



“No Rocko, you can’t eat him.” Then turning to the rest of the crew lounging on the dock he shouted out, “Do you hear that you lot!? No eating the rabbit! That’s the last thing I need.”

“Why all dem importants want to see a bunny?”

“Damned if I know, Rocko. But what I do know is they’re willing to pay his weight in gold, and that’s all that all of us need to know,” the Captain replied, giving Rocko a friendly slap on his shining cheek.

“Alright, up yous get! They’re just finishing up. Get your gear and let’s prepare the ship. Jeffreys! Give me a bell from the engine room when all’s set. UP UP! Ya bunch o’vagabonds! Ole Luna she’s a’waiting on us!” hollered the Captain.

The crew scattered throughout the ship as the last of the cargo was loaded. A clacking and scuffling rattled the walls as gear was chucked into familiar nooks and spaces. Constant thuds of the deckhands moving equipment reverberated. Whistles called uniforms to places. The hum of the starting ship hummed.

*The Chang’e* left the dock prepared for her forty-fifth return trip of the ending season. She floated under the control of Captain Connor just pass the Outer-ring. A glimmer off the Indian Ocean was blocked momentarily as the colossal Orbital Station 3 passed between *The Chang’e* and the Earth. Jeffreys watched the Station swing away rapidly on its orbit toward the ever brighter horizon through his porthole.

“Captain, 15 minutes to Sunrise. Ship’s holding steady.” Jeffreys belled the Captain.

“Right, Mr Jefferys, set the Headsail. Rotate her Earth aft,” came the Captain’s disembodied voice.

“Aye.”

Rocko chuckled nearby.

“It wasn’t funny the first forty-four times, Mate!” Jefferys cut him off with his mouth open. Rocko still chuckled. “Go check on the crew would’ja? Don’t sit there like a hyena.”

“All twelve of dem?”

“Aye, you know the drill. C’mon Mate. Check all of them this time,” said Jefferys as the sunlight, just about to come leaping from behind the earth, slid across the walls like little moons. The ship shuddered with expectation. Jefferys watched as the tip of the first sail turned a brilliant gold.

“Captain, Apollo’s gusting.”

“Grande, Mr Jefferys. Raise the Mainsail.” The course had been the same all season. “Set sail for the Sea of Clouds. Mare Nubium, once again. And Mr Jefferys, please come see me in my quarters once we’re underway.”

Back to the Moon.

As usual at three hours into their journey the Captain was in his quarters smoking his pipe. The thick pink smoke twisted around his head, and with his free hand he spun a Lunar globe that rested on his desk. Though most of the ship maintained the typical metallic look, the Captain’s quarters were wooden and soft. Through his window the Earth looked slightly smaller.

Jefferys entered the room upon a knock.

“Captain, we’ve got considerable speed today.”

“Thank you, James. Have a seat.” The Captain stared the Earth hanging like a piece of fruit in the blackness. “How’s your wife?”

“She’s fine, sir.”

“Doesn’t she give you hell for being away so much?” he asked.

“Aw well, sure enough when it’s time to go, sir. But she understands.”

“Mine did. She sure did,” said the Captain still staring out the window. “I hate it up here.”

Jefferys sat quietly.

“Well, she’ll be sorry,” the Captain swiveled around in his chair. “With the cargo we’ve shipped this season and the rabbit as icing on the cake, I do believe we have done quite well for ourselves this go around. Eh, James?”

“Aye, sir.”

“We’ll be up to our tits in the finest things.”

“Aye, sir. Um, Captain. If you don’t mind my asking, sir. What is the deal with the rabbit anyway?”

“Well, it’s very important and very expensive. Truth be told I know nought about it myself. Just keep an eye on it for me. What I do know is the rabble on this ship. Don’t let anyone mess with it. It’s worth a fortune.”

“Aye, Captain. Will that be all, sir?”

A sound like a coin being thrown at the wall rang suddenly. Jefferys and the Captain looked at each other, their eyes got wide. A loud pang followed another and the clatter of more coins.

“Aw damn! Debris! Always in this shitting sector!” yelled the Captain. Jefferys ran from the room as an alarm screamed. “Engine room! Status report!”

After everything had settled and the damage was assessed, Jefferys glumly returned to the Captain’s Quarters with Rocko.

“Captain, it was a debris hit, as you know. Apparently there are major tears in the sails. Also punctures to the hull, but we have sealed those. No problem there. However, it severely knocked us off course. At the moment, we’re set adrift and every second that passes without functional sails increases our distance to the Moon.”

“Are the sails able to be fixed?” asked the Captain.

“Aye, sir. We have the sisters on it. They can fix anything. Right geniuses the pair. Problem is, Captain, we don’t know exactly how long it’s going to take. It’s a significant tear and we could be off course for days I’m afraid.”

The Captain sighed and looked back out the window where the Earth, now even smaller, was rapidly moving in circles.

“Thank you Mr Jefferys. Rocko, begin rationing our supplies. We’ve got a few days worth. We’ve got to make it last.”

“Aye, sir!” replied both.

Days later the crew moaned in the Messdeck. Any decent food had long since been exhausted and as the hunger increased so did the tension. Fights broke out frequently. To worsen matters the sails were even more damaged than was previously thought. They would be adrift off course for much longer. Rocko did his best to joke and lighten to mood of the crew, but their rumbling bellies were a constant reminder not only of the lack of rations, but of what was in the hold.

The Captain had put both Jefferys and Rocko in charge of the rabbit. He had it moved to its own private quarters under guard.

“Don’t I have enough to do without shoveling the shit of the Captain’s new pet,” was what Jefferys had to say about it later. Most of the duty time fell to Rocko. He would stop by to quickly feed the white rabbit, but after a time he began to stay longer and watch, chuckling at the way she nibbled. Eventually, he began to let her from her luxurious pen, and pet her. He named her Luna and once or twice he lost track of the time while playing with the fuzzy creature, and would get castigated for showing up late for his duties. He asked Jefferys to fill in for him quite frequently, a chore he gladly gave up, and soon Rocko was the sole companion of Luna. Sometimes he caught himself staring at the rabbit for long periods of time and when he realized it, he saw the rabbit staring right back. She liked him, he thought, and that made him happy. On these long days it was nice to have something to care for.

After a considerable time the sisters, who had been working nonstop, completed mending the sails. They were back on their way to the Moon, but it was still days off due to their detour. The crew grumbled in the Mess as the last of the rations were distributed. A particularly hungry and surly crew member slammed his mostly empty tray down on the table with a bang.

“I’m sick of this shit! Let’s eat that god-damned rabbit! The thing’s the size of a dog!”

A significant portion of the crew rang out in agreement. Rocko jumped up.

“Dat bunny is wert more dan your stinking lives! An da Captain said to leave it be!”

“Rocko, ain’t you hungry! Whatever money the Captain gets for that stupid thing won’t be coming to us! Where is it, Rocko?” cried a crew member.

“You’re not getting dat bunny! Leave it!” Rocko yelled, and slammed his fist down on the table. Shoving started and someone toppled over a table. Rocko rammed his fist into the shouters chin. A cacophony echoed though the ship.

“CAPTAIN ON DECK!”

Captain Connor walked through the middle of the brawlers. Everything had ceased and the disgruntled followed him with furrowed brows.

“I know you’re all hungry! But the rabbit is to be LEFT ALONE! I’ve made promises. Money is at stake. You have no idea of what is waiting for us upon arrival. It will be worth it. So, man up! Tighten your belts! People have lasted longer on less. We are on our way. Don’t fuck it up now! Or so help me! I’ll set you adrift!” the Captain hollered.

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The next evening, Rocko was watching the rabbit. He was talking to her as had become his habit. The rabbit appeared to enjoy it.

“Now, I know you’re hungry Luna. But don’ you worry your fuzzy white head. We will eat like we rule da Moon when we get der.” The rabbit’s ears perked up. “You like dat eh? Loads of carrots an cabbage...” he was interrupted as Jefferys came into the room.

“What’chu doin in here, Jefferys?” asked Rocko.

“I’ve come to watch the rabbit, of course,” replied Jefferys.

“An you haven’t come for dat in ages. Why now? Eh?” he eyed Jefferys up.

“Look, the Captain ordered it. You heard him. Now leave. It’s my shift.”

“No,” Rocko said deeply and stepped between the rabbit and Jefferys.

“Rocko, Rocko, nothing’s gonna happen to it.”

Rocko said nothing. His gaze looked beyond the door that was slightly open and there he saw the ravenous faces of the crew.

“So what, you gonna make a bunny stew. Is dat it, Jefferys? Well, let’s see if you can get tru me?”

Rocko deftly lunged to Jefferys side and tossed him into the wall. From the door burst the vanguard of the crew. Rocko swung his fists catching a few in the neck and face before they were on him. Jefferys got up from his slumped spot and pulled a knife from his belt. A flash of blade and blood pooled on the floor. Rocko lay in a heap still between them and the now helpless rabbit.

“Shit! Jefferys, you didn’t have to kill him.”

“Fucked if I didn’t! Well boys! Time to eat!”

A shot deafened them all. The Captain stood in the doorway, his pistol leveled. Jefferys collapsed on the floor next to Rocko.

“Everyone back away from Rocko and the rabbit! NOW!” he ushered them out the door. “Now, we’re gonna stay on course! If you lot so much as breathe on this door you’ll have a hole in your belly and it won’t be from hunger! If you get us to Mare Nubium alive then maybe I won’t have the lot of you arrested for mutiny! Get back to your duties, shut that door, and fuck off!”

The door slammed shut and the Captain and the rabbit were alone.

“Thank you, Captain” came a small voice from behind him. He whipped around aiming the pistol at nobody. With trepidation he lowered himself down and nudged both Rocko and Jefferys on the floor. They were certainly dead. Then he looked at the rabbit. The rabbit looked back.

“I’m going mental up here! Shit, I hate it!” he said to himself.

“I assure you, Captain. You are fine,” said the rabbit. Captain Connor fell back into the wall. “What manner of lunacy ... how can you?” the Captain stuttered.

“I apologize for not making you privy to my abilities as I know it is very strange to you indeed. But, we are in a vitriolic situation and I feel I may be able to help.”

The Captain shook his head, pulled at his hair, stomped about the room, “This is lunacy! Lunacy! Talking rabbits now is it!? And how are you going to help me Bugs? For fucks sake!”

“Please my dear man. At this very moment your crew is outside that door debating whether or not to kill you and me and take the ship.”

“How can you be talking to me?” the Captain whined.

“It is a long story, which I will be willing to tell you, but first you must listen to how we are going to get ourselves out of this situation.”

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Outside of the room the crew roiled. Some yelled, others beat the walls. A turbulence was frothing and would quickly become frantic.

“You heard him! We’re all to be arrested!”

“Take the ship, I say. We could take her to Ganymede.”

“We’ve no supplies, ya pillock! We’ll barely make the Moon.”

“We can’t let him simply put us in. No without a fight!”

“Kill ‘em both and eat em!”

“You fuckin charva! You would wouldn’t ya!”

They touselled about like rough waters until suddenly the door opened. They all crowded over each other to look inside. There the rabbit sat, large, white and fluffy, and spoke: “If all of you would remain calm I believe we can come to some sort of arrangement.”

Everything went quiet as their eyes popped from their heads. Some looked incredulously to each other for proof of a prank. Then, an eruption. In their anger they all simultaneously made for the door and wedged one another. This gave the Captain enough time to fire his pistol in the air. The shock of the ear piercing report and the ricochet that followed silenced the group.

“All of you, shut the hell up!” the Captain yelled. “This is no ordinary rabbit! You must listen and you will know why we must get her to the Moon.”

The rabbit tried again: “I know that all of you are tired and hungry. That you have had not a scrap for days. If you decided to cook me up then I am sure that your growling bellies would be silenced briefly, but imagine for a moment please, never being hungry again. Never being thirsty again. These things could be for you mere trifles. You would eat simply for the taste or satisfaction but not for sustenance. You would drink not for thirst but for enjoyment, intoxication, what you will. What I can offer you for my safe passage to the Moon is something that few humans have ever had the opportunity to gain. It is beyond riches. It is the stuff of legend, but I assure you it is very real.”

“What is it talking about?” yelled the crew.

“I am speaking, my poor famished sirs, of immortality. I look to you a rabbit, and I am, but I am also thousands of years old. My story was told by numerous peoples in fables. Long ago I learned from visitors the art of shaping immortality in the form of a drug and I have been doing so for these visitors for thousands of years thence. If you assure my safe arrival at the Sea of Clouds then this I promise you — that each of you shall receive immortality in a capsule, the chance to live forever.”

The crew stood agape, fixated by the rabbit. Captain Connor stepped into the doorway.

“So now you know. As I said, every man and woman to their posts! Let’s get this ship to port and gain what all have wanted since the beginning of time. The greatest treasure ever attained! Go! You Dogs! Make way! We will cheat death in a day!” He slammed the door shut on their stunned faces.

The Captain stayed in the small room with the rabbit until they reached port at the Sea of Clouds. They discussed the rabbit’s past. Astounded, he listened to her rhapsodically recall the past as she glowed white in her comfy cage.

After a few days the crew gave up thoughts of eating the rabbit. The Captain said as much to the rabbit, “I believe we are out of danger. Only a short while until we arrive and you are safe.” The rabbit began to recite:

“I many times thought peace had come,  
When peace was far away;  
As wrecked men deem they sight the land  
At the centre of the sea,  
And struggle slacker, but to prove,  
As hopelessly as I,  
How many the fictitious shores  
Before the harbor lie.”

“That is lovely, rabbit,” said the Captain.

“It is one of your own,” said the rabbit in reply. “A poet from long ago. She knew how to attain the best immortality. Her pestle and mortar were truth and beauty.”

As the ship moved into port at Mare Nubium, the bedraggled crew anxiously awaited their prize. *The Chang'e* slipped into dock silently. A uniformed man stepped quickly through the ship and her stink to the room housing the Jade Rabbit. With white gloves he ceremoniously bent down and picked her up, and they whispered back and forth.

The uniformed man stood before the Captain who slouched in his seat with his head in his hands. "Captain, the Jade Rabbit has informed me what you are owed. If you would come with me you will be sorted. Also, where is the crewman named Rocko? I was informed that he is deceased. Could you show me to his body, please?"

Captain Connor grudgingly rose and followed the uniformed man. He looked back at the rabbit.

"Remember, one must pay dearly for immortality," she said.

The Jade Rabbit was carried off *The Chang'e* and placed on a table overflowing with her favorite vegetables. Later, as she munched on her preferred sprouts Rocko walked into the room, followed by the uniformed man.

"As ordered, my Lady, the crew were given the pills. We then sent them adrift toward the Empty Regions. Nobody will find them there," said the uniformed man.

The rabbit squeaked in approval.

"I don't remember a ting, Luna," said Rocko to the rabbit. "What happened?"

"My dear Rocko, you sacrificed yourself for me. A true act of love and compassion. I will teach you to pound the elixir of life. Together we will laugh and live and watch it all again...someday."