

Chain Reaction

by Louise Cooper

Everyone was enjoying the cruise. The weather was warm and sunny, the sea was calm, and the passengers hadn't complained about anything, which was unusual. Even the chief engineer wasn't bad-tempered, which was *very* unusual.

Until, one morning, the ship suddenly stopped.

'What's going on?' roared the captain from the bridge. The jolt had spilled his morning coffee all over his uniform.

'Don't know, sir!' the third mate shouted back. 'But I think we've snagged our propeller on something!'

The chief engineer hastily shut down the engines (which *did* make him bad-tempered), and the trouble was investigated. The propeller was snagged, all right. An enormous chain was wrapped around it, and if the engineer had not acted so quickly the blades would have been mashed beyond repair.

'What idiot left a thundering great chain drifting around in the sea?' the captain growled.

'Don't know, sir,' the third mate said again, gloomily. 'But it's going to take some clearing.'

The captain sighed and looked around. It could have been worse, he supposed. The sea was dotted with small islands fringed by white beaches on which waves broke gently. The sun shone from a cloudless sky. If the purser organised a few deck games, then with any luck the crew could free the propeller before the passengers started grumbling.

They set to work, and by lunchtime they had untangled the propeller. But the captain was curious. The freed chain disappeared down into the sea, with no end in sight. Who on earth had put it there, and why? He wanted to find out, and another hour wouldn't hurt.

'Haul it in,' he ordered the second mate (the third mate was off duty by now). 'Let's find out if it's attached to anything. If it isn't, I'll complain to the local coastguards—it's a hazard to shipping!'

The crew started to heave the chain aboard. It came easily enough, but there was a lot of it. Half an hour passed, and they were still hauling. Then suddenly the chain became harder to winch in.

'I think we're nearly there, sir!' the second mate panted.

The captain did not reply. He was staring at the nearest island. Strange... the beach looked much bigger than before. And the low cliffs weren't low any more, but seemed to have grown. 'Sir!' bawled the second mate. 'Come and look at this!' The captain hurried to the winch. The crew had reached the end of the chain. Attached to it, bumping and clanging against the ship's side as it was heaved up, was a circular object about five metres across. The captain frowned. It reminded him of something. In fact he had a thing just like it, though much, much smaller, in the bath in his private cabin. It was...

A plug?

He looked at the islands again. The beaches *were* getting bigger. The cliffs *were* getting higher. As if the sea level was dropping...

'Oops...' said the captain.

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