

## **4 Come Cruise With Us !**

### **Episode Four.....Such a Lovely Day for a Ship Soiree**

As the crowd at the front of the dais began to shuffle back to their tables, and the applause had died down. Soon, serving Androids came pushing wheeled trays into the room. uncovering each platter, I could see they held beautifully arranged foods .The delicious smells wafted up filling my senses. My stomach rumbled. I was painfully aware that I hadn't eaten or drank a thing since lying on that cold deck early in the day.

The officer that had led me up to the table, leaned over and quietly said. "As soon as you've eaten, the Bridge has requested your presents. Nothing troublesome,. There is plenty of time for you to dine." I acknowledged his request just as a "Charlie" server came to the table with a full plate for me.

I pushed away from the table as soon as I had eaten my fill. Turning to the officer next to me, I asked, "Do you have a name?". He laughed and replied, " Yes , SIR ! My full name is Lieutenant John Tracy, as you may have guessed by now, I'm your First Officer.

One after another, each of the other officers stood, saluted, said his name, rank and his duty. William Henry, was the Chief Navigator. Carl Olsen the Third officer and Engineering master. Jordan Bell, our medical officer and lastly, Louis Martin the Purser . John said that the Second officer, Morgan, had the watch and would meet us when we reached the bridge.

The officers excused themselves and only First Officer, John, remained. He pulled aside a curtain behind us revealing an elevator door. The spartan transport moved us up several decks and eased to a stop. A hushed swish, its door opened and we stepped onto the Bridge deck.

Electronics of every kind filled the spaces, Monitors covered all flat surfaces except the 180 degree expanse of windows. Quiet alarms rang and were being quieted by one of the half dozen "Delta" robots who were there manning the controls. I asked one of the machines what its name was. It answered in that now familiar monotone " I am Delta Slash Prime Slash Two Zero Six ". Obviously it was one of the more advanced models. It had to be, it was operating the most sensitive controls of this giant ship.

"John, have you had any problems with the Delta robots" I asked.

"Nothing at all , Captain. They work faster than we can "

"Very well",

I surprised myself speaking as a captain would. It seemed to fit me now.

Crossing from Port to the Starboard side, where we stood, a stately older gentleman walked up to me, saluted, and in a deep voice said, " Good evening Captain,

I'm Lieutenant Martin Zorin, Second Officer aboard the.. *MSV.. ATTIS*. ..I'm at your service , Sir".

I liked him from the start. He had the bearing of a steady old "Salt". A twinkle in his eye said to me, humor with confidence. In fact, I felt all of the officers were of the highest quality. I knew they had to be.

This was a pleasure ship full of people on a holiday. They had to feel nothing was going to happen to them. I felt confident that this fine group of officers and the expert operating robots would guard against any dangers.

Martin and I moved to a desk where I was shown the operations log . As Captain, with my signature , I attested that all was well with this vessel and its crew.

As he and I stood looking out of the forward windows, John, my First Officer tapped me on the shoulder and whispered in my ear.

"Captain, I'm afraid it's time you returned to the main lounge.. They are expecting you".  
"Must I ? " I sighed.

"Yes Sir. it IS what they've all been waiting for. You are the guest of honor at the Celebration Ball . As our New Captain, they all want to meet you".

I was floored by that last comment. I had to ask what he meant.

"John, you say I'm the New Captain? How did that happen ?"

He smiled and proudly said... "You were delivered to us, this morning. Now Sir, we are very late".

I almost said stop, but the First Officer was so eager to press on, I agreed to go. We would have a long talk after the celebration ball was over.

The elevator quickly dropped to the Lounge deck, the door open and I stepped out. The room had changed. Dinner tables had been moved to the side. A few couples danced on a small open space that had been occupied by tables.

As I moved out and into view, the crowd applauded. There even were "Ooo's and Ahh's " from every corner of the room. I smiled and waved at the crowd. The applause became louder.

John whispered in my ear that it was expected that I, the new Captain, would walk among the crowd. I was to shake hands and make small talk to as many passengers as possible. I hated the thought, but knew it was part of the job.

I began the tedious job that all Captains dread. Being friendly to the paying crowd.

I met the grand and the lowly, the silly and the sincer. Most were friendly enough, but I was tiring of the show.

Then SHE was there. Like some Greek goddess, the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen was extending her hand toward me. I took it and felt the electric jolt of passion shock me through and through. I heard the name "Marta" and all the rest of the noise around me faded. I saw in her eyes that she had felt the same lovely pain I had felt.

I bent my head to hers and said. "I would like to see you later".

She said nothing, but passed me a card.

The next hour of meeting and greeting past slowly. I was desperate to have a moment alone so that I could read what had been written on the card.

Finally, the last of the well wishers had gone. I found a quiet spot and pulled the card from my pocket.

In a delicate hand, the note read "Meet me on A deck, Port side, lifeboat 27 at 9:30, Marta".

I looked at my watch and it showed 9:15. I told John where I would be and then quickly found a doorway to the outside deck. I was on A deck, Port side but I had to find lifeboat 27. I hadn't realized just how big the vessel was. It took me 10 minutes to find the lifeboat. She was already there, holding out her arms. We embraced and held each other a few minutes before she spoke. "Do you think me brash, inviting you here tonight?" her words warmed me.

"Marta, the moment I touched you, I knew we had to see each other. It was if I've known you forever".

She smiled and whispered, "I felt that too. I want to be near you. Is that possible?"

I hadn't thought of any problem I might cause. As Captain, I shouldn't have an affair with a passenger. I held her tight and told her that I'd find a way.

We stood there for a very long time. Then she shivered, looked up at me saying "I'm cold".

She began to move the shawl she carried over her arms, trying to wrap it around her shoulders. I fumbled trying to help.

The shawl slipped and fell from her left arm....

There it was! A series of letters and numbers tattooed on that dainty arm.

They read "Beta/ Lima Plus/Female/1274".

I went cold...

My beautiful Marta was a God Damned Machine !

I don't know what I said to her, Something about having to get back to the Bridge. Something about, My duty as a Captain and how it would be impossible for us to be together. I left her at the rail, sobbing. I couldn't feel sorry for her though.. After all..

She was just a machine.

end Part Four.

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