



Red Shrimp

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Saturday morning was calm and clear. The hot sun shone brightly into the millpond sea making it twinkle back a dazzling aquamarine blue. The Divine Vessel continued unimpeded towards her equatorial interplanetary rendezvous that was to take place at midday the next day. All was quiet aboard. The chief officer stood alone on the bridge checking her progress and the chief engineer sat in the engine's control room ensuring she didn't drop a revolution. Captain Pimento and the Chinese deck hands continued the building of the highly technically advanced catcher module for the galactic catapult down in hold number three with quiet concentration. They worked now through the day without having to worry about being discovered by the boson or any of the other officers or crew. They thought they had taken care of all of them. Apart from the regular dull drone of the ships engines everything was quiet.

'Hello, anyone in here? Boson, are you there?' It was the voice of Jonas Klimas. The Lithuanian painter of the Divine Vessel had been wandering about the ship for the past hour but had been unable to find anyone. His job was a straightforward one. It was simply to paint the ship. That was all he ever did, he just kept painting. He painted the decks, the hatches, the cleats, the winches, the cranes, the walls, he even painted the anchor chains. Jonas loved the look of a freshly painted surface, its shine, its newness and the intensity of its colour. And the best thing about his job was that once he had painted everything he could find to paint on the ship he had to start all over again. There was artistry in his work, and the occasional chipped surface would reveal the various shades and hues he had experimented with on each subsequent coat of paint. It might be company policy to paint the ships winches orange, but it didn't say any-

where exactly what kind of orange, it could be persimmon or tangerine. His job also allowed him a great deal of autonomy, as it was up to him to decide what required a fresh coat and when, and he could work for many days without coming into close contact with the rest of the crew. This morning however he had gone in search of the boson to get his signature on a requisition form he had filled out for some new tins of paint. Today he had wanted to start work on the deck of the poop deck and had decided to replace last years coat of pea green paint with a brighter more contemporary sap green. To achieve this desired sap green Jonas reckoned that he would need to mix a tin of verdigris with a tin of mimosa yellow, with perhaps a drop or two of doge purple. The main paint store which had the paints he wanted was located at the bow of the ship under the forecastle deck, and he was only officially allowed to requisition paint from it with the signed permission of the boson. The whole system seemed totally unnecessary to Jonas as he was the only one that ever used any of the paint from it.

‘Boson, where are you?’ Jonas had been around all the places he could imagine the boson might be. He had even checked in the ping pong room. Jonas did think it was strange that not even any of the deckhands were about, but he was more concerned about getting those tins of paint and mixing up that lovely vivid sap green. ‘I do have a key for the large padlock on the paint store door in my pocket, and I could always get the boson’s signature when I next saw him,’ Jonas reasoned to himself.

Having made up his mind to requisition the paint without the necessary signature Jonas made his way quickly towards the bow and the paint store. Removing the padlock he stepped into the long dark room. The light wasn’t working and he squinted through the darkness to make out the names on each of the tins that lined the floor to ceiling shelves down both sides of the store. ‘Shrimp red, no, shell pink, no, mars orange, no, mauvette, nice, but no,’ he muttered to himself as he read out each of the labels. ‘Aureolin, no, bluebird blue, hum perhaps for those aft winches, veronica violet...’

He suddenly stopped, was that a sound he heard from the back of the store? 'Hello?' He ventured into the darkness. The sound came again, the movement of bodies on the ground and muffled voices. 'Whose there? What are you doing back there in the dark?' Jonas groped his way slowly further into the darkness towards the source of the noises. Jonas didn't hear the person step into the paint store behind him, nor did he manage to turn in time to see the vicious swollen eyes of the captain as he swung the ten litre tin of mimosa yellow at the painters head. The tin of paint exploded open as it came into contact with Jonas's skull, and as Jonas lay unconscious on the paint store floor moments later dribbles of the lovely rich yellow gloss slowly ran down his cheeks.

And so by Saturday afternoon the Martians had rid the Divine Vessel of almost all her humans. From of the crew just the steward was left, perhaps because the Martians were not so good at cooking themselves, or perhaps because they knew that Rudi had known what was happening all along but had just been too terrified to speak up. Anyway, they left him to scabble around the galley, stripped of most of its implements, and scavenge ingredients from bottles that had lost their tops and jars that had lost their lids. The only other complete human that remained at liberty was the passenger Margaret McKlusky. Who knows why they had spared her so far? Maybe it was her own self interest that had been her saviour. So unconcerned was she about the lives of the people around her that the disappearance of her fellow passengers and the strange behaviour of the remaining crew made little impact on her introspective world.

It had been six days since the Divine Vessel had left Japan, and she had now lost all hope that her crew might save her from being a part in the Martians' evil plan. Tomorrow she would reach the equator and the Martian army would flood down from space and fill her decks. 'Surely nothing could stop these monsters now,' she lamented.

During these days of preparation, as the ship approached the equator, the Martian Commander, Professor George R. Morrello, had sat in his cabin, quite still, his eyes staring only forwards, overseeing everything.