



*Dahlia*

The Divine Vessel cut cleanly through the smooth waters of the Pacific Ocean towards the equator and her rendezvous with the Martian army in six days time. She had sensed things were not right when the young cadet had been crushed to death beneath the container back in South Korea, and it had pained her to be witness to the loss of the couple to the immense depths of the ocean last night. For the past few days late at night she had been able to feel the Martians making their preparations deep inside her holds, and now this activity began to increase as the time drew closer.

Though aware of the horrific story unfolding upon her, the Divine Vessel found herself powerless to change the course of events. Deep down in her hot loud engine room the Martian that controlled Andre Valov, the chief engineer of the ship, kept a close eye on her engine, ensuring that it continued to produce the steady one hundred and twenty rpm that drove her huge propeller. Whilst up on her bridge the Martian Oddbjorn Ballengrud, the supposed chief officer, kept a close eye out that her course never strayed from one hundred and fifty four degrees, and that her speed never dropped below fourteen knots. The Divine Vessel only wished she could do something to stop these nasty Martians, and felt terrible that she was the one vital component that made their whole plan work. Her only hope that the imminent disaster about to befall planet Earth could be stopped lay in the remaining, non Martian, crew of the ship. She hoped that the second and third engineers might become suspicious of the chief engineer, or that the chief officer might let something slip that would make the second and third officers take action. There was also the boson, the electrician, the painter, the motorman, the skipper and the steward, surely one of

these would notice something, and rally the others support to overthrow the Martian's dastardly plan. However, the Martian Captain Pimento kept an extremely close eye on all of them, watching out for the slightest signs of suspicion and as the days went by and the temperature rose the captain proved extremely good at his job of spotting trouble.

The first of the crew to grow suspicious of the Martians presence was the electrician, a tall pale unkempt Ukrainian called Uri Kurchev. He was a quiet, shy man that stuttered badly when talking to people that held authority over him. He spent the majority of his time on the ship in his workshop, hidden away at the back of the engine room, fixing the ships circuits, or in his cabin fiddling with his antiquated ham radio set. He'd spend most evenings trying to pick up signals from other operators of similar sets around the world, and it was here in the security of his cabin that he found he could speak with confidence to the faceless crackling voices that he conjured from the set. Uri was sat in front of his ham radio, with his large headphones on, slowly tuning the dials the night that the Divine Vessel had departed Japan. He had already talked to an Australian sheep farmer about the sadness they both felt at losing their mothers at a young age, and to a Chinese hotel owner about the beautiful dahlias he had grown that year, when he picked up a transmission that he at first took to be just a practical joke.

'Stand by for transmission, in three, in two, in one, we are now broadcasting live to Earth.' He was about to tune out, as he often came across silly nonsense, when he heard the message continue, 'Hello...hello...Can anyone hear me? This is Mars calling the Divine Vessel...Is there anybody out there?' The mention of the ship's name caught Uri's attention and made him listen closely. The signal was weak but with some small adjustments Uri was able to amplify it enough to hear quite clearly. He wondered whether he should reply, perhaps it was him that they were trying to contact, but before he could push the talk button on the base of his

microphone someone else replied. 'We can hear you loud and clear. It is the Commander here on board the Divine Vessel.' For the next two minutes Uri listened avidly to the rest of the broadcast, at first disbelieving that it was his Divine Vessel and then astonished that it was. Who was this Commander Brian person and where was he transmitting from? If he meant everything he had talked about then he would have to be stopped. Uri's own aerial for his radio set was rigged onto the communications mast above the bridge with a long wire that ran down into his cabin. He knew that anyone else wanting to broadcast, especially to all the way to Mars, would also need to do so from there.

Early the next morning Uri quietly made his way from his cabin up onto the roof above the bridge. The donkey sized main unit of the highly advanced interplanetary communications module had been cleared away after the transmission the night before by the three Martians. However in the dim light of the stars they had overlooked a number of its components which they had accidentally left scattered across the roof. Uri wandered across the roof looking at these strange objects. Among them there was a large marrow attached to a fish slice, an empty glass milk bottle full of what looked like gravy, a bottle of Tabasco half protruding from the bottom of a green bucket, and a long snaking cable made from twisted string, pasta and silver foil. Uri knelt down and picked up a marmalade jar that was filled with dried macaroni. The handle of a metal whisk was inserted through a hole in its lid whilst a dozen brightly coloured pegs were attached to the whisking end of the whisk. Uri lifted it to his ear and shook it. It made the sound of macaroni rattling around in a glass jar. However he found that when he slid a red peg along and around the whisk's end the macaroni began to vibrate at such a frequency as to produce a pleasing sound something like a French horn. Each of the variously coloured pegs produced a different note when moved around the whisk end and in no time at all Uri was humming along as he manipulated the pegs 'G...B flat...A...D...G'

‘Uri?’ came a voice from behind him. Uri jumped with surprise and turned to see a man standing over him.

‘Oh, C...c...c...ca...captain P...p...p...pi...pimento! I was about to come and find y...y...y...you. There is something v...v...v...very strange going...’ but before the innocent Uri could complete his stammered sentence the Captain cracked him over the head with the large marrow sending him falling unconscious onto the deck.