

Quo Vadis Voyager (By Robert Bee)

The freezing water with its hapless denizens streamed off the deck through the gunnels on its journey back to the ocean's bottom from which the SS Voyager had just emerged.

The surfacing ship glistened in the sun like a huge multi-eyed whale, venting fumes stored during its four hour excursion into the depths of the ocean trench. Sombre grey stabilising fins and pressure resistant shielding slowly retracted to reveal the festive colours of a Pacific cruise ship, once more suited for surface level pressures.

As the deck dried and robot servants scurried to erect deck chairs and umbrellas, passengers emerged to see the Sun again, as if a long lost friend.

"Struth, that beat scoring the winning goal against Liverpool," exclaimed a tall athletic man leaning over the railing, watching the last of the phosphorescent water sink out of sight. Brad Calder, known to his world-wide soccer fans as "Lightning," selected a cocktail from a passing tray held by a scantily clad waitress and contemplated making a pass of a non-soccer ball type.

"I wouldn't bother," drawled the chisel faced man who had joined Calder at the railing. "They haven't ironed out the glitches in the Pentium 10 Eros chip in that model yet."

Calder eyed the departing waitress's undulating posterior, shrugged, then turned to his fellow passenger, Joseph F. Riche. Those in the know thought the 'F' stood for 'filthy,' which could be taken whichever way you wanted.

"And how would you know, Joe? Personal experience?"

Riche flinched at the crude abbreviation of his name. "Yes, but not the kind you mean. My company makes most of the world's robots. We've had a few million returned with complaints about the ... responsiveness... of that model. Cost us heaps in warranty."

Calder grinned. "What's a few hundred million to your billions..?" He paused, noticing Riche's amused smile. "Trillions?"

Bored with this direction of conversation, Riche cast his glance around the deck. A large throng of sun-seeking passengers were occupied in 3 Ss of cruise pursuits – sunning, sipping and sleeping. His manner brightened instantly. "Ah, 22nd century technology can't beat the real thing. Here's Celeste." He quickly checked his reflection in a saloon window, fluffed his cravat into a more jaunty arrangement. "Don't you have some goal posts to polish? I have company."

Calder admired the beautiful redhead approaching. "It's a free deck, I'll stay. Besides... Joe... I believe Miss duPree has company of her own."

"Who on Earth..?" Riche stared at the pale skinned man talking animatedly to Celeste duPree as they walked towards him.

"Not a clue," answered Calder, "though I've seen him about ship. An odd one if you ask me."

"Odd?" Riche couldn't take his eyes off Celeste. He'd been captivated by her the first time she performed on the cruise. While billed as a cabaret singer, she was far more than that to Riche. She was... what? More than the most talented multi-voicer he'd ever heard, her dulcet second and third altos joining her exquisitely pure soprano in harmonies that thrilled his long lost soul. She was... the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. And she was going to be his. He had trillions of reasons for absolute confidence, and he had a ring worth an emperor's ransom waiting for her perfect finger. "Why odd? Ah... I see."

Celeste's pale companion had suddenly dropped to the deck, turned onto his back and slithered beneath a life boat, poking his head into the flare of its anti-grav drive. His muffled voice could be heard in snatches of frustration, then amazement. Celeste stood bemused, then saw Riche and Calder. She strolled over, her smile driving another arrow through Riche's smitten heart.

"Joseph, Lightning. Have you met Ulysses?" She gestured back towards the life raft, where only a pair of sandalled feet could be seen poking out.

"Ulysses!" both men blurted. "And what's he doing over... or under... there," Riche continued. "Checking out the engine of the good ship Argo?"

"Probably," Calder agreed. "That's what I was saying before. Ever since he came on board, he's had his head into every bit of machinery. Anyone would think he's never seen an anti-grav drive before. And the way he eyes the robo-waitresses... and the waiters, come to think of it. Do you suppose he might be bi..."

"Forget what'sisname," Riche said. "Celeste, I wanted to ask you..."

"Shostak," Celeste said.

"What?"

"That's his name. Ulysses Shostak. He's a pilot."

"A pilot who's never seen an anti-grav drive? No, he's a con artist, Celeste. Avoid him. Look, let's have a quite drink, I have something to ask you."

"First I have something to ask you, Joseph." Celeste stared at the beautiful diamond ring on the table. "Do you think it possible for two people to meet for the first time, on a cruise, people from worlds apart, and to genuinely fall in love and be together forever?"

Riche's heart pounded with realisation of un hoped for joy. He had expected his wealth to win her body, but her heart as well? "Of course I do, Celeste."

"Thank you Joseph, you've made me so happy." She touched his hand. "I will marry him then."

"Celeste, you've made... what?"

"I'm going to marry Ulysses."

"That pale skinned, ignorant pilot who doesn't even know what century he's in? I can show you the world, take you to tops of mountains, meet kings and presidents. What can he show you?"

Celeste picked up the ring and handed it back to Riche. "Before yours and my grand-parents were born, Ulysses Shostak left Earth in the first star ship, travelled at near light-speed to distant stars and civilisations, and now, thanks to Einstein's relativity, is back only ten years older. After this cruise, he's taking me back to Tau Ceti. I think that trumps your mountains and presidents."

Celeste kissed Riche gently on his forehead, then walked gracefully from the salon toward the sunshine, her beautiful trio voice trilling a joyful song in her wake.

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