

## I

On the morning of September 4, 1910, the inhabitants of Enmyn, a settlement spread out on the shore of the Arctic Ocean, heard an unusual clamor. This was not the cracking of shattered ice, nor the rumble of an avalanche, nor the crashing of stones down the rocky precipices of the Enmyn cape.

Just then, Toko was standing in his chottagin,\* pulling on a white kamleika.† He thrust his arms carefully into the wide sleeves, touching his face to the material, inhaling its smell – had a good airing out in the freezing wind. Otherwise all he touched – traps, Winchester, snowshoes – everything would be permeated with that smell.

A crashing noise roared in his ears. Toko quickly stuck his head through the neck-hole, and sprang out of the chottagin in a single bound.

Where, only yesterday, there had been the white people's ship, a cloud was spreading. There were ice splinters under his feet.

People rushed out from all twelve of the yarangas. They stood in silence, looking out toward the ship, and making guesses about the explosion.

Now Armol' came up to him.

“Likely, they were trying to crack the ice . . .”

\* *Chottagin* – the cold, outer part of the yaranga.

† *Kamleika* – a cloth overall, worn over fur-lined clothing.

“I think so, too,” Toko agreed. “Let’s go.” And the two hunters set off for the ice-bound ship.

The cloud over the ship was dissipated, and in the dawn twilight you could make out a hole in the ice under the bowsprit. There were more and more chunks of ice underfoot, strewn all about the ship.

The deck rang with agitated voices, long shadows flickering across the portholes.

Toko and Armol’ slowed their step. The others caught up with them.

“Blood!” Toko exclaimed, bending down to the tracks that led from the hole to the ship.

“Blood!” the people echoed, looking down at the stains on the ice and on deck.

From the frozen-through wooden belly of the ship came a long, drawn-out moan, just like the howl of a wounded wolf.

“Trouble in the ship!” cried Toko, and leapt up on deck.

Gingerly opening the door, he saw white sailors, crowding in the small cabin. The steam from their breath floated under the low ceiling. Tin lanterns, fueled with seal blubber, gave off barely any light.

A blast of icy wind had rushed into the cabin alongside Toko; a tall, lanky sailor with his neck wrapped in a colorful scarf shouted something, sharp and angry. Toko didn’t know the white men’s language, but understood that he was being thrown out. He beat a hasty retreat, sensing an upraised fist with the back of his eyes.

The people of the Enmyn settlement were standing by the side of the ship. Silently, with their eyes, they asked Toko about what had happened, but he only shook his head and joined the waiting crowd.

The ship had come to Enmyn ten days ago. It must have strayed far north, into the gulf that separated the Invisible Land\* from the continent, and had to run at top speed to evade the approaching ice fields. Still, the ice had caught it, and held it tight to the rocky shores of Enmyn.

\* Invisible Land – Wrangel Island

The whites came ashore. Their faces were marked by despair and fatigue. They went from one yaranga to another, but unlike their predecessors, they had no interest in pelts, whalebone, and walrus tusk; what they asked for was warm clothing and deer meat. There was no deer meat to be had, and the whites were not scornful of taking walrus livers instead. They gave a meager trade for the clothing, but still the goods were indispensable and made to last – needles, axes, saws, cauldrons.

The captain – tufts of hair on his cheeks, and dry, rough skin stretched tight over a long hard bony face – conversed with Orvo, who had once sailed on a whaling ship, and even lived in America, asking him all about the way to the gulf of Irvygyr, and gazing mournfully at the ice-bound horizon.

Orvo felt sorry for him, and tried to make him understand that a strong southerly wind might still push the ice floes offshore. This had happened not just in the beginning of winter, but even at its peak, in those dark days when the sun wandered beyond the horizon, not daring to poke its face out into the frost.

The captain only sucked his pipe in silence, and sighed.

Two days ago, a wind started to rise from the south. It drove the snow from the peaks down to the fast ice,\* and a wide crack that led to the open water appeared by the side of the whites' ship.

The sailors revived and stayed aboard, watchful for an opportunity to break free.

In this kind of wind, the ice floes behind Enmyn's promontory would shift a little, and you could hunt nerpa, to supplement the summer's reserves.

The hunters would leave at dawn, to make the most of the short daylight out on the ice, and return dragging a heavy kill behind them. Chot-

\* Fast ice – sea ice that forms and fastens to the coastline: its edge is dynamic – sea-ice cracks form and enlarge while ice floes may break off. It can extend for only a few meters or for several hundred kilometers from its point of attachment. Fast ice usually ends where the water reaches a depth of 25 m.

tagins were ablaze with light, the well-fed people singing songs, and the muffled drumming of the yarars\* floated down to the ice-bound ship.

The winter promised to be a good one: The meat larder pits were filled to the neck, laden with a mix of walrus kymgyts,† wrapped in walrus hides, and whole seal carcasses, minus skins and flippers. That summer, the people of Enmyn had hunted well, had traded well, and the stores of tobacco and tea were so plentiful that even Orvo, who knew the true value of the white people's goods, was generous enough, from time to time, to treat the destitute ship's captain to a pinch of tobacco.

Orvo walked up to Toko and Armol.

"They should have waited a bit," he said thickly, nodding toward the ship. "A south wind coming."

"The man is moaning. I went over, but they yelled at me, threw me out."

"Maybe they didn't mean it like that," Orvo conjectured. "Sometimes the white man says a tender word just so, and then it sounds like curses."

"Should I go up again, maybe?"

"No, wait." Orvo held him back. "When they need our help, that's when they'll call us. No need to stick our noses in it. The whites have a kind of gathering – it's called a trial. People, dressed all in black, kiss an open book; and then they decide who will be strangled with a rope, and who will be shut up in the house of twilight."

"These are their punishments?" Armol' was horrified.

"Well, the crime can be great, too," said Orvo with a sigh.

A loud groan sent a shudder through the gathering. A rectangle of light appeared as the door swung open, and the captain stepped out on deck. Squinting his eyes into the crowd, he shouted:

"Orvo!"

"Yes! It's me!" Orvo readily replied in English, and limped toward the wide plank that served as a gangway.

\* *Yarar* – a drum made from a stretched walrus stomach.

† *Kymgyt* – a roll-up of walrus meat.

He peered into the cabin's gloom as he entered and made out a figure laid out on the low bunk. On top of the blood-stained covers lay a pair of hands, swathed in white canvas. It was the young man whom everyone called John, and the people of Enmyn, *Sson*.\*

John lay on the bunk with his eyes closed, quietly moaning. His damp, sandy hair was plastered to his forehead, his nostrils quivering as though catching some intriguing aroma. A shadow lay under his lowered eyelashes, just like under a snowcap.

The captain pointed to the wounded man, to his hands.

"John boom!"

Orvo was looking at the prostrate young man, and beginning to guess what had happened without the captain's explanation. The sailors, in their impatience, had decided to blow up the ice field that separated their ship from open water. Orvo had seen it done before. They would bore a hollow in the ice, stuff it with large paper-wrapped cartridges, set fire to a thin rope, over which the fire would quickly run. The ice would shatter, sending shards high into the sky. Sometimes this helped. But today's thunder was to no avail. The explosion failed to make a single crack.

"Should have waited," Orvo concluded. "Maybe, a wind will come and push the ice offshore."

The captain nodded in agreement, signaling to the people crowding by the bedside to disperse. Orvo came closer. It seemed that the young man had gotten it in both hands – in both wrists, to be precise.

"Orvo!" the captain called.

The old man turned and saw a smallish metal flask on the table.

"There are still seventy dollars left. Here they are." The captain laid down a crumpled wad of paper notes, the kind that Orvo had not much faith in, despite knowing well that the whites liked them no less than the metal ones. "John has to be taken to a hospital. Or else he'll die."

On hearing those words, the wounded man gave out a loud moan and

\* This is not merely a question of mispronunciation. In Russian, the word *sson* means "sleep" or "dream." (TN)

raised his eyelids. Orvo was standing close to him, and could see his blue eyes, dimmed with pain.

“It’s a long way off, the hospital,” Orvo sighed. “In Anadyr’. Sson might not make it.”

“There is no other way,” the captain shrugged. “We’ve got to help the lad.”

“Got to help,” Orvo concurred. “I will talk to my comrades.”

The crowd was still milling about the side of the ship. In the east, beyond the sharp peaks of faraway icebergs, it was dawning, but the starlight hadn’t weakened, and the constellations flickered as brightly as though it were night.

Orvo was slowly making his way down the ice-covered plank.

“What’s happened?” Toko was the first to ask.

“Sson had his hands blown up,” Orvo informed him. “He’s in a bad way. Has to be taken to Anadyr’.”

“To where?” asked Armol’.

“Anadyr’,” Toko repeated. “There’s a Russian doctor there, attached to the regional governor.”

“Who’s going to drive him all that way?” Toko said doubtfully. “What if he dies on the journey?”

“He can die here, too,” Orvo observed, and after a pause, added, “They’ve got nothing to pay. All that’s left is a bottle of the bad fire-water, and a small heap of paper money.”

The men lowered their eyes, and took a long time peering at the toes of their torbasses. In the silence, the wounded man’s moans escaped through the thin cabin planks.

“Who is he to us?” Armol’ broke the silence. “A stranger, a white man. Let them do as they please. We didn’t wound him, so it’s not our concern.”

“Armol’ speaks rightly,” Toko agreed. “What good have they done for us? They don’t even have any tobacco. Racing the dogs all the way to Anadyr’ and back – that’ll take just about the entire moon! So much feed

wasted! No time to go hunting, so who's going to feed the ones left behind in the yarangas?"

"And you, Toko, are also right," Orvo agreed.

He stood there, feet planted wide, furiously thinking. The people speak rightly: Why should they help the white man, who has his own shamans, his own customs, his own lands?

When he lived in Alaska, and the cough bent him in two, who helped him then? What help was there for the one who wandered by the garbage pits and fought the dogs over scraps? It wasn't any better aboard ship, either. They didn't seat him at the table, along with everybody else. After lunch, the cook would bring a bucket out for him, where everything was heaped together – bones, meat, the sweet, the bitter, the salty. He ate, and the whites watched him, laughing. When they spotted a white she-bear on a drifting iceberg and killed her, taking her cub on board, the sailors treated it with more care than they did Orvo, a human being, a hunter of walrus and whale and those same polar bears.

The moans grew louder. Little by little, it was becoming brighter, and the imprisoned ship was emerging from twilight; a snow-covered deck, icicles on its rigging, and yellow lights moving behind the frosted port-holes.

"Everyone, go back to Enmyn," Orvo said, and started first for the yarangas, turning his back on the ship.

The others drifted after him. The creaking of snow under their lakhtak\* soles drowned out the wounded man's moaning.

But before they could reach the shore, they heard the captain calling after them.

"Orvo! Orvo!" The captain was shouting as he ran to catch up. "Wait! I have something to talk to you about."

He clutched at the old man's sleeve, dragging him back.

\* *Lakhtak* – bearded seal, sometimes known as sea hare (*Erignathus Barbatus*). (TN)

Orvo shook off the captain's hand, and said, with dignity:

"The three of us will come: Toko, Armol', and I."

"All right, all right," the captain nodded vigorously, and loped back to the ship.

The wounded man had been moved to some other room. He was not in the wardroom. Where he had lain, Orvo now saw three Winchesters, a zinc box of cartridges, and a large steel two-handed saw.

"If you take him to Anadyr', and bring back a paper saying you delivered him safe and sound, these Winchesters will be yours," the captain said.

Toko, who had never owned a proper gun, only a small shotgun, rushed over to the Winchesters. This kind of generosity was unheard of! Three Winchesters, with cartridges, in exchange for a month-long journey!

"And he'll hand over the guns right now?" Toko asked Orvo.

"I'll find out." Orvo started to talk to the captain in English.

They talked and argued for a long time. Then the captain grabbed one of the Winchesters and held it out to Orvo.

"He says that he's willing to give us only one Winchester now, and the others when we come back."

"He won't cheat us?" Toko was unconvinced.

"Sure, we'll trust him, just like that." Armol' spat to the side. The captain looked at him with displeasure, then moved his eyes to the floor, to where the yellow slug of spittle had landed.

Toko elbowed his friend, and whispered:

"It's not done to spit inside the wooden yaranga."

The captain walked over to the Winchesters, picked one up and, almost forcibly, made Orvo take it. He then took the magazines out of the remaining guns, and handed them to Armol' and Toko. He said something, with an important look, and Orvo quickly translated:

"The captain swears that these Winchesters will be waiting for us



onboard the ship until we come back. As a security, he is giving us the nests for the bullets.”

Armol' and Toko looked at one another, and Toko said:

“We agree.”

All three of them left the cabin and walked down the plank onto the ice. The crowd had returned to the side of the ship, waiting in the cold for further news.

Orvo, Armol', and Toko walked side by side, heading for the yarangas. A silent crowd followed them, farther and farther away from the ice-covered ship.

“We should have also asked them for a small wooden boat,” Armol' said with regret.

“They gave a good price. No reason to be put out,” said Orvo sensibly. “Now taking one of their cloth yarangas, that's another thing. The wounded man isn't used to spending the night in the tundra, and anyway, one of those cloth tents is a good thing. Who knows, we might end up keeping it. Cut it up for kamleikas.”

Toko entered his chottagin. His wife already knew everything. She took out clothing for a long journey, from a large sack – a wide kukhlianka with the fur facing out, an under-kukhlianka made of baby deer hide, double-thick trousers, three pairs of torbasses, mittens, a chamois ochre-dyed kamleika, a loose overall trimmed with thick wolverine fur, and a piece of bear skin – for sitting or sleeping on.

Toko took his winter dogsled with birch runners off the roof, found a long lakhtak harness, and went off to find the sled dogs.