

I. HEADING HOME

Thursday, September 27, 1928 – S.S. Malolo - two days east of Honolulu

“**W**hat the hell?” Zephyr Davies stopped short, aborting his evening stroll along the swaying walkways of the S.S. Malolo. After a tumultuous few weeks fleeing the Orient, he was in desperate need of tranquility. Mercifully, the sultry evening was conspiring with a calm sea to soothe his spirit and portray nature as his benevolent companion – now the spell was shattered. On a lower deck he caught sight of his Chinese friend, No Sin, being taunted by three sailors. For a moment Davies thought that the lad's bullying brothers had somehow sneaked aboard the ship, but the burly white men who had surrounded the slender youth were hardly relatives.

“May I ask what's going on here?” Davies called out as he descended the metal stairway that led to where the men were gathered like jays, massing to peck a weaker bird to death.

“We have it handled, if you don't mind,” the tallest and most aggressive of the sailors said with a measured politeness that was reserved for white passengers. Turning back to No Sin he barked, “What cabin are you staying in?”

“I, uh.,,”

“Just thought you'd hitch a ride? So sorry, no cabin, no ride'ee.” He winked at his mates, who smiled back.

“He's staying in cabin thirty-four on C deck,” Davies said.

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“Thank you for the information, sir, but I don't think this concerns you.” The officer's back remained turned toward Davies.

“Actually, it does,” Davies said pointing to a half dozen dress shirts that were hanging from a length of twine and billowing in the wind. “Those are my shirts.” Apparently No Sin had committed the unspeakable act of stringing up a clothesline in order to dry Davies' laundry.

“Are they now?” The man finally turned toward Davies and he forced a smile that had probably taken weeks of training to perfect. His uniform identified him as the associate chief steward and he had the kind of face that begged to be smacked: smug, with a tiny nose and a slackening overly-square jaw that implied good genes gone bad from centuries of cousins marrying cousins who'd all come over on the Mayflower. “I know we all like to find a bargain, but have you considered that there are certain protocols to be followed on a first-class ship? Didn't your people ever explain that to you?”

Evidently this associate chief steward assumed that Davies had hired No Sin to wash his clothes out of a gauche desire to save a few pennies over what the Malolo's laundry charged.

“Come on,” Davies said, “this ship goes overboard, pun intended, to create an atmosphere of fun. You have people lying about half naked on the deck in bathing suits, you organize turtle races and ladies' nail driving contests - in that context is it so awful that he's hung some laundry out to dry?”

Instead of replying, the associate chief steward resumed his harassment of No Sin. “Are you hard of hearing, boy, or just stupid? Let me see your room key! Chop! Chop!”

No Sin hesitated, looking to Davies for guidance.

It was outrageous that this twit felt he had license to insult No Sin because of his race. Despite his youth, No Sin had an intelligence, strength, and depth of experience that few people could match. “I can assure you that he has all his proper documentation, and his room is paid for,” Davies said, struggling to stay calm.

With his back still turned to Davies, the officer raised his hand in a cautionary gesture. "Sir, please allow us to do our jobs." Consistent with the man's curt, manufactured personality, there were no rings on his slender fingers to imply a hint of humanness, however Davies was surprised to catch sight of a Cuban link bracelet adorned with tiny, green Hawaiian stones hidden within the dark cave of the fellow's sleeve.

Meanwhile, No Sin began to remove a shirt from the improvised clothesline, probably believing that this would diffuse the situation.

"Leave that!" the associate chief steward barked. "I asked you a question!"

No Sin took hold of a second shirt.

The associate chief steward lurched at the offending rope, trying vainly to rip it down with one, masterful stroke.

No Sin stepped in to help, doing his best to untie the knot. As he struggled with the obstinate tangle of rope, he accidentally jabbed the associate chief steward in the stomach with his elbow. The blow was light and glancing, but the associate chief steward reacted as if he'd been swatted by a grizzly bear.

"Did you see that," the young officer cried, spinning toward his mates, "he struck me! I want this boy held for criminal assault!"

Raw panic swept across No Sin's face. He didn't stand "a Chinaman's chance," of making it to America if was held for even a minor offense. In no time, he could be back on the streets of Shanghai, begging for food. The young officer was a twit, but in all counties twits wearing the right uniform wielded real power.

"Look, why don't we all just calm down," Davies said.

"No, you look! He attacked me! That's a very serious offense!" The associate chief steward turned back to his mates. "Didn't I tell you to take this filthy Chinaman below!" To emphasize his authority, he succeeded in tearing the remaining shirts off the line - holding them possessively in his arms.

The mates went to No Sin, each taking hold of an arm.

"This is very easily resolved," Davies said.

"Sir, as an officer of this ship, I have the authority to restrain

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any passenger who questions my authority and compromises the safety of this vessel.”

“I was just saying..”

“We're done here, right?” This time the artificial smile signified finality as he turned away from Davies. “Right.”

The officer's dismissal was stunning, Davies felt like he was back in prep school where privilege created an especially odious brand of bully. The concept of fair play would be as foreign to this man as the surface of the moon. It was time to play a hunch, and he'd better be right as No Sin's entire future was at stake.

“How's your father?”

Slowly, the associate chief steward turned back to face Davies. “I beg your pardon.”

“Associate chief stewards are usually working class and have to make their way up through the ranks, but here you are, young, brash,..” Davies paused for emphasis. “How did you make it so young? You aren't wearing a class ring, which implies a less than stellar scholastic experience, resulting, perhaps, in bitter memories. The only possible explanation,” Davies continued pleasantly, “is that daddy got you this job. Unless I miss my guess he's a director of the line.”

The associate chief steward cocked his head in a reflective manner, studying the gray sea as if he'd suddenly discovered beauty in nature.

Behind the associate chief steward, the mates tightened their grip on No Sin, but did little else; they seemed quite interested in hearing Davies' appraisal of their superior officer.

“You would also like to be a director, wouldn't you?” Davies said softly, “at least a vice president. So why aren't you? Is it because your father has no confidence in you?”

The young officer's face remained rigid, but his cheeks had turned scarlet and his lips were tight. “You must really enjoy hearing yourself talk.”

“To make matters worse, I can't imagine that dad is pleased with your Hawaiian girlfriend.” Davies was now wearing a practiced expression of concerned empathy. “Or is it a secret?”

“What gave you that idea?” the young man said, his voice an octave higher and his face turning several contrasting colors.

“The charm worn around your wrist. It's a Cuban link adorned with peridots - a green, volcanic gem known as ‘the poor man's emerald.’ You don't fancy jewelry; your fingers are bare, so obviously it's a gift from someone special. Someone Hawaiian. Your sweetheart I presume.”

Both mates glanced at their superior officer as if seeing him in a new light.

“I have more important things to do. You deal with this.” The associate chief steward threw the shirts at his mates, turned sharply on his heels, and stalked away.

Embarrassed, the mates released No Sin, then did a clumsy job of folding the shirts and handing them back to Davies. “Sorry 'bout that, sir,” the shorter of the two said. “He's a bit in over his head.” The two sailors gave Davies a little salute and climbed the stairs to a higher deck.

No Sin let out an audible exhale of relief. “Let me thank you, Mr. Sir.” he said, clasping his hands together and executing an exaggerated bow. No Sin's playful sarcasm was a welcome signal that things were creeping back to normal; he had an arsenal of methods designed to keep Davies from slipping into the role of a smug, celestial white face looking after his little yellow brother, and such reminders were extremely helpful.

Davies held up the damp shirts that were clutched in his arms. “They have a perfectly good laundry service on this ship, you know.”

“Laundry man too fat.”

“Mr. Wissman?”

“How can he be as good as me? I do not understand why those guys get so mad. I do it before, you know that, and it okay.”

“That was on a tramp steamer in Chinese waters. You were in steerage.”

“Ahh, so peaceful. So lovely to sleep on deck and look at stars.”

“Okay, but now you know that the Malolo isn't like that. They don't have steerage on this ship, in fact they don't even have

second class.”

With a loud sigh, No Sin took the bundle of damp shirts out of Davies' arms. The boy appeared strange holding the laundry, his sleek, elegant looks rendered him unconvincing as a domestic, and belied his impoverished background. Thinking about this renewed Davies' fury at the associate chief steward's ignorance and bigotry. “I bring these to you later,” No Sin said, “maybe. I have little problem with Mrs. Kisser's colored amah, so we see.”

“Again?” Mrs. Kissler was a fussy matron who dressed lavishly, if badly, usually in a chiffon gown, which was color-coordinated to match her wig. No Sin helped her with odds and ends now and then.

“Yes. I need to borrow iron. But amah won't let me borrow iron until after I help her repack Mrs. 'Kisser's' dresses.”

Davies stared blankly at him, awaiting an explanation.

“Mrs. 'Kisser,' she buy too many dresses in Honolulu, no room left in steamer trunk. Now you understand?” He rolled his eyes and muttered, “Sometime I think I too nice to you.”

“Alright,” Davies said, amused that No Sin never lacked for a cutting remark, a remarkable feat considering the young man's tenuous grasp of the English language.

“And sometime you too nice to me.”

“I'll try to correct the matter.”

“Don't joke. People think you strange; it serious problem. Sometime you act like you own world; other time you act like world own you, it very confusing. Worst thing of all, you dress too much like money. Rich people supposed to be old and ugly, and boss everyone. Then you come along, very handsome, very polite, you supposed to be thirty-five or something but you looking very young, always patient, always watching. What going on? You gigolo? Maybe some kind of crook casing joint? Even sissy? That what people think because pieces don't add up.” The unsolicited criticism came as no surprise to Davies; he knew from experience that many people grew to resent those who shackled them with bonds of gratitude. No Sin felt that his imminent immigration to America made him the luckiest person in the

world, but also the most indebted. “One thing I do not understand,” No Sin said, causing Davies to wonder what the boy had planned for an encore, “why Mrs. 'Kisser' buy more dresses? I mean, everything she wear so ugly. And she ugly too. What difference does it make what she wear?”

“I imagine it makes a difference to her. And it's Mrs. Kissler, not 'Kisser' as you insist on calling her. I should add, Sin, that you'll be old yourself someday, so try to be nice.”

“Why? You not nice to that guy, *for once*.” No Sin drew out the last two words so there'd be no mistaking his scorn for Davies' regular, excruciatingly reasonable *modus operandi*. “I love it so much, so perfect. How you know what to say to get him to leave?”

“Logic. And a touch of luck.”

“But how you know you right?”

“I don't. I take bits of information and form a logical conclusion. Then I run it by my instincts. If my conclusion *feels* right I take a deep breath and plunge ahead; nine times out of ten I get away with it.”

“You can't imagine how scare I am. I hope some big fish jump up and eat that guy.” No Sin glanced down at the laundry in his arms and smoothed a barely wrinkled collar. “So how long before we be in America? It that way, right?” He pointed with his chin toward the ship's bow.

Davies turned to look. “I must say, your aim is quite accurate.”

“Of course. I not stupid.”

“In all fairness, sometimes you play dumb.”

“And sometimes I *am* dumb, that what you think?”

“Occasionally naïve, simply because you are nineteen years old. Also because you are more intelligent than most people. How should I put this? Bright people are often labeled as naive because they can imagine things and see fantastic possibilities that are beyond the abilities of those with duller, more closed minds.”

No Sin squinted at Davies. “Okay, that pretty good answer. I forgive you this time.”

Leaving No Sin to deal with the laundry, Davies took another aimless turn around the deck. Tonight the sea resembled an undulating landscape of small, gray hills; dull, smooth waves conspiring to create a vista that seemed solid and geographic. He made a search for the horizon, but the slate-colored sky was such a perfect match for the ocean that the space where the two met was an illusive smudge, slipping by too briefly to be clearly made out. It was an appropriate metaphor for his life.

An entire evening loomed ahead, offering him nothing but a return to worrying. The impending reality of returning home and adopting a mundane, normal life, getting up in the morning and trudging off to an office for ten hours a day, was weighing on him. Living a life of adventure, running guns, and moonlighting as a detective had been alternately exciting and terrifying; it made sense to give it up. Yet had he chosen the best alternative? Becoming a respectable businessman simply didn't suit him. His very identity was at stake.

He headed toward the front of the ship, enjoying the twilight, which was gloomy and warm. He hoped to catch sight of performing sea life, frolicking dolphins, that might be silhouetted by glowing wakes of green phosphorous. He preferred natural entertainment to a movie, and he wondered how many passengers would be tempted to sit huddled on an upper deck, pointed toward an outdoor screen, as Hollywood's latest streamed from the projection booth built into the Malolo's rear smokestack. Sleek and modern, the Malolo was the pride of the Matson Line. It felt almost sinful to be enjoying its comforts after weeks spent on leaky junks and battered tramp steamers.

Passing the English flavored, dark paneled smoking room Zephyr Davies overheard a loud table of drunken card players. Through a window he could see several sturdy men in evening clothes, who seemed to be all noses and earlobes, sitting at the bar and telling stories of their travels. When younger, Davies would have prided himself on having endured greater miseries than these seasoned old men, now he was in awe of them for having maintained a spirit that he had lost. Unlike them, adventure was

something he no longer believed in - instead, sadly, he believed in cruelty, injustice, physical injury, stupidity, sudden, meaningless death, and irony. When he'd left for the Orient at the brash age of twenty-seven he'd told himself that there could be nothing worse than a safe, predictable life filled with dull routine, generating mental stagnation. Now he was wondering if there could be anything better.

His anger reignited as he entered his cabin. It was outrageous that No Sin had been treated so badly, simply because of his race. He'd probably brood about it all night and there seemed little point in doing much of anything except try to sleep, which was becoming the high point of his day. He'd hoped that, with this journey, the traumas and tragedies of the past five years would fade into oblivion. However, the run-in with the associate chief steward, the fragility of No Sin's prospects, the tumultuous sea suggested to him that China was following him home. Dammit all, it was disgraceful for a person with his advantages to indulge in even a moment's self-pity. Resolving to embrace a more positive attitude he flopped onto bed and quickly dozed off.

Right before midnight, when he'd finally descended into a full, welcome sleep, there was a loud, banging on his door. It would be just his luck if some crewman was outside waiting to tell him that the ship was sinking. He lumbered out of bed and put on his greatcoat, all that he could find in a hurry. Still groggy, and unintentionally dressed as an exhibitionist, he swung the door open; the slack faced associate chief steward, the one he'd sparred with earlier, was standing in the doorway. Oh, God, now what? Had they rounded up No Sin and thrown him in irons after all?

"Would you be so good as to come with me?" the officer said with a formality that caused Davies' anxiety level to shoot up a notch. "The Captain would like a word with you."

II: THE SEALED ROOM

Leaving his cabin, Davies anticipated a late night scolding by the crew, maybe even a hazing led by the Captain, surrounded by all the sailors wearing robes made of seaweed, and accessorized with hats rendered from giant clams. Therefore, he was surprised to be told simply that his assistance was needed.

The night was thick with mist, making the ship's wooden planking treacherous. Pearls of moisture glistened on the top of the associate chief steward's cap, and the shoulders of his uniform, as he led the way. "You did such a good job of putting me in my place earlier," he said, brusquely, "that I thought you might be able to help with a situation that's come up. Also, I'm told that you know the gentleman in question."

Not quite an apology, but close. Davies appreciated the man's change of attitude, though he didn't sound any more pleasant than he had that afternoon, and a certain level of tension remained. Davies wasn't ready to become bosom buddies with this fellow, and would be glad to get on to whatever matter was at hand. "Who exactly is the 'gentleman in question?'"

"His name is Huey Arnold. I believe you sailed with him from China."

Huey Arnold was a slovenly, portly fellow, slight of stature, who went by the nickname of "the Hatman" for the forged passports, or covers, that he provided for a fee. Davies and Huey Arnold were not on the best of terms, and the odd, little man had become strikingly paranoid since a haphazard attempt had been made on his life a week earlier on another ship. He was now such a

committed recluse that he wouldn't come out of his room even to eat.

They went down a deck, and through a heavy door into the welcome warmth of the ship. Arriving at the narrow corridor outside the Hatman's cabin, Davies saw that No Sin was already present, crammed in amongst a crowd of curious and groggy passengers. In the confusion, Davies heard a bald man ask No Sin to fetch him clean towels. The passenger didn't realize how lucky he was that his request was merely ignored.

The ship's stately, bewhiskered Scottish Captain, a studious, thoughtful appearing purser, and several mates were pounding on the cabin door and demanding entrance. "Ye must open the door! We cann'o help you unless you let us in!" The Captain called out in his lilting, Scottish brogue.

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" the Hatman wailed from inside his locked cabin.

"Mr. Arnold," the Captain yelled back, "please open the door!"

"I can't open the door!"

"Of course, ye kin," the Captain hollered.

This appeal was answered by a piercing scream, which caused many of the bystanders to gasp.

"Mr. Arnold?"

Not so much as a moan came from beyond the Hatman's door.

The bald passenger scratched the back of his gleaming skull.

"What's happened to him?"

"Something's wrong with the poor guy," an elderly man said, as if he was the only one aware of the obvious.

The Captain fumbled a passkey from his tunic and unlocked the door. He twisted the handle and pushed the door inward, but it refused to budge.

Elbowing his way through the small crowd, Davies tried pushing on the door himself; something was jamming it.

Mrs. Kissler and her colored maid joined the onlookers. Tonight her red wig and alabaster make-up had apparently been slapped on in a hurry, making her appear that much more like a demonic circus clown. "What the hell is going on?" she demanded, angry that her sleep had been interrupted.

"I don't know what all the fuss's about," a sharp-faced woman muttered. "The guy's drunk."

Another woman, wearing a tweed coat and with traces of cold cream on her face, found this statement so absurd that she snorted out a contemptuous laugh and shook her head.

"Well, he is," the sharp-faced woman said defensively.

Davies wasn't surprised that the Hatman's last, truly horrific scream had rattled some of the passengers into various spasms of denial. It had certainly rattled him.

While Mrs. Kissler advised, ordered and complained it took nearly five minutes of pounding and straining to break the door down. They timed their efforts to match the rolling of the ship. Each time the corridor wall moved downward, capturing their weight, four broad shoulders heaved against the obstinate door. It finally yielded, accompanied by the snapping and crunching sound of splintering wood. As the door swung into the room, hot, musty air billowed out.

The lights in the cabin wouldn't work, and the purser came back with a torch and shone it into the blackness. The darting cone of light revealed a room that was a mess - clothes strewn about, the Malabo's trademark table lamp with a single flower painted on its green shade lying broken beside a slender mattress that had been cast to the floor, dangling like a dog's tongue from the built-in bed. There was no sign of Huey Arnold.

Davies was the first to enter, calling out a cautious, "Huey?" The warm air inside added to Davies' apprehension, particularly as it was not unreasonable to assume that the Hatman had committed suicide, considering his bizarre behavior. However, no body lay on the floor, which didn't mean that one wasn't sprawled in the tiny shower in the equally tiny bathroom. A passing thought chilled him, was the Hatman's paranoia justified and some hulking, murderous thug was lurking in the gloom of the cabin?

"Where is he?" the Captain demanded as he peered into the darkness. "We'ar we not just talkin' to him?" He seemed teed off, but Davies had seen fear take many strange forms.

"He must be in here somewhere," Davies said. "Maybe in the loo." He took a determined breath and moved deeper into the

cabin, whose current darkness muted the fact that it was freshly painted and cheerfully decorated. Were the lights not working to facilitate an ambush?

Hesitantly, the Captain followed after him.

They pushed open the door to the bathroom and shined the torch on the shining walls; no one was there.

Together they continued their search. Each time Davies opened a drawer, or lifted up something that had fallen on the floor, he was afraid of what he might find. However, no bodies were under a lumpy pile of bed sheets and blankets, no hacked-up body parts had been placed in the cupboards built into the base of the bed.

“This is impossible,” the Captain muttered, his voice losing much of its previous steadiness. He was a stately man, the sort who seemed to have nerves that were never rattled, therefore the anxiety in his voice was unsettling. “We all he'ard him. And the door was locked from the inside. Boarded up fer that matter. Where is he?”

Davies said nothing. The experience of being inside the dark, hot room where a man had inexplicably vanished was simultaneously unreal and overly real, causing his emotions to operate on a primal level, and making him feel mildly nauseated.

“Conn'I 'ave the torch?” The Captain asked in loud, steady voice intended to mask his unease.

Davies handed the torch to the Captain, who used it to carefully examine the portholes; they were securely locked from the inside with latches that proved themselves to be difficult to operate.

Davies reclaimed the torch from the Captain and reinspected the inside of the door. Not only had the stubborn inner safety latch been activated, but also boards, secured by nails pounded deep into the center of the door, were firmly in place. When shut, five bed slats had stretched from the center of the door to where more nails had been driven deep into the wooden outer molding surrounding the door. This was why the door had been so hard to force open. The boarded-over door indicated that the Hatman had been trying very hard to keep something from getting in. Then it seemed he had lost his battle, and simply vaporized into thin air.

“Who's that?” Davies called out, aware that another figure had

joined his party.

"It me," No Sin said, coming closer to where Davies could see him. "This place so scary. Why it so hot?"

Abandoning a peek under the mattress, which lay on the floor, Davies went to check the vent above the bed. "Heat's on full blast for some reason." He found the rheostat and turned the cock, shutting the heat off. "Even aboard ship, someone must have heard him pounding all those nails." Davies glanced out at the crowd of curious passengers. "Did any of you hear strange noises in this room?"

The passengers looked at each other and shook their heads.

"Nothing?" Davies persisted. "What time did you all go to dinner?"

"I dined at seven," Mrs. Kissler said in an overtly helpful tone.

"I went about seven-fifteen," the balding man added hesitantly.

"Was anybody here between seven-fifteen and, say, eight?"

The passengers looked at each other a second time; nobody responded.

"What time did you get back?" Davies asked Mrs. Kissler.

"About eight-twenty I expect. I left the dining room ahead of the others."

"So this could have happened while everyone was eating, that's why nobody heard anything. Sin," Davies said, "you stayed in the hall after we broke the door down. Could someone have slipped out with all the confusion?"

"How could anyone get by?" No Sin asked. "We could hardly move it was so crowded."

This observation was so self-evident that Davies wondered why he had even bothered to pose the question. "Can we be sure that his screams were actually coming from his cabin?" Davies asked the Captain.

"Ye were here, weren't you? Ye hear'd him." The Captain looked at Davies as if challenging him to disprove his words.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Davies conceded. "Sin, would you go into the cabin beside this one, shut the door, and shout back at us?"

No Sin shrugged, went into an adjacent cabin and shouted,

“Hello, I dying! Help me, please! Oh no!”

Davies knew that No Sin was not trying to be funny, nonetheless his performance elicited nervous titters from the onlookers. More to the point, his shouts sounded like they were coming from the cabin next door, not the Hatman's cabin.

“All right, Sin, that's enough.”

“I've seen many a stray'ange thing over the years.” The Captain wiped his brow with a handkerchief. “Boot this beats all.”

“Mr. Davies! Come look at this!” No Sin called from inside the Hatman's cabin. It was surprising that he could move about so quickly and stealthily.

Davies abandoned the hall and crossed to the center of the room where No Sin was looking at a spot, illuminated by the purser's torch, which had previously been covered by the mattress that No Sin had moved back on to the bed frame. The feeble beam of the torch illuminated a long, streaked trail of something wine colored and glistening on the floor.

“Wha' did ye find?” the Captain asked as he poked his head into the cabin.

Beneath where the mattress had lain, long, dark fingers of purple exploded from the filmy pool of liquid. Davies crouched and put his finger into the sticky stuff. The sharp metallic odor of iodine gave it away. “Blood,” he said to the Captain. “Let me see that torch for a moment.”

The purser handed it to him. “Close the door, would you?”

The purser did so. Alone in the cabin, and suppressing a creeping sense of panic, Davies used the torch's soft, yellow shaft of light to follow a trail of plum-colored drops that led from the clotting pool back toward the hall. “Jesus,” he hissed as he saw something that he hadn't noticed before: down low, crimson hand-prints were smeared on the inside face of the shut door. Above them, written in blood was, “IM DEAD.”

