

Ruby's eyes sprang open. What was that shudder the ship had given? Had they hit something? She held her breath so she could listen as closely as possible, but, no, there were no more sounds, it should be ok to close her eyes again. What was that she had been dreaming? Now she remembered. Cows, the size of crabs, what the hell was that about? It must be night now. All the lights, except Seth's reading lamp, were out and she could hear Seth's erratic snoring competing with the ships droning engines. The Divine Vessel's sounds seemed so much louder at night, in fact, so did Seth's. The whole room was alive with rattles and buzzings caused by the ships constant vibration of the rooms contents. Something was slowly rolling backwards and forwards, perhaps the Nescafe jar, with the slow lolling pitch of the ship. She really could feel the cabin moving up and down, and the more she tried not to think about it, the more she felt that lump in her stomach trying to move in opposition. It only took her body a couple of minutes after waking to decide that it was sea sick. That horrible dry furriness returned to the inside of her mouth along with the accompanying taste of sick. She lay there trying to ignore it, trying to recapture the dream where she had left off, but after some time she had to admit to herself that she wasn't even tired. She had laid down on her bunk sometime in the mid-afternoon hoping that it would alleviate the sickness and now realised she must slept right through dinner again. No wonder she didn't feel tired. Laying in the bunk now certainly wasn't making her feel any better, so she carefully eased herself out of bed. The small alarm clock said it was nearly two in the morning. I must have been asleep over ten hours she thought. My sleep pattern's really messed up now. The small yellowish cabin still remained unfamiliar to

her, and it wasn't just the cabin, the whole experience of being on a ship in the middle of the ocean was still really disturbing her. It was worst at night when she would lay awake experiencing every pitch and roll of the ship, imagining that with the next roll they would just keep on going over and capsize. I mean, how does it stay upright in the first place? She decided to get up and do something to stop her mulling all this over. Over at the table she rescued the coffee jar, wedging it securely between the tea and the kettle. The laptop sat open and Ruby could see that Seth had already made a start on the next chapter without her, and she began to read:

*'Coffee sir?'*

*'Why sure,' answered Professor Robert G Pomelon. 'Do you have any skim milk?'*

*'Yes, here is the milk.'*

*'No. I'm sorry but I want skim, this here is full fat.'* Professor Pomelon stated, looking over at Heather to see if she had heard his healthy lifestyle choice.

*'I'll ask cook,' said the steward and scurried out of the room.*

*Ivan poured himself some corn flakes and Heather sipped her tea.*

*'Good morning, let me introduce myself,' Ivan and Heather looked up, recognising the man who had just entered the room as the same man with the long scar on his face whom they had seen whilst boarding the previous evening.*

*'I am the Chief Mate,' he said, his left eye twitching evilly.*

*'Milk, sir, the chef has skimmed it for you,' said the steward to Professor Pomelon as he rushed back into the room holding a small jug.*

Oh dear, thought Ruby, I'll have to have a word with him in the morning, that's terrible. Seth's snoring continued in its reliable unpredictableness. Sometimes there was a snort, sometimes a hiss and then a tantalising silence, allowing the listener the false hope that they might be able to get back to sleep before...another snort. He had fallen asleep on his side with his naked arse exposed, facing towards where Ruby now stood.

She pulled the blanket over him and made him decent, but not before giving his buttock an affectionate little stroke. Reaching over and turning out his reading lamp, she crossed the now dark cabin to the aft porthole and drew back the curtains. The aft deck lights were on again, which struck her as slightly unusual. She was beginning to make a habit of these evening vigils of the rolling black sea. The lights enabled her to see the waters churned up by the propellers at the stern of the ship, and she watched the swells pass by into the darkness beyond.

Ruby was feeling no better for looking out of the window, and although she didn't feel particularly hungry, she had missed dinner, so reasoned that a sandwich might help to ground her stomach. She decided to head down and raid the fridge in the officers lounge, and perhaps watch a film like last night. Still fully dressed from when she had collapsed on her bunk that afternoon it didn't take her a moment to slip on her Chinese slippers and leave the cabin.

Ruby and Seth's cabin was at the far end of the third deck, and as she made her way along the moving corridor towards the stairs she struggled to keep her balance. The movement Divine Vessel was making was a long gradual drop and climb combined with a slight roll. As Ruby walked her legs kept crumpling beneath her with the additional pressure as the corridors floor rose towards her, and then she would find herself almost walking in mid-air as the floor fell away. She held on tight to the hand rail and as she slowly made her way towards the stairs her stomach rose and fell in opposition. Carefully she made her way down the staircase, which was moving as if it were a funfair ride, to the first deck.

Ruby paused before the final step to watch a dozen small round objects she had spotted. They rolled left and right with the movements of the ship back and forth across the step. Giving a shrug and thinking nothing more of it, she stepped over them and walked across the landing towards the lounge. Just then she saw something out of the corner of her eye moving down the staircase towards the deck below. Leaning over the banister,

thinking she would catch sight of a seaman off on some job, she saw something far more curious. It was a white rabbit hopping down the stairs. It reached the poop deck, made its way round the landing, and continued down towards the main deck. Ruby was intrigued by this strange late night apparition and quietly followed it down the stairs. Reaching the main deck, where the staircase ended, she saw again those dark round pellets rolling gently to and fro across the floor and realised what they were, droppings, of course. She caught sight of the tail of the rabbit disappearing through an open door to a passageway that led outside onto the main deck. Ruby decided at this point to go back, this was already further than she had ever previously explored on the ship. It was just not in her nature to go out on to the deck of this big ship in the middle of the ocean in the middle of the night, especially after some funny little bunny.

Her mind had already returned to sea sickness and cheese sandwiches when she saw an even stranger sight that changed her mind about continuing on. The rabbit she had been following had been joined by two others. They seemed to be conferring with each other, then hopped off together along the walkway that ran along the side of the main deck towards the bow. Ruby was so astonished at this sight that she made her way down the passageway and gingerly stepped out into the night onto the wet slippery deck. She could still see the rabbits thirty metres ahead, their smooth white fur shining silver in the bright moonlight, hopping slowly along the rolling deck, occasionally turning to each other as if in conversation. The walkway ran for about a hundred metres in front of Ruby and at its widest it measured a metre and at its highest two. Along the right hand side of the walkway was the grey painted steel of the ships holds, the length of which was broken up with various handles, steps, and hatches. It was along this side that Ruby began to carefully edge. A roof was created over the walkway by the bottoms of the containers that precariously balanced on the very edge of the ship. It was the left side of the walkway that Ruby was trying to stay away from, for

apart from the container supports it was completely open to the ocean that rushed by just a few metres below. She looked down at the dark angry movements of the sea, its motion seemed to her completely random, waves came from all angles, not really large ones, but occasionally one would manage to wash up over the side of the ship and slosh down the walkway. Grabbing any handholds she could she continued to make her way down the ship. Up ahead the rabbits had stopped outside an open hatch on the right side of the walkway. A flickering bright white blue light was emitted from the hatch, illuminating the bunnies and reflecting off the shifting black waters. From where she was Ruby could not see in through the hatch, but she could hear the sounds of quiet industry coming from inside. She watched as a fourth strong looking rabbit appeared in the hatch's entrance, framed menacingly by the unearthly light that flooded out around it. It seemed to speak to the three new arrivals and then they all followed it in through the hatch. Gathering all her courage Ruby moved forward, determined to find out what was going on in through that hatch. But just as she was approaching the door, her bum cheeks quivering with fear and excitement and her bum hole tingling with fear (see cover illustration), a large rough hand suddenly clasped around her mouth and a strong arm pulled her backwards back down the walkway. She tried to scream, to struggle free, but the grasp on her was just too fierce.

'No need to be scared,' a voice whispered in her ear, 'no need to worry, I won't hurt you lady.' It was the voice of a foreigner. This did nothing to relax Ruby, after all this is what murderers and rapists said before doing their dastardly worst. She was pulled still struggling back down the passageway into the ship back to the bottom of the stairs. The stranger's voice then whispered 'Down here is no place for a lady passenger like yourself. If I were you I'd hurry back to my cabin. There's nothing for you to see down here. I'm going to let you go now and I want you to head straight back up those stairs, no shouting. If you do this I'll promise to say nothing to the captain in the morning about your little excursion. Ok?'

Ruby nodded her head vigorously. What had she been thinking to go out on deck in the first place anyway? The strong arms then slowly released her from their tight grasp. She span round to face the man that had attacked her, or was it saved her? She recognised the dark tanned face of Millian, the Indonesian able bodied seaman that had been so nice to her and Seth when they had boarded in Shanghai.

‘It’s for your own safety,’ he said smiling almost apologetically now.

Ruby nodded in understanding, and whispering a ‘Sorry, thank you,’ scooted back up the stairs towards her cabin.

Millian had found himself down on the main deck of the Divine Vessel in much the same way that Ruby had. He had heard some noises outside his cabin, and had followed a trail of droppings down to the deck. Now that Ruby was back safely tucked up in her bunk he could continue his investigations. He made his way back along walkway to the open hatch that was still emitting that mysterious glow. Slowly, very slowly, Millian put his head round the corner of the glowing hatch. His eyes widened in disbelief at the scene that he beheld before him inside number three hold. ‘Oh the horror, the horror of it all.’