did, he would receive a lot of ribbing."

Otto glanced at death's ribs which lay exposed as he lay on the bed. He yawned. "Can I have my bed back now Grim?"

“If you insist” the Grim Reaper replied, climbing off. “I was just getting comfortable.” He headed towards the cabin door.

“Goodnight Otto.”

“Goodnight Grim.”

After breakfast the following morning, Penny suggested they walk together along the deck.

"Well, Otto, it's getting near the end of our journey when we go our separate ways."

Otto's heart sank. "Will we ... er ... see each other again?"

She glanced at him and saw the disappointment on his face. She stopped to face him and took his hands into hers. "Otto."

"Yes, Penny?"

"I really have enjoyed your company and have had great fun with you over the last few days. I **would** like to see you again and have grown quite fond of you but I'm not yet ready for anything serious. I hope you understand."

Otto brightened up. "Of course, Penny. You are a very attractive woman and I can see how men have fallen for you; but it's not just about looks. You have such a lovely and disarming personality. Maybe I was expecting too much from a chance meeting; but having worked closely with you I felt that maybe there was some chemistry between us."

"I do agree that there was some molecular bonding but the electrons are whizzing around too fast. Although your sense of humour is a bit strange at times, I do find you funny. I also like your carefree attitude to life."

"I think that happened after my accident."

"Oh? What accident was that?"

"Oh, just a motoring accident."

"Were you badly injured?"

"Not particularly as it turned out; but I at one stage I thought my time had come when I had a brush with death – the Grim Reaper."

"Gosh! That must have been scary."

"Not really. In fact he tends to follow me around. Look what happened on this cruise."

Penny laughed. "You need to take care. Maybe he wants you to join him."

"He does."

"Now you're spooking me, Otto. Let's go and have a drink."

===== " =====

With the cruise finally over and, following the usual farewells to the Captain and crew, Otto and Penny collected their luggage and disembarked. At the end of the gangway Penny turned around and gave Otto a big hug and kiss.

"I am staying here in Oltenita for a couple of days, Otto, and have a taxi waiting. Look after yourself and we will meet again no doubt."

Otto would like to have suggested keeping her company but realised inwardly that it was not the right time. "Yes, I will look forward to it."

She was just about to walk off but stopped. "Oh, what's your mobile number, Otto? I will send you a message so that you will also have mine. We must keep in touch."

Otto felt better for that and gave her his number. She immediately sent him a text.

"There. That's done. Let me know how you get on."

"Likewise" Otto replied and gave her a kiss. "Bye, Penny."

"Bye, Otto." She walked off, waving.

Death was standing next to him. "She'll be the death of you."

"I'm not suicidal, Grim, if that's what you're implying."

"Just wishful thinking" came the rasping reply.

"Haven't you got a job to go to?"

It was later when Otto picked up a newspaper and read about the accidental death of a tourist on a Danube cruise ship.

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