

WAHINE DISASTER

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Inside our cabin on board the ship, I sat. The table in front of me was small and decorated in coffee mug stains. Slowly I lifted up my cup of hot tea and brought it to my lips. The warm liquid slid down my throat, warming my tummy inside. For a while I sat, staring into the evaporating steam, swirling and mingling in the air. It calmed me right down as I watched it blankly. I get nervous around boat rides, the swaying of the ship, the ocean waves pounding against it. The uneasiness it makes me feel.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of knocking on my cabin door and I swiftly stood up, placed my cup of tea down and walked over to open it. The door was small and wedged in tight, so I had to yank with a bit of pressure to get it open. My husband stood with a smile.

“Look what I came to bring,” He held out a couple of dry, raisin biscuits, wrapped in a brown package. “They were handing them out in the lounge and I thought to bring some to eat.”

I smiled. “Thank you, how gracious of you.” I took a step back to let him inside, his teased black hair just brushing under the door frame as he ducks to step in.

“Now that is one small door.” He laughs and I giggle. I’ve known Sam for as long as I remember. We went to the same kindy and even the same high school. He’s pretty much the only reason that I’m still here, clinging on to life. I love him and that’s never going to change. He’s my life and light, and I hope to spend the rest of my life with him for as long as possible. Maybe we’d have kids someday - that’s why we were going away, to start a new life together.

We both sat down at the tiny table and dunked the dry biscuits in our hot tea, while chatting about family and friends. Soon after, Sam decided to go to bed early and went off to go get changed and I was left alone in our cabin. I leaned over to the window that was fixed on the wall next to me. We were on one of the lowest levels on the ship and the view from the window overlooked the water's surface. It churned as it broke against the ship's impact, creating streaks of foam dissipating away. The thought of being out there with the ocean alarmed me. I couldn't swim that well and sure enough the cold ocean would swallow me into its depths with no way to breathe. The icy water surging around me, tightening a grip onto me and pulling me down and the more I screamed the less anyone could hear.

I finished the last sip of my tea and went to get changed into my nighties. The change of clothes soothed me a bit and I breathed in the smell of cotton wool. It reminded me of home.

The bed was also small, meant only to fit two and packed in snug with the rest of the cabin's furniture. The mattress was hard and the sheets were prickly and rough, but what more could

you expect from a cheap cabin on a boat? Sam rested next to me and soon he easily dozed off into a deep sleep. I rolled over, facing away from him. I was restless. I couldn't sleep. The rocking of the boat taunted me and the trickle of blue light coming from the window kept me awake.

Annoyed, I slid out of bed and walked over to the window. The cabin's floor was cold beneath my feet and as I came up to the window a slight breeze passed through me, sending goosebumps down my back. It was dark outside the ship and dark inside as well, the only light coming from the full white moon. I reached over to the thin, short curtains either side of the window and pulled them closed. It did little to stop the light or breeze, but it did muffle it a bit so it wasn't as strong. Fear overwhelmed me and I quickly scurried back over to my bed. I wrapped the sheets around my body and slid in close to Sam. Warmth filled me and my eyes began to droop. Not long after I was overcome with sleep.

I gave a groan. A bright light filled the room, messing with my sleep. I scrunched up my face and opened my heavy eyes. Sam wasn't in the cabin, and it was morning.

Groaning again I rolled over, almost falling off the bed. I glanced at the clock - it read 9am. Raising myself up, I staggered to the little makeshift mirror next to the door, my feet clumsily stepping on, over air. My brown, messy hair was all over the place and my eyes were caked in sleep from last night.

Suddenly the door veered open in a bang and crashed back into the wall millimeters from the mirror and my head. I stumbled back in astonishment to give the person a threatening speech, but no one was there. At that point I got flung backward. I lost my footing and fell hard on the ground, sliding towards the back of the cabin to the table and window. I was most definitely wide awake by now and thoughts swarmed my mind.

I didn't know where Sam was; he wasn't in the cabin. My breathing quickened rapidly. I could feel my body tensing. "Sam!" My voice was hoarse from sleep and cracked. "Sam!" No one replied. Next door I heard people screaming and yelling in fear, and a baby crying.

I pushed myself up onto my knees and started to crawl to the doorway. The floor was so steeply slanted up I struggled not to slide down. Then I felt my stomach drop as the floor started to move again. It shifted down, leveling out before slanting down the other way. I could feel myself sliding down the floor to the doorway. I hastily jumped to my feet and grabbed hold of the doorframe. The ship swerved to the side so much I was left dangling out in the hallway, holding on desperately to the doorframe. My clammy hands started to slip and I clutched on as much as possible. Come on.

“OH NO,” I watched as the heavy metal door started to slowly swing back. “No, no, no, no, no, no!” It came at me with extreme speed and I let go of my hold just as it slammed into the doorframe. I landed on my back with a thump. A breath of air came out as I lay there. I was on the wall. I was lying on the wall. My brow furrowed deeply.

My ears ringed and the sounds around me all clashed together. I heard loud thumps on the floor, people crying out, the pound of waves. Something was shoving me at my side.

I turned my head. A distant figure was yelling at me, telling me something that I couldn’t quite make out. My vision was blurry and little golden orbs flew around me. Then I was consumed with darkness and I blacked out.

I woke in a daze. We weren't in the cabin. My forehead and hands were sweaty and my back ached. Something firm was against my chest and wrapped around my back.

“Hey.” A voice whispered to me.

“Hey?” My voice croaked. Where was I? Someone was gripping my hand.

“Sam?”

“Hello.” My face lifted into a smile.

“Where am I and what happened?” My vision cleared up and I could make out Sam’s concerned face. His chestnut brown eyes were grave.

“You're all right. We’re in the common lounge with lots of others. The ship hit some rocks in Barrett Reef. Sorry I wasn’t there with you at the time. Everyone was asked to put life jackets on.” I looked down. Sam had put one on for me. “They say the ship’s all right but I think otherwise.”

I looked around. People were obviously distressed. They were handing out food and drinks.

“What’s the time?”

Sam glanced at his watch, “Nearly 1pm.” I sat shocked. Four hours?

“Thanks for coming back.” I said and he embraced me with a hug and a soft, gentle kiss.

“I’m just glad that you're ok.” His face dropped, “You are ok, right?”

I smiled, “Yes, thanks to you” Well, I didn’t actually know if he was the one that helped me or not, but I’d thank him anyway. For a while we sat, staring at each other when a yelp was heard from across the room. Heads from all over the lounge turned. A plump lady bolted upright - she

had no life jacket. I scanned across the room. Most people didn't, why was that? Sam said that everyone was told to wear one...

The lady trembled. "Listen to the radio," she said hoarsely. The room soon became silent, everyone keen to hear what she was talking about.

Relda Familton, a weather lady, was broadcasting. She was talking about our ship and that passengers were disembarking. There were hushed whispers coming around the room and I could feel Sam's arms tightening around me. The radio changed and told everyone that everything was under control. Sighs came around the room and I could feel Sam's arms loosen, but not quite let go. I looked up at him, but he was looking off into the distance. His face was troubled. I reached up to touch him. He turned and looked down and gave me a smile. Just then the radio turned back and this time it was the regional news. The whole room fell silent in a second and the only sound we could make out was the heavy breathing of anticipation. They started to talk about our ship again.

"Yes and just not far from Wellington Harbour we have passengers frantically abandoning their ship as it started to sink..." I immediately felt my pulse intensify. I quickly stood up. My head began to swim and my face lost colour. My hearing distorted as strangers fled from the lounge room. They pushed and shoved me away. We were told that we were ok. Our ship was sinking. Our ship was sinking. Why was that not getting to my head? I could feel my feet move beneath me, but I don't remember when I started to walk. My arm was being pulled by someone and I could only obey.

We started to run through corridors and up stairs. Pain shoots through my back and I wince. Bodies slam against me from all sides. They push me from behind and I continuously stumble over my own feet. I begin to feel my arm slipping away from whoever is pulling me. I grab on to them, knowing very well that it was Sam. The air begins to thin and warm up as more and more people are clustered together, and I'm struggling to gasp for air. I don't know where I'm going, I don't remember where I've been. I only know that I am to follow the person pulling me.

The ship sways dangerously towards everyone's left. People fall to the ground and bump into each other. I'm knocked over to my side and get rammed into the wall of people. People shout out as they get crushed with the weight. I feel a tug from my right hand and stumble on after it, trying not to step or kick on fallen bodies.

The corridor seems to last forever as it swerves, a right turn, a left turn. Soon I feel a strong breeze and I can finally make sense of everything. Sam was pulling me up some metal stairs with railings either side. There were much less people surrounding us now and it was easier to move. Loud creaking echoed around the chamber.

“Sam,” I barely manage to whisper. We reach the top of the stairs and I stumble into him. The boat was tilted at a 45 degree angle. Strong gales of wind hit us and I frantically grabbed hold of him. Clouds of salt water rain on us. I could barely hear or see anything. I watched as people scrambled for the railing and clambered onto life boats. I tugged on him. “Sam, that’s where we need to go.” My voice gets thrown away by the wind. I point over to where people were boarding lifeboats and I see him nod.

A gust of wind comes crashing into us and I lose grip with him and get flung onto the deck. “Sam!” I yelled out as hard as I could, but even I could barely hear myself. I could feel myself slide across the deck’s floor. I could see the boat's edge near me and I grabbed hold of the railing, hugging it. It was drenched in salt water and I could barely get hold of it. “Sam!” A figure grabs hold of me. “Sam?!”

“You need to get over there and get into a lifeboat!” They yell at me, I can see that they're wearing a crew hat on their head. “Go over there and they’ll help you.”

I instinctively nod. And he moves on. One foot in front of the other I say. Holding onto the rail I shifted myself over to where the man told me to go. I can see a wave crashing up against the ship just ahead of me. It stands up tall in the air before falling down with a clap. I take a step back and someone pushes me sideways. I shout out to them before falling over off the boat. My heart stops as gravity pulls me down. I glance down at a small yellow boat, pinned against the ship's wall. I fall down into it and someone yanks me up on my feet and pushes me back down. I land on my bum, surrounded by five other people. We’re all sitting, huddled together on the boat as it whips back and forth against the ship. My body feels like a ragdoll being thrown around.

Someone new jumps down onto the boat and joins us. “How many more?” I yell.

“It can hold up to around twenty people,” someone says. I look back up and watch as a little kid around twelve jumps down to land on our boat. But his timing was off and he fell as soon as our boat bounced off the ship's wall. He missed the boat and instead his head got crushed by our boat coming back in to impact with the ship. I screamed and flinged out my arms to grab him but he fell into the ocean, limp. I could feel tears at my eyes.

A crew member jumped onto our raft and unhooked it from the ship.

“Alright, we’re gonna get you guys to shore - just try to keep yourself inside the raft,” he said firmly and our ship slowly rocked back with the waves and away from our ship.

Where was Sam? I didn't know. Was he safe? I didn't know. The only thing I could do was to comply with the crewman's orders and wait until we got to shore. And as we rocked back and forth I watched as the Wahine got slowly submerged by the ocean.