

Traveller PBEM

The Plankwell Campaign Chapters 1-46

TRAVELLER

*Science-Fiction Adventure ☺
on Jewell*

play-by-email

Traveller Play-By-Email Plankwell Campaign

GMing: Jim Vassilakos & Timothy Collinson,
Playing Capt. Plankwell: Phil Pugliese (Ch 1-5) & Conrad Rader (Ch 5-46)

In Alarums & Excursions¹ #534 & #535, I introduced a pair of frameworks for playing single-player/multi-GM RPG campaigns. What follows is the beginning of a write-up of one such campaign, one based in Traveller's Third Imperium, which was first devised by Game Designers' Workshop and later elaborated upon by numerous other publishers.² Co-GMing with me is Timothy Collinson, and playing the protagonist is Phil Pugliese (Chapters 1-5) and Conrad Rader (Chapters 5-46).

So far, Timothy and I have *not* adhered to either of the aforementioned frameworks. Due to time constraints as well as medical issues, Timothy opted to take more of a supportive role. Nonetheless, he provided most of the description of the INS Jaqueline in Chapters 1-3 and created character sheets for most of the NPCs, also running the occasional NPC and serving as a sounding board and editor, which had been extremely helpful.

The upshot is that this campaign is an experiment in both roleplaying as well as collaborative writing. What we're trying to do, essentially, is determine how well 1PMG (single-player/multi-GM) roleplaying functions in an actual PBEM and also how easily the email logs can be translated into fiction.

I've learned a few important lessons so far, as there are some non-intuitive ways in which this style of roleplaying should probably be practiced. Overall, however, the process seems to work. Obviously, you can judge the results for yourself, but if you'd like to learn more about this form of roleplaying/writing, feel free to contact me. My email is on the last page.

1 See <https://conchord.org/xeno/aande.html> for subscription information and <https://mega.nz/folder/hGYliCKK#a0fr1dDhy3no6Ey5xNPukQ> for my past A&E zines.

2 The Traveller game in all forms is owned by Far Future Enterprises. Copyright 1977-2024 Far Future Enterprises.

Chapter 1 The New Assignment

117-1114: Jewell, Plankwell Naval Base, BOQ (Bachelor Officers Quarters)

Hazel eyes briefly met mine in the mirror as I took one last look. I stepped back, checking my uniform for lint or loose threads. My new shoulder boards were those of a captain in the Imperial Navy. I still couldn't believe it.

I was the youngest captain I'd ever met. Only one percent of officers ever rose this far, yet here I was, at forty-two³, and promoted at a base that bore the name of my most illustrious ancestor. I chuckled, thinking of the crusty, old commodore who'd been my supervising officer during my last assignment.

Guess the old guy liked me, after all.

3 Phil used a Traveller character generator at <http://traveller.chromeblack.com/files/mtpcgen.html> to create his character, which he based on a character of the same name he played in a Traveller PBEM twenty and some odd years ago. One idiosyncrasy about this character generator, however, is that it skips the rank of sublieutenant, so he ended up being a Captain rather than a Commander. In addition to this, it's my intuition that Traveller character generation is broken in the sense that it allows promotions to higher ranks to be as accessible as promotions to lower ones. If one assumes a 50% rate of promotion per four-year term, then the odds of getting all the way to Commodore in six terms of service (six promotions in twenty-four years) would be $(\frac{1}{2})^6 = 1.5\%$. The odds of reaching only Captain in the same amount of time would be a lot higher, probably around 9%. If one assumes a sufficiently bloated military, then one can go ahead and accept the Traveller rules as written, but then you're likely to have only admirals and above commanding large (10000+ ton) ships. Also, you'd have a hierarchical structure that more resembles a vase than a pyramid. So how common are captains in the real navy? I pulled the 1% figure from the second table at <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/12005> (the number given is actually 1.5%, but I've read critiques that the U.S. military is top-heavy).

A knock emanated from the door, and I opened it with the push of a button.

“The shuttle’s ready for you, sir.”

I donned my hat, took one last look in the mirror, then turned to the rating, gesturing toward my duffel bag. “Take that for me, will you?”

He picked up my bag, and I followed him out the door, no idea as to which hanger held my shuttle.

My shuttle.

I’d been assigned to the INS Jaqueline to serve as her commanding officer, meaning that the ship’s shuttle was, indeed, mine. That I should have a command didn’t baffle me. It was about time. But the choice of ship had no doubt been made by some admiral with a dark sense of humor.

Jaqueline⁴, of course, was the name of the Empress my famous ancestor had deposed in order to end her devious machinations. Indeed, she’d tried quite fervently to bring about his untimely demise. Despite this, however, many had called his action murder — or regicide, to be more precise — although the more mainstream view was he was justified, given the exigencies of the time. Since the reign of Empress Arbellatra⁵, the Imperium had officially taken that view, but there were still many historical revisionists who argued that the bad guys won.⁶

The only consolation was that all this happened roughly five centuries ago. Nonetheless, I always had to wonder what someone would think of me upon learning that I was indeed a descendant of none other than Olav hault-Plankwell.⁷

My uncle, Bernart, confessed that he faced the same thing, but for him it was worse. People in

the private sector held a less favorable view of old Olav than those in the military, and more specifically, those in the navy, where he was still regarded as the greatest admiral the Spinward Marches, and perhaps the entire Imperium, had ever known.

So it was that when Bernart asked if I wanted to join him in making credits hand-over-fist, I declined. Better to serve in the Imperial Navy, as old Admiral Olav did, than to acquire great wealth but be resented for one’s ancestry. Even if it happened only once in a while, as he said, what would the anticipation of the next occurrence be like, psychologically? What toll did it take on him? People giving him the stink-eye because of something a professor said at some unaccredited college — No, I’d chosen my path long ago, and come hell or the vacuum of space, I’d walk that path to the end, whatever the end might be.

The hanger doors opened, revealing a twenty-ton launch, its silver exterior gleaming in the artificial light. Likewise, the welcoming committee looked to be all spit and polish, spines stiffening as I approached the shuttle’s ramp. A female with a commander’s shoulder boards crisply saluted me, and the rest of the welcoming party followed suit. The commander, my executive officer, I presumed, was as beautiful a woman as I’d ever seen in uniform: raven hair, high cheekbones, and porcelain white skin. As per protocol, she held her salute until I returned it, maintaining firm eye contact as she lowered her hand and twitched her little finger. The rating standing opposite her didn’t miss it and hurried forward to take my luggage.

“Commander Stefani Nizlich, *sir*.” The *sir* was clearly emphasized, but there was a strong accent. A swordworlder? “Velcome. This vay if you vould.”

As we headed up the ramp, her small squad fell in behind, and once on the shuttle, she motioned me toward the forward compartment.

“Ve’ve prepared a forward couch, but if you’d like to take the co-pilot’s seat...”

“The couch will be fine,” I replied. I did prefer the co-pilot’s seat, but I didn’t want to start micromanaging. Having been a ship’s boat pilot myself, I knew how nerve-racking it was to have a captain watching your every move.

4 Her name has been spelled as both Jaqueline & Jacqueline in Classic Traveller, MegaTraveller, GURPS: Traveller, and the Mongoose edition.

5 <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Arbellatra>

6 That was my view, and I posted about it on the Traveller Mailing List to see what other people thought (<https://archives.simplelists.com/tml/msg/16890994/>), but it wasn’t until I read about Arbella that I realized that her mother was a Plankwell, so Olav, who assisted her in her naval career, was a blood relation. No wonder his reputation got salvaged! When Arbella won the civil war, Olav became a deceased member of the new Imperial family, as well as the prime instigator for the war that brought her to power.

7 <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Olav>

We all strapped in, Nizlich taking the co-pilot seat directly in front of me.

“Ve expect transit time to be twenty-three minutes. Ve are ready to depart at your order, sir.”

“Proceed.”

We darted up and out of the hanger like a hungry hopper-hawk chasing its next meal. Fortunately, the inertial compensation kicked in, so there was only a slight jolt inside the shuttle.

“Easy does it, Jimenez. Ve don't want the Captain's first requisition order to be for a new launch.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

I couldn't see the pilot's face, but I could imagine her grinning, if that had been intended, or sweating if it hadn't.

Jewell's sun settled low on the horizon, streaming rays of red and gold, but as we rose above the clouds, so did it, brightening as we climbed to orbit. The cockpit window dimmed in response, and Commander Nizlich unstrapped her safety harness, reaching back to pass me a handcomp.

“You should be able to join our comms net with this authorization.”

Comms net? Malarkey. She wanted to verify that I was, indeed, who I presented myself to be, and not some impostor. Rather sharp of her, yet socially adroit.

I let it scan the palm of my hand, followed by a voice and then a retinal print.

“Satisfied?” I asked, handing it back.

Before she could conjure a reply, a steward came into the cockpit. “Drinks?”

Nizlich shook her head.

“Zardocha⁸,” I said, “ice-blended with an ounce of Frangelico, if you have it.”

“Amaretto would be our closest substitute, sir.”

“Amaretto, then.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“Sir.” Nizlich proffered the handcomp once more. “A proposed schedule for the rest of the

day. Completely at your discretion of course; or reordering.” Captain's stateroom, tour of the ship, finishing on the bridge, inspection of bridge crew, briefing with officers, and reception with senior officers and invited guests. Invited guests?

She'd allotted four hours for the tour, inspection, and briefing, which, given the Jaqueline's size of seventy-five thousand tons, meant there would likely be zero downtime.

“Very well, commander, I believe this itinerary will do just fine.”

The steward returned with my drink, and the amaretto, if it was only an ounce, had to be top shelf.

“Make sure ve stock Frangelico from now on,” Nizlich told him.

“Aye aye, sir⁹,” the steward responded.

Two dragonflies¹⁰ met us at about thirty kilometers in altitude, and sidled up to our port and starboard wings. Escorts. Totally unnecessary, of course. We were above the largest naval base in the subsector, but it must have been a formality that Nizlich had planned, for she'd smiled as soon as they came into view.

Meanwhile, I slowly nursed my zardocha, making sure to keep it above the fill line until we got onboard. Not that I stood any chance of getting tipsy. The caffeine would more than make up for the alcohol. But I didn't want the steward hovering, waiting expectantly for the moment he'd be required to top off my glass.

Soon enough, the highport came into view, and not far from it, the INS Jaqueline. She was an Amara-class cruiser, the largest of the Element-family, which included the Ghalalk and Khumakirri classes. Fully-loaded with all her pods, she could carry a crew roster of well over a thousand souls.

I wouldn't be the commanding officer to all of them, of course. There would be marines as well as members of the scout service, each with their own separate chains of command, and my only formal connection to them would be through their

8 Zardocha? I made it up. Phil said his character wanted a strong drink, but not so strong to raise eyebrows. I thought the navy prohibited alcohol. Well, apparently it's okay in the British Navy, and I figured the Imperial Navy would be more likely to follow the Brits than us Yanks. In any case, zardocha, for those who care, was first described in Quanta #5 (July 1990). See <http://koapp.narod.ru/english/journal/book8.htm>.

9 There's some confusion in today's military over whether female officers should be called sir or ma'am (see <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/alpha-blog-charlie/202103/the-female-military-officer-is-called-sir>). In the Imperial military, for the purposes of this campaign, either option is acceptable.

10 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Dragonfly_class_Light_Fighter

liaison officers. Nonetheless, the responsibility was immense, and like nothing I'd ever before experienced.

At first a distant speck, like a silverbug resting on a black wall, she grew and grew, soon filling the entire cockpit window, her crystaliron hull gleaming in the unfiltered sunlight.

The two fighters withdrew to their hanger, and we docked along the outside of the ship. We unbuckled and stood, walking toward the airlocks as they pressurized.

As the inner airlock opened, a bosun piped the traditional *Captain aboard* signal, and the crew on either side of the alleyway snapped to attention and saluted. At the end of this welcome line, the bosun ceremonially held out a cap with a *Jaqueline* insignia on it.

"The crew of the INS *Jaqueline* at your command, sir!" Commander Nizlich said, more than loud enough for all to hear. "Welcome aboard, sir!"

"Very tight and shipshape, Commander." I nodded, accepting the cap. "Just the way I prefer. You may proceed with the itinerary."

Nizlich gave the slightest of nods. "This vay, sir."

She led me through the port airlock on what I guessed to be Deck 2. Actually, I *knew* more than I *guessed*, as I'd already studied the deck plans, but seeing the spaces for real was quite different than looking at classified blueprints. The alleyways all seemed narrower than I'd envisioned, with various doodads sticking out at odd angles, a good way to smash one's head or shin if trying to double-time it from one place to another.

The unfamiliarity wasn't merely due to the fact that I hadn't been aboard the *Jaqueline* before this. Truth be told, I hadn't spent time aboard any large combatant since the war. By contrast, Nizlich knew exactly when to weave and duck as she led me toward officers' quarters.

"Vatch your head on this vun," she pointed. "Pretty sure the architects never spent any time aboard vith crew. If they had, they might have gotten accidentally spaced."

Passing crew saluted, and soon we approached officer country and a switch to carpets and bulkheads that weren't all pipes and signage. A

lieutenant passed us in dress uniform, complete with medals and cutlass.

"Commander," he said, and then a sharper "Captain," as he noticed my shoulder boards.

"Carry on, Lieutenant," Nizlich said, even as he straightened and saluted.

We turned into a section I recognized as the command officers' mess, and Nizlich led me down an alleyway with a 90° turn, to what I quickly realized was my stateroom. On one side of the door, the rating, still holding my bag, stood at attention. Nizlich must have sent him ahead during the hat ceremony.

On the other side of the door was a palm scanner. I put my hand on it, and the door slid open, revealing a larger stateroom than any I'd ever been assigned. There was more faux-wood than I'd ever seen in a military cabin, and it gleamed as the automatic lights switched on.

The rating followed me in, still standing at attention as I surveyed the room. The centerpiece was a low kava table, and resting upon it was an envelope. I walked over to get a closer look. The envelope was clearly of the highest quality, "RJJ" embossed in gold along its top-left corner, and the words, inscribed in black ink, "To my successor" taking center stage.

I pointed to a spot on the floor, and said, "Thank you," to the crewman. "That will be all."

He placed my luggage upon the exact spot at which I'd pointed and quickly saluted, Nizlich, still at the door, giving him a crisp nod as he left.

"Sir, how long do you vant until the tour?"

"Well, if we only have four hours..."

"Everything can be pushed back, sir. It's your ship. Everything will be as you vish, or I'm not doing my job... sir."

"Well..." I felt slightly lightheaded, but I wasn't about to contradict. "One hour, then. That should give me time to get settled. And, by the way, Commander... what's the big occasion that required that lieutenant to be in full dress?"

"Ah. I believe he's attending a function." She pursed her lips. "A conjoining ceremony if I recall correctly. Shore leave ends tomorrow, unless... vell... I vill see you in vun hour, sir." With that, she quit the stateroom doorway and left me to my own devices.

Chapter 2

The Tour

To: Relieving Captain, INS Jaqueline
From: Captain Rishard Jellic Jenkins
Date: 1114/115

Dear Captain,

Congratulations on your new command, and welcome to the INS Jaqueline. She may not be the newest the Navy can offer, nor the fastest, but she's staunch and may yet get you out of a tight spot.

As you are aware, early deployment orders have meant I'm unable to handover to you personally. However, I leave you in the more than capable hands of Commander Nizlich who has been briefed to her clearance level and will no doubt provide you with as much background as you require. I've given her a long rein and will leave you to assess whether this has served the ship in a manner that suits you.

On the ship's computer, under Captain's documents, you will find the relevant briefing documents and handover papers as per regulations. Just say "Hello Computer" to access.

I wish you all the best for your command and every success for your future deployment.

In the service of the Third Imperium. Long live Emperor Strephon!

- R.J. Jenkins

"Hello, computer."

"Hello Captain Plankwell," a feminine voice responded as the faux wood paneling along the wall to my right separated, exposing a holographic console that quickly unfolded itself, soon taking up well over a square meter of floor space.

I rolled a chair over to it, one of the two sitting behind the kava table. Being on magnetic balls, it stuck to the deck and would do so even if we lost gravity. One side had a hand brake and height adjuster. On the other side was a cup holder.

"Can you make me something to drink?" I asked.

"What would you like to drink?" the voice asked.

"More zardocha, I suppose."

"How do you like your zardocha?"

"Ice-blended with a shot of Frangelico."

"I am not stocked with..."

"Amaretto, then."

"To confirm... you want a medium zardocha, ice-blended, with a half-ounce of amaretto."

"A full ounce." *A stingy bartender, no less. Who programmed you? Some Zhodani-sympathizer?*

"To confirm..."

"Yes, confirmed. And bring it over, will you?"

I sat down.

Now let's see. Captain's documents. Oh, there it is.

As promised, there was a long list of attached documents: copies of the ship's logbooks, her muster list, standing orders, pod status reports, various manifests, and, of course, divisional briefs from each of the senior officers. I touched "standing orders" and watched as it expanded to fill the screen.

The Jaqueline was on border patrol, but we were so far from sector command that I was essentially free to do whatever I thought best served Imperial interests. All I had to do was stay within ten parsecs of the Imperial border *unless necessity should dictate otherwise*. But aside from some higher ranking officer handing me a mission, there was no set route. I could take the ship wherever I wanted.

Being that the Element family was known for its modularity, I returned to the main list and touched my finger to the status reports for the various pods. There was a missile pod, a marine operations pod, a fighter pod, a forward communications pod, an intelligence operations pod, and an exploration pod. An interesting mix.

There were folders within folders, and soon I was deep in specifications, details, notes, personnel files and more. Nizlich had annotated the pod files with variances from the standard fit out. Among other things, I noted that the intel pod's command center was being refitted, some of the pods had various turrets destroyed or under repair, and there was a persistent minor fault on the marine pod. Also, the fighter pod had two squadrons that were still planetside undergoing regular maintenance. According to the timetable, they were expected to be ready tomorrow.

However, six more fighters had been damaged, and no timetable had been established for their return. One was considered beyond repair. I looked at the pictures. How the pilot survived, I had no idea. And aside from this, five additional fighters had been declared lost in action, so we were ordering six replacements. These were assembled on Jewell and were ready for delivery.

It was clear that patrolling the borders was not a sinecure.

Two of the Naval Couriers were currently away on missions, and the Exploration and Intelligence Ops hangars were unoccupied. As I got further into the details, the door chimed, and I noticed in my cup holder was the drink I'd ordered, completely untouched. I looked at the clock. An hour had passed.

"C'mon in, Commander," I said. Nothing happened. "Computer, open the door."

The door slid open.

"Sir," Nizlich said, strolling into the room, "I thought we would work out."

"Before we go anywhere, I want to know what happened to my fighters. And where are the couriers off to? And what about those destroyed turrets? What have I walked into, Commander?"

* * *

Needless to say, the Jaqueline had seen recent combat. The neutral zone, Commander Nizlich explained, was teeming with pirates and mercenaries as well as actual Zhodani and Imperial warships.

"It happened at Quar," she said, explaining how the world had been won back during the Fifth Frontier War, but although the Zhodani had relinquished it in treaty negotiations, that didn't mean they wanted an Imperial Naval base two parsecs from their border.

"Well, what did they think was going to happen? They didn't bother to read the treaty?"

"Vords," Nizlich said, shaking her head. "The Zhodani have a saying: Vords are meaningless; it's only thoughts that count."

"And what exactly did they hit us with?"

She bit her lip, looking toward the floor, then took a breath and raised her chin. "We believe it was the Vermillion Stance."

The Vermillion Stance?

Of course, I'd heard of the Vermillion Stance incident, but I was a bit hazy on the details. It all happened over three decades ago, back when I was still a kid.

The Vermillion Stance was a Lightning Class Cruiser. Like the Jaqueline, she had fighter squadrons, a spinal mount, and lots of guns. She had been doing important work with the IISS somewhere in the Beyond Sector.

And then the Zhodani captured her.

I didn't recall the details of how it happened, only that subterfuge was involved, as it usually was with the Zhodani. Her crew, those who were taken prisoner, were held for eight years, all of them subject to telepathic interrogation that basically amounted to torture. Eight years of hell.

"Are you sure?"

"They jumped into the system, identifying themselves as the Bard Refuge... claiming to be wounded... in need of assistance. Telemetry confirmed they were a Lightning-class, but... there was no transponder signal." *Of course, not. If it was the Stance, they'd have the Stance's transponder, not the Bard's.* "Captain Jenkins had us approach cautiously and sent two squadrons of fighters to get visual confirmation... to try to get more data... make sure everything was... on the up and up."

"You walked into an ambush."

"It could have been much worse, but yes... they waited until we were close enough to score a solid hit. Then they attacked and jumped away. By the time we could hear the explosions, they were already gone."

What was that old saying? Better to trust a rabid vargr than a zho? And all this damage without so much as a return shot, no wonder Jenkins was reassigned — probably to the INS GarbageScow, assuming he hadn't been beached!

Commander Nizlich watched me, focused.

"Thanks for the information, Commander. I now have a greater appreciation of the potential hazards."

"I was planning to tell you during the tour as we would reach areas still being repaired."

"When will the repairs be complete? How soon can we get underway?"

"We can finish the repairs in space, or if you prefer, we can stay in port. Estimates are within a week in port, and two to four weeks in space. But even

without the repairs, we are strong enough to take on pirates.”

I shook my head. The Jaqueline had been attacked, and crew members had died. To venture forth at anything less than full strength would be foolhardy, not to mention what it would do morale.

“We’ll stay in port for another week,” I said, “or however long it takes to finish the repairs.”

Nizlich nodded.

“Are there any new orders?”

“No new orders, but there are a lot of requests. Would you like to go over them now or wait until after the tour?”

“We can go over them after the tour.” I got up. “Lead the way, Commander.”

“Aye aye, sir.” She touched her handcomp in several places as I grabbed my hat. “Amara-class Element Cruiser. 59,400 tons podless, 75,000 fully loaded. Range, four parsecs. Thrust, six gravities. Bonded super-dense armor with reinforced radiation shielding. Thirty-nine years old.”

We walked past a large bas relief adorning the bulkhead. It depicted a giant cephalopod entwined around the hull and masts of an old-style sailing vessel.

“Spa, Officers’ Mess and Salon.” She waved vaguely, clearly not intending to stop. “The other side of this bulkhead is run of the flight crew messes. Your Senior Bridge Officer is Lt. Često Axmin. He’s a first class astrogator; never seen anyone as good with numbers.”

She bit her lip, and we passed through a fire shutter and turned to starboard.

“We have two bridges of course, plus a command bridge for flag officers and fleet maneuvers — we use it as an ops room usually. Currently it is used for control of the Intelligence Ops Pod. Their Command Center is being refitted.”

Probably damaged in the attack.

Another fire shutter and the carpet gave way to a painted deck. We entered a large space I knew was an assembly point, the bulkheads covered in piping, storage, and equipment clamps. Nizlich warned me to watch my step, as the deck plating was all kinds of uneven.

She showed me the Countermeasure Suite, distributed arrays on one side of the space and the

fusion barbettes, point defences, meson screens, and nuclear dampers on the other. Fortunately, none of it appeared damaged. Everything looked used but tidy.

“As you probably know, everything is reflected on the port side,” she said, leading me onward. “Armory.” She didn’t open the door. “Sensor suite.” This one, she did. Those inside were focused on their jobs; they didn’t look up, and Nizlich didn’t interrupt them. Instead, she closed the door, and we moved on.

“Engineering Mess. The Chief Engineer is Lt. Commander Onneri Martinsen. He’s expecting us aft in the engine room. Tech crew mess.”

We took an alleyway that turned back into the core of the ship, and Nizlich gave me a run down on the armaments as we passed the first of many turret sections.

“The spinal particle accelerator is our main weapon. Also, we have sixteen fusion barbettes, thirty beam lasers, two type-three point defense batteries. Of course, that’s before all the pod-based weaponry.”

Hence, the reason the Stance fled after her initial volley. Funny how simply having great firepower often meant one didn’t have to use it.

“Defensively we are perhaps more limited. Ten meson screens, ten nuclear dampers, twenty triple sandcaster turrets with four hundred and ten barrels at present. As for the pod-based weaponry, the missile pod has twelve bays with five thousand seven hundred and sixty missiles at last inventory. Not to mention five dozen more triple beam lasers.”

As we passed the end of an alleyway, Nizlich gestured. “Theater and conference room. There’s a production of Retian and Juniare on at present.” Was there a hint of antipathy in her tone?

We soon found ourselves at the forward end of the spinal transport tube, and an empty capsule was already waiting. I had no idea how the commander managed that; there was no sign of anyone holding the door. The tube ran along the length of the ship, beside the particle accelerator and main fuel tanks. The capsule zipped us aft at a decent speed, past a gunnery crew mess, beam laser turrets and RIS (Replenishment in Space). It announced stops for more crew messes and Power Plants C and D, but we didn’t pause. An airlock stop on either side of the transport tube

preceded the fuel tanks and then the pods. There were six of them, and programmable signs announced, in turn, Missile and Forward Comms, Fighter and Marine Ops, then finally Exploration and Intelligence Ops.

We stopped at the first of two engineering stations. From my study of the deckplans, I knew this one led to the Engineering Bridge. At the main engineering bulkhead airlock, Nizlich took two ear defenders from a storage unit, handing me one, and I followed her along the alleyway as she gestured expansively, raising her voice so I could hear her. “Our number two propulsion inverter has been overhauled and is expected to be online later this evening. It’s in the briefing.”

We were not in the engineering spaces proper yet, but the heat and noise was beginning to build.

Entering the Engineering Bridge just off the transport tube, a lieutenant commander in overalls approached and saluted. He looked to be around fifty, his straw-colored hair beginning to grey, and he gave me a curt nod, as Nizlich introduced us.

“This is Lt. Commander Martinsen, our Chief Engineer. Martinsen, Captain Plankvell.”

“Sir!”

“I realize you’re busy, Commander, but I’d very much appreciate a brief look-see.”

“Aye, Cap’n.”

Martinsen took the lead. His style, however, was the polar opposite of Nizlich. Where she had been informative and engaging, Martinsen was anything but. He seemed to have mastered the art of show, don’t tell.

“Maneuver Drive,” he said, where Nizlich might have given me details. Then he stopped, almost mid stride, and fixed his attention on a console, tapping it like we weren’t even there. The readout didn’t seem to shift much, but he stepped back, apparently satisfied. Then, without explanation, he continued starboard, not even looking to see if we were still following him. All the equipment here was on a massive scale. Even many of the tools clamped to the bulkheads were of Brobdingnagian proportions.

“Jump Drive,” he said, not even bothering to gesture left or right.

Nizlich pursed her lips.

We looped around and passed the Power Plant when the Chief Engineer glanced toward Nizlich

and only then, perhaps, sensed that a little more was required.

“The power plants are all operating as expected. Engineering is ready to go at your command, sir.”

Nizlich was giving him a look. “And the Jump Drive alignment?” she finally said.

His eyes widened. “You want me to go into that?”

Go into what?

“He’s the Captain,” Nizlich said. “He has to know.”

Martinsen sagged for a moment, his arms hanging at his sides.

“Okay, well... it may be nothing, but... there might be a minor misalignment between the sink array and the lanthanum grid.”

“Meaning?”

“On our Jump to Jevell,” Nizlich said, “we landed over a half million kilometers off-target.”

Half a million? On a jump of that distance, the target zone should have been no wider than, say, 25,000 kilometers.

“Could it have been a navigational error?”

“That’s what we thought at first, but Često went through the logs.” *The astrogator*. “He insists there was no mistake.”

Jumpspace was noodly. Discovering and then accessing it was so difficult that, as far as historians knew, only a few species ever figured it out on their own — the so-called major races¹¹ — and despite the fact the technology had now been around for millennia, it was still not well-understood. In any case, it wasn’t that unusual for damaged ships to go wobbly. Lanthanum grids required precision and were therefore inherently fragile.

“Can you fix it?” I asked Martinsen.

“We’ve already repaired the grid, and we’ve been looking at the zuchai crystals on the off-chance the fault’s not in the grid.”

“What makes you think it’s not the grid?”

“The jump governor should have detected the fault and compensated.”

“Sometimes the fault’s too big,” I said. “Wounded birds don’t always fly straight.” I’d been a pilot, so I knew what I was talking about.

11 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Major_Race

"If that was the case, the jump governor should have aborted. Plus, we went over the transition logs with a fine-toothed comb. They don't tell us what happened, which means the fault is most likely intermittent."

"But you said you repaired the grid."

"Yeah," Martinsen nodded. "So either we got it, or we didn't. Won't know until the next time we jump. If we end up half a million kilometers off target, then we know we didn't. Worst case scenario, it's not half a million kilometers next time; it's half a parsec."

A misjump.

My last assignment involved a misjump wherein I ended up in Vargr territory. And we were lucky. We came out of jump close enough to a star system, that we could use our remaining fuel to get there. But that didn't always happen. Deep space was littered with the frozen corpses of starships that had misjumped long ago. Aside from getting blown up by hostiles or suffering some life support mishap, misjumps were the main way spacers ended up dead.

"Does the crew know?"

Nizlich shook her head.

Of course, not. Terrible for morale.

"Who knows?" I asked.

"In engineering?" Martinsen wet his lips. "Just me and Lt. Amishar."

"Često knows," Nizlich said. "So does the base commander."

Including us three, that made seven, a number large enough that scuttlebutt was no doubt running rampant. But no amount of speculation would answer the question.

"Well, Commanders," I said, "I think it would be prudent to put this to the test, as it were."

They nodded, both leaning in.

"As soon as can be arranged," I added. "We'll discuss the exact timing later. I don't intend to take this ship in harm's way 'til I'm sure she's fit for deployment."

"Aye, sir," Nizlich nodded.

"Like I said, we probably already fixed it," Martinsen said, "and even if not, the misalignment seems to be minor, but if you want to play it safe, we can slap a fuel pod in place of one of the others. Because if we ever misjump and, heaven forbid, end up in the big empty,

we're going to need hydrogen to get out, or we'll be at the mercy of the space gods."

"If we just do a J-1, wouldn't that leave plenty of fuel in case of a misjump?"

"Aye," Martinsen nodded. "That it would."

"Would it still be advisable to get a fuel pod?"

"No." He shook his head. "Not in any but the most extreme case."

"What do you think?" I asked Nizlich.

"That means we're going to either Emerald or Ruby."

"Is that a problem?"

"No, sir."

Martinsen led us back to the Engineering Bridge.

"Let me know if there's anythin' you need," he offered. He was clearly handing me back to Nizlich, and she gave me a wry smile as she took up the reins once again.

"Almost chatty for Onneri," she said after we left.

"His reticence to brief me about the jump drive makes me wonder how reliable he is."

"Sir, you can absolutely rely on him to know the ship inside and out."

"That may be, but I can't say I'm completely comfortable with a Chief Engineer who would question whether I need to know about a problem like this."

"I suspect he wanted to track this down *and fix it* before reporting it, sir."

"That just will not do! Not as long as I'm Captain of this vessel."

"You're quite right. Let me handle it. I'll talk to him."

"Very well, Commander, I'll leave it in your hands, for now."

As we talked, we continued making our way through a labyrinth of alleyways, walkways and gantries. Nizlich warned me to watch myself, as there were protruding snags to catch even the most wary. Soon we found a ladder down to Deck 1. She led me to the port side.

"Cargo bay, brig, and medical bay. And the same starboard, of course."

I already knew that, having studied the deckplans.

Nizlich stopped at a doorway. "Our Chief Medical Officer is Lt. Commander Kosy Villin."

We entered.

Several medics stopped what they were doing and saluted, and a woman in her 30s with two and half stripes on her sleeve crossed over, visibly brightening.

"Captain Plankwell, welcome aboard. I'm Dr. Willin." There was just the slightest emphasis on her surname.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Willin."

She smiled. "What can I show you? We have two medical bays here aft. Larboard and starboard. Generally, I call this one home. Captain Jenkins preferred to berth 'portside to,' so this puts me in the best position for shore facilities, if they're needed." She glanced at Nizlich. "We're kept pretty busy, sir. Just the three staff assisting me; of course, the marine pod has a separate medical unit, but still... you can do the math." Her speech quickened as she went on. "Most of it, quite honestly, is venereal disease. But I shudder to think what would happen if we ever got into another serious fight. We don't have the resources to handle mass casualties." She turned, her gaze suddenly upon me. "Did you want to see any of my current patients?"

"Well, Doctor, you are the expert. I'll leave that up to you. Are there any patients that you think I should see at this time?"

She wrinkled her nose.

"Just one. Come this way."

She led us to what looked like an intensive care unit. Someone was there, a woman. She looked like she was asleep, various wires and tubes attached to her body, including her nose and mouth. The skin that was exposed looked vacuum-blistered, and there were patches over her eyes. No doubt, they'd either frozen or popped, perhaps both.

"One of our pilots, sir. Lieutenant Jaamzon." She examined the diagnostic, her shoulders sagging as she shook her head. "No change."

I couldn't tell how old Lt. Jaamzon was, not from looking at her like this.

Willin glanced again at Nizlich. "It's all in my report, sir, but the short of it is that she's been in a coma since our last... umm... altercation with the Zhos. Her fighter was pretty wrecked; I'm sure the flight technicians will have the details."

"I've already seen their report," I told her. It had mentioned the pilot had survived but said

nothing about a coma. "Do you expect her to recover?"

"Honestly, I didn't expect her to live this long. She's... her vitals have been remarkably stable, and there's brain activity. It's more like a dream state than conscious thought, but... in her mind, at least... she's experiencing something."

That battle was five weeks ago. People could remain in a coma for years.

"What are her chances?"

"To wake up?" She shook her head. "Not good. To have a meaningful recovery... even worse. We've kept her here because our facilities for this sort of thing are actually somewhat better than at the base, and one of my specialties at the academy was brain trauma. I thought perhaps I'd be able to detect some progress, but... there's no change." She lowered her head and sighed.

"Captain Jenkins intended to return her to her home world," Nizlich said. "He wanted to return her to her family. The request for a medical discharge has already been made."

Knowing the Navy, that could take awhile.

"Where's she from?" I asked.

"Olympia, in the Lunion Subsector."

"Tell me, Doctor, has there been any consideration of whether psionics might have been involved here?"

Willin took a step back.

"A psionic attack?" Her lips pressed together into a slight grimace as a visible shiver ran down her spine, but she quickly shook it off. "Well, anything's possible, I suppose."

"Sir," Nizlich interjected, "Jaamzon's fighter was crippled by conventional weapons, and at a range virtually impossible for any known psionic attack."

"There might be a way to check the Captain's theory," Dr. Willin replied. "It's probably too late now, but I heard a rumor that the base has some sort of experimental psionic scanner. Apparently, it's able to detect psi waves or residue or some such."

"Commander, contact the base quartermaster. I want to have a look at this device. As for the lieutenant," I said, turning back to Dr. Willin, "I don't consider it good practice to keep her aboard once we're ready to deploy. She can stay for now, but prepare to transfer her portside by the time we're ready to depart."

"Aye aye, sir," the doctor replied.

"Thank you, Villin," Nizlich said. "Ve should be moving on."

We left the medical bay, looped around, and ascended back to Deck 2, where we found, once again, a transport capsule waiting patiently in its tube. As we headed back to the forward section, I realized we hadn't looked at Deck 3. The simple graphic on the capsule wall showed it was more of the drives and the particle accelerator machinery.

"By the way, Commander, any particular reason we are skipping over the PA battery?"

"Ah, no." She blinked. "Not particularly. Just time constraints. Ve can see if you vish, but it's a fairly tight schedule before the function this evening."

"That's quite all right."

We stopped midships at a sign that read *General Crew Quarters* and took a short tour around the section. It was obvious the inhabitants were forewarned, as usually for a crowded compartment full of ratings, cacophony reigned supreme. In this one, however, there was only silence save for the sharp noises of boots coming to attention and saluted "Sirs" from everyone we came across. Nizlich stopped every now and then to examine a bunk, open a locker, or nod at someone. A couple of times she asked questions. Nothing was out of place; nothing needed a further remark. Nonetheless, tension filled the air. In my experience, at least outside of basic training, it was unusual.

"Stand easy, crew!" the commander called. There was only the very slightest relaxation.

"Things seem to be a little tense around here, Commander," I commented.

She looked around as though seeing the space for the first time. "I don't believe so, Captain."

One crewmember looked away towards a bulkhead. Nizlich glanced towards her.

"New captains and all. Everyone keen to get a feel for how you vill run things." She looked around the space again. "Ladies and gentlemen! Crew members and comrades in arms! I introduce to you our new commanding officer, Captain Augustine Olav Plankvell!"

Everyone snapped back to attention.

"Would you like to say a few vords, sir?"

Not really. I've never cared for speeches or those who give them, and this was hardly a proper venue. Nonetheless, I pulled up a chair and climbed atop it, using it as a makeshift podium, so that everyone could see me and so that my voice might carry a bit farther.

"Thank you, Commander," I began. "Commander Nizlich has been showing me around. We just came from sickbay. We saw Lt. Jaamzon, who is still in a coma, as I'm sure all of you are aware."

If it was quiet before, now it was doubly so.

"That attack at Quar was not merely an act of war. It was a deliberate, cold-blooded murder, and I vow to you, it shall not go unpunished! The Zhodani have, I presume, already denied responsibility. Well, they've tried pushing us out of this subsector five times, and they failed five times, so this sort of cowardly hit and run followed by denials is nothing new. All that has changed is that next time, we are going to hit back! So I need all of you to be ready. I need you to be prepared for our moment of truth, when we're going to stand and fight and avenge Lt. Jaamzon and all the others! Can I count on you?"

There was a resounding "Yes, sir!" as an able spacehand held up his clenched fist and a senior petty officer looked around at her messmates and saluted. Everyone was standing a bit straighter, and the oldest among them were nodding their heads.

"As you were," I said, back in my normal voice, giving the petty officer a courtesy return salute before I stepped down from my makeshift soapbox.

"As you vere!" Nizlich called out, making sure everyone heard me.

As we exited, a few Zhodani slurs broke out along with lots of smiles, and everyone wanted to make eye contact, as if to say, "I'm with you." Even Commander Nizlich had a gleam in her eye. In short, it was as obvious as a supernova; they were hungry for leadership, and they wanted revenge.

Chapter 3

The Captain's Secret Stash

Though my words raised some spirits, my vow promising them vengeance was probably hollow. The ship that attacked the Jaqueline, even assuming it *was* the Vermillion Stance, had jumped away, no doubt to the safety of Zhodani space, and to cross into Zhodani territory looking for it would be an act of war, not to mention suicidal. Granted, they had crossed into our space, and on a mission of murder, no less. Quar was back to being an Imperial world, made so by the peace treaty they had signed.

Four parsecs away.

Technically, we could get there in one jump. It would do the crew good and send a message to the Zhodani they could not run us out, but given the sorry state of our engines, I couldn't trust us not to misjump, and if we did so on a J-4 leg, that could be our doom.

Commander Nizlich led me back down to Deck 1, showing me the port-side hanger along with our "twelve twenty-ton" utility craft, two of which were planetside undergoing annual maintenance. Being in the Navy meant dealing with every sort of accent one could imagine, but hers was impressively thick, and it had an edge like a sword.

Soon we were back on the starboard side walking by a large marine barracks and a rather impressive armory. Then she led me forward, past the primary computer, meson screens, and nuclear dampers.

"As is standard, there is a Model 998 in every officer's stateroom," the 998 was a gauss pistol, "plus small gun lockers in key locations such as the bridge, engineering, and gunnery control." Then she went into list mode, which I'd now begun to recognize: "Four snub pistols, belts, vebbing, and three magazines per veapon."

Did she rehearse? I doubted it. Her mind was simply that well-organized. Either that or she was trying really hard to impress me with her thoroughness and attention to detail.

"We are fully bunkered. Also, the Logistics Officer reported completion of loading for departure," she checked her 'comp, "two hours ago."

"Loaded, but unable to go anywhere," I said, "at least not until we get back all the craft that are still down for maintenance."

"Yes, sir."

"Maybe you can help me understand something. You've been here, what... five weeks? And we still need a week for small craft annual maintenance certifications? Why wasn't this done earlier?"

"Our hands were tied."

"By who?"

"Karneticky."

Admiral Karneticky? The guy who just gave me my new shoulder boards?

"Given the extent of the damage," Nizlich continued, "he apparently decided to confer with Admiral Vasilyev."

"About annual maintenance? That seems a little out-of-the-ordinary, don't you think?"

"That was the official story." She pressed her lips flat, her eyes unflinching. "You want to know the truth? That, no doubt, is a *slightly different* story."

"What do you know?"

"After we got back from Quar, apparently Karneticky and Rishard had some sharp words." Captain Jenkins, she meant. "Since the Jackie is still technically attached to the 213th Fleet, the admiral couldn't unilaterally remove him without acquiescence from Efate... so... seeing as you are here now, it seems obvious what he decided to do."

The implications of her words quickly sank in. Karneticky was admiral of the 212th Fleet, having only succeeded Admiral Mtume earlier this year. For him to go out of his way to shit-can Jenkins, who wasn't even under his command, meant that either Jenkins screwed up big-time or the two must have had a pretty horrible relationship. In any case, refusing to approve a fairly routine inter-fleet maintenance request kept the Jaqueline in port until a courier could reach Efate and get back again.

I recalled how, a couple of weeks ago, I'd been on Efate, getting debriefed after my unintended vacation to the Vargr world of Forrodkhokh, when, out of the blue, I was called into Vasilyev's office and told I'd finally made Captain. The whole thing came as a complete surprise, particularly given all the mishaps I'd been

through, but now I understood the chain of events.

“Try to get along with Admiral Karneticky,” Vasilyev had told me, “or any other admiral with whom you happen to cross paths, but remember... you work for me, and the Jaqueline belongs to *this* fleet. Not the 212th. And if you decide to do anyone any favors, you make them formalize it with an official request. Are we clear?”¹²

I only arrived at Jewell the day before yesterday, and Karneticky performed the promotion ceremony that very evening. I never even saw Jenkins, but the letter he left me was dated the same day.

“When did you find out Captain Jenkins had been reassigned?”

“Two days ago.”

“And the maintenance request was approved the same day?”

She nodded.

None of it was proof, of course, but it all lined up straight and confirmed my initial suspicions upon learning what happened at Quar.

“Well, Commander, that certainly is food for thought. I greatly appreciate your frankness. We’re going to have to watch our steps, I would think, at least for the time being.”

“Aye, sir.”

We continued through the main forward section, passing auxiliary power plants and more crew quarters. Given the sheer size of the Jaqueline, I could tell it would be a while before finding my way around would become second nature. Again, here and there, the deck was uneven, and a corner or two needed care. If there were any technicians specializing in welding, it was a good bet they were kept busy.

Nizlich kept up her running commentary about ship specifications and crew details, pausing momentarily as we reached the port side meson screen.

“Some problems with this vun, sir. Very energy inefficient.” Once more she looked pained that part of her ship was less than perfect. “Captain Jenkins put in several requests for an upgrade. We are still waiting.” She seemed less than inclined to

linger here and gestured to the upper deck access port.¹³

As we returned to Deck 2 and headed forward again, I could sense the tour coming to a conclusion. We’d made a pretty good circuit of the entire vessel.

“At some point, Commander, I’d like us to discuss the statement, which I am interpreting as a request for more resources, by the doctor concerning sickbay staffing.”

“Aye, sir. You will find that all the divisions have requests along the same lines.”

“I see. Well, it would be a good idea for you and I to go over those together and also to meet with the division commanders individually to give them the opportunity to make their cases.”

“Aye, sir.”

“In addition, I would appreciate it if you would forward to me the current status of the other naval assets patrolling this subsector.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Also, I’d like to see an inventory concerning our stock of psi equipment... with an emphasis on double-checking functionality. We can’t be too careful this close to Zho space.”

“I can give you that right now. Our three marine companies are outfitted with shielded helmets.”



¹³ For a ship of this tonnage, it seems to me a bit odd that it has only two major decks (Deck 3 being mostly devoted to the spinal mount). Hence, the top picture (above) is probably the best representation. If, however, the ship is really as thick as the bottom two pictures suggest, then it should probably have more decks. I mentioned this to Timothy, and he agreed that based on those pictures, five or six decks would have made more sense. That, presumably, would have also made the stem-to-stern distance much shorter, perhaps reducing the need for the ship’s internal transport tube.

¹² See the essay (below) on detached patrols in Traveller.

“That’s nice for the marines, but what about us?”

“There’s a locker onboard that Captain Jenkins once spoke of.”

“Where?”

“In his quarters... *your quarters*... I believe.”

“You haven’t seen what’s in it?”

“Captain Jenkins said it’s above my clearance,” she replied with a pinched expression.¹⁴

As we approached the portside assembly point I could sense something of a hubbub. The space was packed with crew and officers, some with their regulation naval cutlasses, even though dress uniform wasn’t the order of the day.

“Atten...tion!” someone called out.

As if of a single mind, everyone snapped to, and somebody using the ship’s PA called the entire ship to quarters. Then music struck up, the anthem of the Imperial Navy.

A narrow corridor parted as we entered, and Nizlich led me to a small table set up in the middle. There, a Lt. Commander stood with a handcomp at the ready. He was a good looking young man, in a well-chiseled chin sort of way, the name “Bonventure” on his uniform pocket, and next to him, mounted on a faux-wood block — no, on second look, real wood — was an expensive looking stylus.

Commander Nizlich lifted her voice. “Call all hands to muster! Read the order of detachment.”

The Lt. Commander did so, reading the order that required Captain Jenkins to return to the headquarters of the 213th fleet on Efate for debriefing and reassignment. Notably, there were no congratulatory phrases, nor so much as one word about the battle at Quar.

It was all an unnecessary formality, of course, as Jenkins had already left, but that also made it weirdly fitting, as signing ceremonies, though common, were themselves unnecessary, at least in the Imperial Navy. Why they were conducted at all was probably due to cultural bleed over from the merchant marines, where, as far as I knew, they had always been done, but in the Navy, it was up to the commanding officer. Hence, Nizlich probably should have consulted with me

about this, something that I might bring up to her later, when we’d have a moment alone.

Having finished with his part, Bonventure turned the handcomp over to Nizlich, and she read my orders of relief: “*A letter from the Board for the Admiralty of the Domain of Deneb to Captain Plankvell, Imperial Navy. Sir, you are directed and required to report aboard the Imperial Navy Ship Jaqueline, there to take up the appointment of commanding officer of said vessel. Herein fail not at your peril!*”¹⁵

Of course, it was Admiral Vasilyev, on behalf of the board, who signed and attached that letter to my transfer orders, and as Nizlich presented me with the handcomp for my signature, I couldn’t help but wonder if I’d simply been the recipient of good fortune. Perhaps my promotion was due to nothing more than the fact that I walked into the admiral’s field of view at the right moment. Fortunately, the crew didn’t harbor such suspicions, at least not that I knew, and so all eyes were on me, expectant, as I took handcomp and the proffered stylus, signing in, as it were.

*This must be what it feels like to have finally arrived: my ship, my crew, all these people I would need to get to know, and all of them depending on me to **fail not**.*

“Welcome aboard, Captain Plankvell of the INS Jaqueline.” Nizlich saluted and then held out her hand, the crowd cheering as I returned her salute and then shook her hand.

“Thank you, Commanders,” I said to Nizlich and Bonventure, and then, turning toward the crew — at least those in front of me — I said, “Thank you all for attending. I hope you all look forward as eagerly as I do toward our future starfaring.”

There was much saluting and smiling and words of solidarity and hope, including a few kind remarks about another Plankwell, someone a bit more famous than myself.

“Sir, is it true your middle name is Olav?”

“It is,” I replied.

“Olav Plankwell!” someone in the back remarked rather loudly. “I never dreamed I’d serve with Olav Plankwell!”

“I reckon we’re in good hands!”

¹⁴ We had quite a discussion the TML about this. See <https://archives.simplelists.com/tml/msg/17296760/>.

¹⁵ Thanks to **Michael Cule**.

“Olav... Olav... Olav...” a few began to chant.

I acknowledged them with a simple gesture and turned back to Nizlich.

“You may dismiss.”

“Dismissed!” Nizlich called out with a high chin and exposed neck. “Thank you, everyvun!”

She gave them a crisp nod, then motioned for me to follow, leading me out past some more maintenance conduits and through another fire shutter.

“I hope you don’t mind, sir, but signing ceremonies are a long tradition on this ship.”

“I’m impressed, Commander. Crew morale appears to be high.”

“It’s not,” she said, shaking her head. “It hasn’t been since Quar. The loud ones in there — I apologize for that, by the way... it was undisciplined —”

“No, it’s quite all right. I just would have preferred a little warning... about the ceremony.”

“Aye aye, sir. No more surprises. Over there is the port-side countermeasures suite and controls for our distributed arrays,” Nizlich said, pointing left.

That told me we were probably close to the bridge, and sure enough, at the next door she turned left and led me into a wide, rectangular room, primarily lit by a variety of large holographic displays. A young man was standing next to the captain’s chair looking rather nervous, but his eyes showed his smile was genuine.

“This is our Officer of the Vatch,” Nizlich said, “Sublieutenant Adma Marshalsea.”

Marshalsea saluted sharply, if not perfectly, with a crisp, “Sir,” though, after that, he seemed at a bit of a loss for words.

“At ease, Lieutenant. Would you be good enough to show me around the bridge and give me a brief status report?”

“Aye aye, sir.” He paused for a moment, clearly composing his thoughts. “Status nominal. Moored fore and aft with double lines. Portside to. No flight operations scheduled for today.” He seemed to come to the end of his mental checklist. “We’re on Port Watch of course, so it’s just the three of us.” He pointed to the seat in the forward starboard corner of the Bridge. There sat a rather chubby young woman of about his age whose uniform was straining slightly at the

seams. “That’s Able Spacehand Blodder, sir. Comms.”

“And very good on them,” Nizlich added in what wasn’t quite an aside. Blodder blushed under the scrutiny but kept her eyes on her screens.

“Are ve keeping up with our regimen, Spacehand?”

“Yessir,” Blodder replied.

Marshalsea pointed again at the only remaining figure, if one didn’t count the bas relief on the aft bulkhead. Sitting there was a woman who looked so young, I at first wondered if she was someone’s teenage niece, but then Marshalsea introduced her as “Able Spacehand Zelic on sensors.” Once again, the crewman kept her eyes on her screens. It looked like there was a lot going on there. The highport was evidently busy.

Nizlich again provided commentary, but quieter this time.

“Very bright. Could go far.” Then louder. “For space vatch ve’d add helm, of course, and possibly an astrogator, depending on our movements and requirements; flight ops, if needed. For combat vatch ve’d add veapons, flight operations, and yourself, of course. A runner is traditional as vell but at your discretion.”

The only remaining figure, which I’d already noticed, was the two-meter tall portrait of Empress Jaqueline, which was painted directly onto the aft bulkhead. I couldn’t read her expression, but being that I was a descendant of the man who killed her, she probably wasn’t too happy to see me. I’d eventually get used to her presence, I figured, as I turned to scan the bridge once more.

The crew were intent on their jobs. Nizlich, meanwhile, kept her focus on me, a slow smile adorning the corners of her lips. The holographic displays and flickering consoles seemed to add their own welcome. In short, it felt like I belonged here, and for a moment, I considered sitting in the Captain’s chair — my chair — but resisted the temptation.

“All shipshape and taut, Commander. Very good. Is there anything further? If not, I would appreciate your accompanying me to my quarters.”

"Aye aye, sir."

We exited back into the corridor.

"Commander, I would like you to be present during my search for the special locker you mentioned earlier."

"Certainly, sir."

"I intend to open it, and then I will decide if I agree with my predecessor's determination with respect to your 'need to know' about the contents. Do you think we have enough time?"

She checked her handcomp.

"This evening's function is in just over ninety minutes, sir. It will take thirty-six minutes to travel there." Thirty-six. Not thirty-five or almost forty. "It would be... ah..." she seemed to struggle to find the right words, "...ah... poor," which hardly seemed to cover it, "if you were late."

"I fully agree, Commander." I couldn't afford to make a bad first impression, not with my Captaincy being this new.

"Full dress will be expected, of course."

"Of course." Ninety minutes minus thirty-six left almost an hour, more than enough to shower and dress without feeling rushed.

"But, sir, I daresay we could look *quickly* and form an impression of what further examination and consideration might be required. Hmm?"

I couldn't help but grin. Curiosity had gotten the better of her, after all.

"Well then, let us proceed. Lead the way, Commander."

* * *

Back in the time of Olav halt-Plankwell and Empress Arbellatra, the Imperial Navy had teams of psions that fought the Zhodani tooth and nail, each side trying to out-telepath, out-precog, and out-teleport the other. Then, in the late 700s, there were a series of scandals centered around various psionics institutes, and it became obvious that the psions, with assistance from the Zhodani, were trying to take over.



Needless to say, there was an immediate crackdown. Psions were snatched up and imprisoned. Others went underground and began a fruitless guerrilla campaign, and during the three centuries that followed, we fought the Zhodani three times, and each time, we fought at a disadvantage, like a boxer with one hand tied behind his back.

During the last war, I found the situation so

infuriating I asked my Captain point blank if there wasn't some way we could requisition some psions.

"Requisition psions? From who?"

"I don't know, but you can't tell me we don't have them. Our leadership may be many things, but stupid isn't one of them."

It was a bold statement, and probably untrue, as the war went from bad to worse, Archduke Norris finally ousting the sector admiral. But unfounded confidence in our leadership wasn't what made the statement bold. It was that psionics was something people didn't discuss. Standard operating procedure was to report it, even a suspicion, and people could disappear because of those reports.

But, of course, once one reached a certain rank and found oneself in a position where one needed to talk about it in order to protect one's crew, one assumes that it would become more socially acceptable to raise the question of why naval personnel weren't *all* wearing psionic shields! But, inexplicably, that's a question I'd never heard raised, at least not in the Imperial Navy, although, obviously, the marines had come to their senses.

"If you want to retain your commission, I strongly suggest you stow any thoughts you have of requisitioning psions or anything psionic. Is that clear, Mr. Plankwell?"

Of course, I'd acquiesced. But now, according to my XO, there was a secret cache of psi-equipment in my quarters, and I'd be damned if I wasn't going to investigate.

"You can come in with me," I said as we approached my quarters, "but at some point, I might ask you to step away. It's nothing personal, okay?"

Nizlich nodded. She always looked serious, but she now watched me with an intensity that was almost disconcerting.

"Captain Plankwell speaking," I announced as we entered. "Signify your recognition."

Nothing happened.

"Oh, for... *<expletive deleted>*. Hello, Computer! Captain Plankwell speaking! Signify your recognition!"

"Hello, Captain."

"What information do you possess with respect to any concealed lockers within the Captain's cabin? Include all lockers that have any sort of classified status."

"That information is classified, captain's eyes only. Do you wish to override, Captain?"

"I'm very sorry," I said, turning to Nizlich, "but under the circumstances, I must ask you to remain here while I move on to the bedroom."

She nodded again, her lips pressed tight. If she was disappointed, she was good at hiding it. I entered the bedroom, the door automatically sliding shut behind me.

"Hello, Computer." I repeated my demand exactly so there could be no chance of confusion: "What information do you possess with respect to any concealed lockers within the Captain's cabin? Include all lockers that have any sort of classified status."

"The *captain's secret stash* consists of a shielded compartment, one hundred and ninety-eight centimeters square by forty-seven centimeters deep, secreted in the ceiling of the captain's quarters." I looked up. Except for the recessed lighting, the ceiling looked perfectly smooth. "The one-point-four-two horsepower motor allows for a maximum lift capacity of seven hundred and ten kilograms in zero-point-one-five-two-four meters per second in one-point-zero standard gravities."

"Where?"

"Insufficient input. Please rephrase..."

"Where in the ceiling?"

"The ceiling is an upper interior surface parallel to and above the floor."

"*<expletive>*! Computer, *where* is the damn locker!"

"What locker, Captain?"

"You *<expletive>* piece of *<really bad expletive>* garbage! The secret locker!"

"Are you inquiring as to the location of the *captain's secret stash*?"

"Yes!" *Finally!*

"It's in the captain's quarters, Captain. Would you like me to open it?"

I was about to say yes when the thought of seven hundred and ten kilograms falling from the ceiling suddenly hit me.

"Am I standing directly under it?"

"Negative, Captain."

With that out of the way, "Computer, open the captain's secret stash, please."

For a moment, nothing happened, but then there was a knock at the door.

Nizlich.

I stepped toward the door, causing it to slide open. Sure enough, Commander Nizlich was there, while behind her, a section of the living room's ceiling, roughly two meters square, slowly descended to the floor.

"Sir, I just want to say, I am most honored."

I walked into the room, mouth agape. I had to tell the computer to abort and make it go the other way.

"Computer—"

"The trust you have placed in me... it is something I will never forget."

Huh?

The commander seemed to be on the edge of tearing up, her eyes practically glowing. Then, with flushing cheeks, she broke eye-contact, turning toward my now not-so-secret stash.

"Aren't those psi-shields?" she asked.

Indeed, there were ten helmets, complete with transparent visors, in what looked like an open-faced dresser drawer roughly two meters on a side. A gray hoodie, nicely folded, lay there as well, along with a metallic box, around thirty centimeters long, and a small black pouch. Apparently, the descending tray had some sort of sensor on its underside, as it had stopped just short of crushing the kava table.

"Yes, I do believe that they are. How much time do we have, Commander?"

“Our shuttle leaves in forty-four minutes, but everyvun is supposed to meet at the port airlock in thirty-nine.”

“Everyone? Who’s everyone?”

“The senior officers, sir.”

“Ah.” I remembered the itinerary saying something about a briefing. “The briefing’s in the shuttle then?”

“Yes, sir.” She nodded. “I assumed you’d want to get acquainted with everyone before the reception.”

“Of course. Well, we should probably leave this until later.”

“Very vell, sir. I’ll meet you at the port airlock in—” she checked the time again— “thirty-eight minutes, or here in thirty-five, if you prefer.”

I wasn’t sure I could find my way to the port airlock.

“Here in thirty-five.”

“Aye aye, sir. Oh! One last thing. Did you want to bring any of these?” She gestured toward the psi-shields.

“To the reception?”

“The Zhodani ambassador is on the guest list.”

Detached Patrols in Traveller

Generally, when I run campaigns, instead of setting the PCs on a particular adventure, I prefer to extend a variety of options through chance encounters and let them decide which direction they want to go. In this way, by letting the players choose their own adventure, as it were, I like to think I get greater buy-in. But, in a military campaign, the presupposition is that one is going to receive missions. So how do you run a military campaign that allows players the freedom to go explore the setting and choose their own missions? My solution, however unrealistic, was to come up with this idea of detached patrols.

Imperial Naval Fleets, in Traveller, at least during peacetime, have a tendency to sit in one place for a while. They establish a base of operations, usually on a major world, and then stretch their protection over the rest of the subsector, concentrating, of course, on the spacelanes (shipping routes). In so doing, they need to interact with the subsector's nobles, and, often, they become pawns or even players in interplanetary politics. Because the entire fleet is often within two jumps of its headquarters, ship captains are only four weeks away from getting sacked if they do something that angers their fleet admiral and/or the subsector duke.

On the surface, this seems all well and good, because, after all, a hierarchy cannot function without accountability, but the upshot, the Imperium has found, is that it's usually when a fleet is being relocated that corruption, often on a vast scale, gets revealed. The old arrangements either have to be renewed with the new fleet admiral, and his commodores and captains, or they will end up being exposed.

Hence, sector admirals like to reshuffle the deck every so often, but this process of moving entire fleets takes time and resources, and it can have the unfortunate side-effect of leaving strategic worlds temporarily defenseless. It is chiefly for these reasons that detached patrols have become a notable fixture of peacetime military operations, particularly in border regions.

A certain percentage of a fleet's resources, usually determined by the sector admiral on a fleet-by-fleet basis, are designated as being for

detached patrol. The captains of those ships, usually cruisers, are given vague instructions to go out and patrol a certain region of space, generally several subsectors in scope, and to undertake such missions as seem worthy and fitting. In other words, go out there, show the flag, lend support wherever you can, find out what's going on with the other fleets around us, and report back.

Needless to say, this achieves several objectives. First, it tends to expose "vast corruption" on the part of fleet admirals and their subordinates much earlier, making such misbehavior less likely to occur. Secondly, it gets the captains far enough away from the admiral of their home fleet that they can afford to take some risks, dealing with problems that might otherwise fall between the cracks, such as on worlds deemed unimportant by the powers that be, or doing something that might anger the local admiral or even the local duke. Because detached patrols are not tied to a particular subsector, they are not immersed and consumed by a particular subsector's politics.

This is obviously good and bad. It can create a situation where the left hand is undoing what the right hand just did. But the reason the system exists is that one hand, acting alone, can often end up acting in error. In this way, the doctrine of detached patrols is a check and balance against the traditional power structure of numbered fleets periodically playing musical chairs. Finally, during a period where fleets are relocating, the detached patrol cruisers can take up strategic positions, guarding important worlds from the sort of surprise attack that kicked off the Fifth Frontier War.

In any case, this is all admittedly a rationale, and probably not a very convincing one, but it does create some interesting questions. For example, if a ship gets damaged, whose budget do the repairs come out of, the fleet to which the cruiser is nominally assigned (the home fleet) or the fleet assigned to the subsector in which the ship was damaged and is presumably being repaired (the local fleet)? The answer is that it all boils down to a question of agency.

If a captain decides to undertake some mission on his own, and the ship gets damaged or suffers casualties, the home fleet pays for it. (Imperial

fleets have an internal credit system whereby they repair each other's ships all the time, reassigning personnel back and forth as necessary, and then settling up at the end of each fiscal year.) But if a captain is ordered by a local admiral (or any higher ranking officer attached to a local fleet) to undertake a mission, and then the ship comes limping back to port, the local fleet pays for the repairs. Requests, even those made informally, are considered to be the same as orders, not in the sense that the ship captain has to do as requested, but rather in the sense that if he does and things go badly, the fleet that made the request is on the hook.

For this reason, unscrupulous admirals and commodores will often try to get a detached captain to voluntarily take on a dangerous mission without actually making it a request. Consider the following dialogue:

Admiral: "Pirates are about. Though they strike rarely, their mere presence has become a hindrance to interstellar commerce. Unfortunately, our resources are stretched quite thin, and there's a merchant convoy piling up, waiting for a naval escort to Emerald, Plaven, Quar, and Gougeste."

Captain: "Into the demilitarized zone?"

Admiral: "Or, it's hardly demilitarized. Both we and the Zhodani patrol the region. I only mention it because I thought it might be on your way. Where are you heading next?"

Captain: "Well, I haven't quite decided."

Admiral: "Oh, well, I don't want to put you out."

Captain: "No... no... it's quite all right. Anything to help out."

So was this a request?

I could see each side having a slightly different take, should things go south, and bear in mind, repairing a damaged cruiser costs millions of credits. Replacing destroyed fighters costs millions more. That money has to come out of someone's budget, and people can get awfully prickly when it comes to money. For this reason, captains on detached patrol will often ask for formal, written requests before undertaking a mission for some local admiral or commodore.

Note that normal operational costs, such as annual maintenance and resupply, are still paid by

the home fleet through the inter-fleet credit system. The only time operational costs are held to be the responsibility of a local fleet are instances where a patrol ship becomes effectively captured by a local command. Such instances, however, are rare, as whenever a local admiral keeps issuing orders to a detached patrol, effectively keeping it from moving on to the next subsector, that admiral risks *buying the ship*.

What'll happen is that the sector fleet admiral will eventually learn of it, and the ship will simply be reassigned to the local fleet along with a corresponding transfer of funds to the budget of the ship's original home fleet. Hence, admirals who want to keep their budgets intact tend not to abuse detached patrols passing through their territory unless they like the ship and/or its captain so much that they feel it's worth the money, in which case they'll pluck the ship for their own fleet.

When this happens, it is usually with the cooperation of the ship's captain, who may want to be reassigned as a way of advancing his or her career. By the same token, captains often use detached patrols to meet the admirals of various neighboring fleets, doing a few favors here and there in the hope of being rewarded with a plum assignment later in their careers.

For this reason, captains are sometimes loath to offend an admiral by asking for a hinted request to be formalized, particularly when they think the risk of sustaining serious damage is relatively small. This may, indeed, be what happened between Captain Jenkins and Admiral Karneticky, resulting in "sharp words" when the Jaqueline limped back Jewell, wounded and, arguably, disgraced.

Chapter 4

The Staff Meeting

"The Zhodani ambassador is going to be there?"

"She's on the guest list." Commander Nizlich nodded.

The ambassador for the Zhodani Consulate, which we had recently been at war with — for the fifth time, no less — and which had surreptitiously sucker-punched the Jaqueline, setting the stage for my promotion, was going to be at my reception!

"Is this... normal?"

"Normal, sir?"

"To allow someone who's most certainly a psion, and from an unfriendly power, to mingle freely with naval personnel? Who else is coming?"

Nizlich looked at the handcomp. "According to the list the admiral's office sent us, Admiral Karneticky will be there, as well as Princess Alise, first daughter of the Countess."

High society.

"And there's some religious figure," she continued, "Canon Regimath Forklinbrass, and Han Dignalberry..."

"The gravball star?"

"I wouldn't know, sir. I don't follow sports."

I once lost fifty credits in fantasy gravball because I put Dignalberry in my lineup. He'd been a great player, for sure, taking the Chrysoprase Daggers to the sector finals, but gravballers, as with many other high-impact sports, tended to have short careers punctuated by injuries.

"We also have a Kaz Remshaw representing the local chamber of commerce."

An ambassador, a canon, a gravballer, and a businessman walk into a bar. It sounded like the beginning of a joke. And, no doubt, there were many others, but we hardly had time to go through them all.

"Go dress, Commander. I'll see you back here in..."

"Thirty-four minutes, sir."

She left, and I turned around, glancing again toward the psi-helmets, the hoodie, the metal box, and that little black pouch. I was naturally curious

to examine all these in greater detail, but there would be sufficient time later, and in any case, the highport ought to have its own security. If I brought a bunch of psi-shields with me, that could be awkward, and I needed to make a good first impression and show whoever was in charge of security that I trusted them to do their job.

"Computer, close the captain's secret stash."

I returned to the bedroom as the tray ascended back to the ceiling, and there I undressed and spent a few minutes rinsing off in the shower. Then I hit the dry button, prompting jets of hot air to shoot out from nozzles embedded in the walls and ceiling. Finally, I searched for my parade uniform, locating it in the closet. Somehow it had already found its way onto a hanger, no doubt due to the same mysterious entity that served me that amaretto zardocha and then apparently disposed of it while I was busy with Nizlich.

"Hello, Computer. Do I have a robot steward?"

"My processors include emulation and drivers for a variety of robotic systems, including the Rashush line of expert valets."

"Show me."

For a moment, nothing happened, but then the door opened, and a floating ball nearly a meter in diameter, appeared.

"You're a valet-bot?"

"This is Gopher," the computer responded, "a modified 476-INLAV." Small arms sprang out from the thing's sides.¹⁶ "What do you need, Captain?"

"Nothing. Just curious. Why Gopher? Go for this, go for that?"

"The Gopher is a modified 476-INLAV. Do you wish to learn more about its operating specifications?"

Damn AIs with their conversational interfaces. They were fine so long things stayed sufficiently simple, but the moment you went off-script, they became essentially useless.

"I don't suppose you can help me with my medals?" I asked as I dressed.

"You'll have to earn your own medals, Captain."

Ah! A sense of humor. How wonderfully useless.

¹⁶ See Classic Traveller's *101 Robots*, pg 27.

Full-dress for any Imperial navy captain entailed lots of ribbons and medals, and they all had their proper order. Now that I was in charge of a mid-sized cruiser, I figured I should be able to get my own private steward, preferably one of the flesh and blood variety. On some ships they were called batmen or orderlies. I'd once been on a dreadnought that had three: one for the commodore, another for the captain, and a third for the rest of the senior staff.

I was a captain now, so why not?

The front door chimed.

"Computer, open the door."

It was Commander Nizlich, of course. She'd returned within a minute of her appointed time. Without my even having to ask, she gave me a once over, clearly making a note of the ribbons on show. Then she plucked something from my right shoulder board. I was certain there had been nothing out of place, but perhaps her attention to detail was even greater than mine. Whatever the case, she finally put her fists on her hips, elbows wide, and gave a crisp nod.

"Very good, Captain. Our boat awaits."

She led the way at a brisk pace back to the airlock we'd entered by. Beyond that was another twenty-ton launch, basically identical to the one that brought me to the Jaqueline, except that instead of rows of seats on one side and a cargo area on the other, this one had four folding tables situated together, two-by-two, so as to make one big table at the center of the passenger/cargo bay. Crowded around the edges of this makeshift conference table were around ten chairs, all but two of them already occupied, and as I followed Commander Nizlich inside, someone said "Captain on deck," and everyone stood and saluted, which was a bit awkward, given the cramped conditions.

"At ease," I said, returning the salute.

There was a general shuffling and scraping as those who could, sat, while others, less senior, stood behind the chairs and along the bulkhead. Meanwhile, the airlocks noisily decoupled, and then the deck seemed to wobble as we began accelerating away from the Jaqueline. Nizlich, staying at my side, gestured to the left as she began working her way around the table.

"This is Lt. Često Axmin, our Senior Bridge Officer and Flight Division Chief."

A male in his twenties with a slightly pinched look nodded and coughed.

"Sir," he said. He held a fist to his mouth again as though he were going to cough once more but thought better of it.

"Engineering Division," Nizlich continued. "You've already met Lt. Commander Martinsen."

The chief engineer gave me a single nod.

"Technical Division. Lt. Manda Shepherd."

Behind Martinsen, a vargr appeared, her fur light brown with a darker patch on her lower jaw. She gave a toothy grin and a half wave, half salute.

"Greetings, Captain. Welcome aboard. Suenoe, zoukhinku."

Surprisingly, despite her canine larynx and vocal cords, she had less of an accent than Commander Nizlich. Next to the vargr was a lieutenant whose clerical collar gave him away even before his introduction.

"Lieutenant Villiam Briggs, Chaplain."

"Good to meet you, sir," he said, smiling for a moment. He looked as if he were about to say something more, but then refrained as Nizlich moved on.

"Force Commander Sandy Fa'Linto."

A middle-aged marine, looking as if he were hewed from solid granite, came to full attention and saluted once more, giving me a crisp, "Sir. At your command."

A young man in a Scout Service uniform was standing next to him.

"Scout Liaison, Bim Marshall."

He saluted as well. "I'm looking forward to working with you, sir." He completed his salute with a smile and a nod.

Nizlich moved on to the next seated figure. "You've already met our Chief Medical Officer, Lt. Commander Kosy Villin."

Dr. Willin seemed to be looking at Commander Nizlich rather than myself, but she nodded in recognition. "Sir, I assumed you would like me along for the occasion. Though I'm sure I won't be needed professionally." She smiled.

Next around the table was a raven-haired woman who seemed to be studying the vinyl surface of the table in front of her with some interest.

"Gunnery Division. Lt. Commander Ansi Furtle."

The woman lifted her head just a fraction and gave me a quiet, "Sir."

Nizlich didn't linger. "Lt. Josefeen Abbonette, Intel Ops Pod."

A bathykolpian woman with an intricately patterned hairstyle flashed a brilliant smile at me. "Captain. Number six pod all set."

"Fighter Pod Commander Lydia Vang."

"It's Wang," a middle-aged woman replied.

"That's what I said. Vang. Next is Forward Communications Pod Commander Ganimakkur Eneri Irkirin Managudeli Damgaramar. Did I murder any of that, Ganim?"¹⁷

"No, Commander, you pronounced it all absolutely perfectly." A lithe man with hazel eyes replied, smiling. Next to him was rather frail-looking, grey-haired woman, short of stature, a burn-scar covering the left half of her face, leaving her with very little remaining of her left ear, and there was a small reflective bubble over her left eye socket, effectively a mirror-shade, no doubt protecting a cybernetic implant underneath.

"Senior Master Chief Eleni Lin Irkirin Kaashukapiaki Damgaramar."

"You can call me Elen, Captain," the woman said, not remarking on the Commander's pronunciation. "Pleased to make your acquaintance. We have much to discuss."

Closest to me on the right was another man I recognized, the chiseled jaw from the signing ceremony.

"Crew Division. Our Operations Officer, Lt. Cmdr. Patrice Bonventure."

Bonventure stood again and reached out a hand. "Welcome, Captain. The Commander has a good team here, and we're looking forward to serving under you."

Of course, there was hardly time for a full briefing, but that didn't stop Nizlich from trying.

"We only have half-an-hour, so be quick. Same order as introductions, excepting Martinsen and Villin. Često?"

"Uh." He coughed again, no doubt gathering his thoughts. "Our last jump exit was a little off the mark. I went through the logs again..."

"The Captain's been briefed on that," Nizlich interrupted him. "Anything else?"

"No."

"Manda," Nizlich said, moving to the Vargr. "You look a little under the weather. What happened?"

"Chocolate happened, sir."

"Chocolate?" There were a few chuckles along with the Commander's response. "Ah, I see. You ate chocolate, knowing it to be poisonous to your species. What possessed you... oh, never mind. I don't want to know. Do you have anything to report?"

"Hmm... I can tell you it tasted better going down than it did coming back up."

Most everyone laughed, and even the Commander couldn't help but crack a smile.

"I take it the Technical Division is in perfect order, then?"

"Oh... I wouldn't say perfect, but we're getting by."

"Your shore leave is revoked until further notice, Lieutenant. Force Commander?"

The chaplain looked like he was about to say something, but closed his mouth as the sharp voice of the Marine Captain once again dominated the room.

"Sir," he looked at me, "my soldiers are ready, willing, and able to perform whatever task you set for us, whether it be in space or on the ground, but if you want us to be at full strength, I believe we can squeeze in a fourth company."

"I will take it under consideration. Commander, please make a note. Chaplain, do you have something to say?"

"Oh, bless you, Captain. I just wanted to point out, if I may, that it would be prudent and morally proper to start all our meetings with an invocation. Granted, we have already started this meeting, but I believe the maxim *better late than never* still applies."

"Oh, for God's sake," Nizlich muttered.

"Well said, Commander." Chaplain Briggs nodded, his eyes glowing innocently, as though he completely misunderstood her sentiment. "Oh Heavenly Omnipotence," he continued, "let that moral light that shines from within each of us, without promising or threatening anything with certainty, demand of us its due respect. And when we come together, as we have now, and partake in

¹⁷ The format for Vilani names was taken from a Freelance Traveller article by Jeff Zeitlin. See <https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/culture/cus-toms/vilnames.html>

purposeful discourse, let our respect for our moral lights, our own and each others', become active and dominant in our minds and spirit, that we may be devoted to righteousness rather than to pride, and so that our words and deeds may be true to the community of our moral dispositions. We ask this in the name of the Almighty One, the all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful, and by the impenetrable mystery of being. Amen."¹⁸

"Amen," most everyone said.

"Thank you, Chaplain," Nizlich said. "Bim, you're up."

The young Scout Liaison uncrossed his arms. "Uh... well, as you know, I've been talking to the Admiral's office about getting authorization for re-staffing, and they say that with Captain Plankwell's authorization..."

"We'll be discussing that tonight with the Admiral directly."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you, sir."

"Villin, you've already made your case. Lt. Commander Furtle?"

"All damaged weapons are being repaired as per prior authorizations. All payloads are fully stocked. We finally got approval on the port side fusion batteries, but Efate says four weeks."

"Assuming we stay put," Nizlich added.

The chief gunner nodded.

"Lt. Abbonette," Nizlich said, moving on to the lady with the big smile, ample bosom, and borderline non-regulation hair.

18 Traveller doesn't say much about religion in the 3rd Imperium, leaving this aspect of the setting largely up to the individual referee. Jeff Zeitlin recently posted a challenge on this topic on the Traveller Mailing List (<https://archives.simplelists.com/tml/msg/17580736/>), asking for input for a theme issue of *Freelance Traveller* (<https://www.freelancetraveller.com/>). I don't know that I have sufficient background to respond to this in an educated manner, but my intuition tells me that if religion continues to exist in Traveller, it would do well to expunge the vast majority of religious dogma that exists today and instead concentrate on just a few core principals that most if not all religions can accept. Granted, this might tend to move it more into the realm of amorphous spirituality, but it would also, hopefully, prevent a lot of needless bloodshed. Of course, such a move would also tend to reduce the social power of religion, which is hardly in the interests of the clergy, so my expectation is that any such defanged, mass-market religion will probably be a conscious construction of the Imperium's high nobility and will ultimately be controlled by the same.

"We're still waiting on... you-know-what. Has the captain been briefed?"

"Not yet."

"I'd like to be there when he is."

"Of course." Nizlich nodded. "Lt. Commander Vang?"

Lt. Commander Wang bit her lip, shaking her head slightly. "Red and Purple Squadrons are still undergoing maintenance. They're due to be released tomorrow. Our new pilots arrived yesterday. We're getting them settled in. However, we still need final authorizations for the five dragonflies that need repair as well as the six replacements. I recommend we replace all eleven to save time. Also, given what happened to Jaamzon, I formally request that the ejection pods on *all* the remaining fighters be reinspected."

"Noted. Ganim?"

"Nothing new to report. One bird is still planetside. Another is due to return shortly, and the two remaining are ready for duty."

"Very good. Elen?"

"Oh... how much would you like me to say here, Commander?"

"The Captain should have no illusions as to the crew's morale."

"Well... since you want brevity, let's just say they're on edge."

"Patrice? Anything to report?"

Bonventure stroked his chiseled chin for a moment, seemingly torn by indecision.

"Well, I don't know that this is worthy of the Captain's attention, or anyone else's for that matter, but we had a... uh... mushroom soup malfunction with one of the dispensers, and it resulted in an altercation between one of my people and one of Manda's."

"One of my people?!" the vargr exclaimed.

"What sort of altercation?"

"It was a fight," the senior master chief said. "Or to put it more accurately, they were trying to fight but were fortunately rather inept in their efforts. They're in the brig, where they belong."

"When did this happen?" Manda asked.

"Probably while you were barfing chocolate," Nizlich replied.

"It was about an hour ago," Bonventure stated. "Elen had security put them in the same cell," he added with a grin.

“Easier for them to kiss and make up,” the master chief explained.

I turned toward Nizlich, cocking an eyebrow. “Commander?”

“Yes, Captain?”

“Whatever was the root cause of this, we need to nip it in the bud. I expect a full report. You may proceed.”

“Aye aye, sir. Ve seem to have made it around the table twice vithin our allotted time. Unless you have any questions or would like to make a statement....”

As her voice trailed off, all their eyes fell upon me. I was, after all, the final authority in this room, and as I looked at them all, taking a moment to gather my thoughts, a Fringian Range Carrier, a cargo ship as large as the Jaqueline herself, came into view outside the starboard window. I hadn’t even introduced myself, I suddenly realized, and now we were about to dock with the highport.

“Some of you, I’ve already met. To those I haven’t, I’m Captain Plankwell. I’m honored to have been chosen to command the Jaqueline. Our number one priority, I think you’ll agree, has to be to get her back into tip-top fighting shape and out on patrol ASAP. At first, I thought that was merely going to require some maintenance and repairs, but now I see that the task will involve much more. As the senior officers, we must each renew our commitment to improving crew morale. How exactly we’re going to achieve this... I’m open to your thoughts and ideas, but I need each and every one of you to pull together on this. We have no choice but to succeed.”

The metallic, clamping noise of two mating airlocks resounded through the shuttle’s hold, while outside the starboard window, dozens of craft sat docked along the highport’s exterior surface.

“That will be all,” I concluded.

Nizlich nodded as though on behalf of everyone present. “This meeting is adjourned, but you are not dismissed. The captain vill lead us out. The rest of us vill file in behind him according to rank and then seniority. After ve enter the reception area, I will dismiss you to disperse as you vish. Ve vill meet back here at 1300 hours ship time.”

The airlock doors opened. It was showtime.

Chapter 5

The Reception

“Sir.” An ensign, also in dress uniform, saluted as soon as we began filing out of the shuttle.

“Reform in twos,” Nizlich commanded.

I looked over my shoulder as my senior staff efficiently formed up side-by-side, all except for the vargr lieutenant and the one who’d been coughing. They collided rather spectacularly but managed to not fall down, Nizlich gasping when it seemed uncertain if they’d lose their balance. Rather than take in her next reaction, however, I turned back.

The ensign was still saluting. Either she’d been concentrating so hard on maintaining perfect military posture she hadn’t noticed, or she was an accomplished actress, as her gaze, through on me, remained a blank slate.

“Ensign,” I replied, snapping off a quick salute.

“You’re Captain Plankwell?”

“That is correct.”

“I’m Ensign Florence, sir,” she said with bright, sparkling eyes. “I’m to show you and your staff to the ballroom.”

“Of course. Let us proceed.”

“Sir, I hope I’m not out of line in saying what an honor it is to meet you. I’ve been studying the career of Emperor Olav since even before the academy.”

I pasted on a fake smile as a knot formed somewhere deep in my belly. I’d run into Plankwell groupies before, convinced I would share their deepest love simply on the basis of my name.¹⁹

“Yes, those were very interesting times,” I replied as we walked. I decided test her a little. “I believe there might be some lessons that apply to the current situation.”

“Yes, exactly. For example, the way that fighting at Zivije²⁰ proved instrumental during both wars... both then and now... it’s almost eerie.”

¹⁹ Conrad added this feature of Captain Plankwell’s personality during the editing process, which I think is a nice touch, making the character more sympathetic. The idea will be expanded upon at the beginning of the next chapter.

²⁰ [http://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Zivije_\(world\)](http://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Zivije_(world))

As I was the guest of honor, so to speak, the reception being put on by the Admiral to showcase a newly minted Captain and his crew, I was somewhat disappointed to rate only an ensign as my escort. Granted, she was attractive, enthusiastic, and she clearly knew her history.

Of course, being a Plankwell, I knew all about what happened at Zivije during the First Frontier War, and as would anyone in the Imperial Navy, I'd heard stories about the Zivijie resistance and what they accomplished five years ago, arguably saving Rhylanor and changing the course of the war. The ensign's knowledge, however, seemed encyclopedic, as she began talking about specific units and ships.

Definitely a groupie.

She led us to a security checkpoint where a pair of SPA officers stood guard, and each of us pressed our hands to one of three palm-scanners. Despite the Commander's prior instruction to line up in twos, my officers broke formation into three equal lines, and as we passed through the checkpoint, they silently reformed back into ranks of two. All the while, Ensign Florence chattered about military history, drawing parallels here and there.

"In any case, sir, and I say this with all due respect to our leadership today, I don't think there was ever any admiral of this or any other navy who measured up to Olav hault-Plankwell. He was a super-genius mastermind! And if he hadn't been betrayed, I think he would've come back and kicked the Zhodani out of the Marches for good. Then, maybe, the last four frontier wars would never have happened. That's all the zhos need, in my opinion, Sir, a good, solid ass-whupping of the sort they'll never forget. I'm sorry, sir. I sometimes get riled up just thinking about this stuff."

"That is to be expected, Ensign," I said, adding, "I'd be somewhat disappointed otherwise."²¹

21 It's interesting to me that Phil and Conrad had opposite reactions to Ensign Florence. Phil saw her as a good candidate for becoming Captain Plankwell's personal steward (his desire for one prompted this discussion: <https://archives.simplelists.com/tml/msg/17558030/>), whereas Conrad seemed to view her as a bit of an annoyance. Needless to say, we kept this bit of original dialogue during the editing process, although the interpretation is different insofar as the reader knows

Her cheeks flushed, but she smiled, pressing her hands to her stomach.

"There's something I really want to tell you, but I can't."

"Oh?"

"It's supposed to be a surprise," she said as we continued onto an escalator. "All I can tell you is that I was involved in the final testing." We rose into what appeared to be a higher class section of the station.

"Final testing of what?"

She looked down at the metal steps with a slight grimace.

"You'll know soon," she finally answered. "Speaking personally, I was blown away. The Darrians really outdid themselves this time. I hope you'll feel the same way, sir, but if not, I just hope you won't be offended."

Offended?

I felt an uncomfortable tightness in my chest, annoyed that she was keeping a secret. I didn't particularly like surprises. In fact, one could say I despised them. Almost as much as speeches.

Up ahead, something big and shiny was slowly turning in mid-air, and as we closed the distance, I could see it was the logo of the Stellar Excelsior Hotel. Gravitationally suspended above a wide fountain, the gem-studded sculpture rotated in one direction as dancing water droplets, sparkling in every hue imaginable, swirled in the opposite direction, glittering brightly through the efforts of hundreds of tiny lasers recessed into the ceiling. Once past this monument to grandeur, the corridor widened into a large multi-story atrium.

Ensign Florence led us to the back and then along an arched corridor. Finally, we entered a large room ornately decorated in the traditional farewell colors of silver and black. The far wall was transparent, essentially one big window overlooking Jewell, and a large model of the Jaqueline, perhaps two meters long, floated in mid-air in one corner, slowly rotating like the sculpture we'd just passed.

Plush furnishings, mostly sofas and divans, sat here and there, mostly near the walls, and a buffet, no doubt of the highest quality, was situated along the wall closest to the entrance. The hotel's own staff were serving, each of them

how Captain Plankwell really feels.

wearing crisp uniforms with the company logo, while other waitstaff circulated with trays of finger foods and drinks.

There were perhaps sixty guests dressed in a variety of fashions. Most were from Jewell, no doubt, but many, like myself, were probably offworlders, meaning that the mix of styles in clothing and dress was, like that sculpture outside, a visual cacophony, but mesmerizing nonetheless.

“Plankwell!” Admiral Karneticky strode over from across the room. He was short and balding, his stockiness turning to paunch, and he had a ruddy complexion and a self-important gait.

I reflexively snapped to attention, giving the admiral a crisp, regulation salute. All my officers apparently followed suit, for he quickly glanced down the line, several people pausing in mid-sentence or mid-bite to gaze in our direction.

“At ease, everyone. This is a party.” He returned our salute with a sloppy chop. “Go mingle and eat something. I recommend the caviar canapés. They’re quite delightful.”

“Disperse,” Nizlich echoed the admiral’s instruction, condensing it to a single word.

“Oh, hello there, Stefani.” Karneticky grinned as he looked her up and down. “So what do you think of your new Captain? Does he meet with your approval?”

Nizlich paused for a moment, as though considering her words. “Vhy shouldn’t he?” she finally answered, glancing toward Ensign Florence. “He is, after all, a Plankvell.” Being right behind me all the way here, I was sure she’d heard everything the ensign had to say.

“Come,” Karneticky said, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Let’s talk about your speech.”

Speech?

I hadn’t prepared a speech, though perhaps I should have. After all, he’d mentioned the reception yesterday at my promotion ceremony, although he didn’t warn me I’d have to say anything formal. With his hand on my shoulder, the admiral gently pulled me away from Commander Nizlich and Ensign Florence. Clearly, he wanted to talk to me privately, despite the fact that we were surrounded by people, most of them perfect strangers.

“Speech... ah... of course, sir. Perhaps you have suggestions? It’s not really my cup of tea.”

“I thought you drank zardocha,” he said.

“Yes, well...” I smiled, though perhaps a bit too tightly. “It’s not my cup of zardocha either.”

“Well, you are the guest of honor, so just make up something short and keep it civil. You see that woman over there?”

The admiral motioned with his chin toward a small group of guests. Among them were several women, but one stood out, most notably due to her height and the fact that she was clearly Zhodani. Her height was a partial giveaway — the Zhodani were generally tall and lithe, and she had both qualities in spades; she was positively statuesque, even callipygian, in her tight blue gown with its violet hem and golden neckline — but her turban-like headdress was the clincher. It was part of their traditional garb, probably adopted in a mad race to accentuate their already prodigious height. Adding her dark complexion to the mix, there could be little doubt.

“The Zhodani?”

“Ambassador Vaktishstebr,” the admiral clarified. “I’m to understand from your predecessor that your entire crew thinks it was Zhodani who attacked the Jaqueline at Quar in an opportunistic hit and run, but with no proof it’s important that you not level any unfounded speculations regarding the identity of the perpetrators. If you wish to bring it up at all, you may simply refer to them as pirates and leave it at that. In short, I don’t wish to turn this reception into a diplomatic incident, so be on your best behavior. Understood, Captain?”

As my whole body tensed up, I couldn’t help but wonder if the admiral thought me a fool. What had I done wrong?

“Yes, sir! Understood, sir! Won’t mention the ‘incident’ at all, sir.”

An old couple walking by turned their heads to stare at us for a moment, and the admiral smiled and nodded politely.

“Discretion, Captain,” he said after they’d passed. “That’s all I’m asking for. Now tell me, since I’ve got your ear, have you decided whether or not to keep your exploration pod?”

An image of that scout liaison asking about restaffing flashed to mind. Apparently, the admiral knew more about this than I did.

“Well, sir, especially in light of recent circumstances and also considering that my patrol

area is *not* exactly what one could call unexplored, I *have* been considering the possibility.”²²

“And?”

“I thought I might replace it with a pod that would be more useful should I run into another hostile vessel equal to or larger than the Jaqueline.”

“Well, you’re in luck, Captain. Admiral Vasilyev has pre-approved whatever changes you want to make to your ship’s load out. Talk to the head quartermaster, Commander Shumurdim²³, and I’ll make sure your requests get expedited on our end.”

“Thank you very much, sir! I’ll confer with my XO and get in touch with the quartermaster ASAP.”

“By the way, you lucky devil, what do you think of Stefani?” He glanced back toward Nizlich, who was by now talking to Dr. Willin. His question didn’t surprise me, but the *lucky devil* part did, and the fact that he was referring to Nizlich by her first name indicated they had some sort of relationship beyond the professional, even if only in *his* mind.

“Sir... I... uh... I do consider myself *very* lucky to have inherited an XO who’s proving to be indispensable. She has made the command transition smooth and seamless.”²⁴

The admiral broke eye contact, pressing his lips together for a moment.²⁵

“Glad to hear it, Captain,” he finally said. “Well, if there’s nothing else, I’ll continue making my rounds among the guests.”

“At your service,” I said, nodding.

He ambled off, and one of the waitstaff approached me with hors d’oeuvres. I took one, not having any idea what it was, and popped it in

my mouth, grabbing a glass of wine from another who approached from the other side. They must have both been hovering nearby, waiting for an opportunity to lighten their trays without interrupting our conversation. Of course, it would have been more efficient to employ robot servers, but there was something about actual people, smartly dressed, serving food and drink, that lent itself to high society functions such as this.

As I turned, I noticed the zhodani ambassador’s little group had dispersed, and, still looking statuesque, she craned her neck like a bird of prey overlooking a feast of rodents. Then she fixed her gaze, and I turned to look, following the direction her eyes pointed. There was another zhodani, a man, sitting on one of the sofas, and for less than a half-second our eyes met. Immediately, he shifted his gaze, looking around the room as if the moment had happened by pure chance. He wore a black military uniform. Zhodani Navy?

Talk about a fish out of water. What was a zhodani officer doing at a reception for an INS captain? Scoping out the new opposition? Sizing me up?

I looked around, seeing if I could spot anyone I knew, but, of course, I’d never been to Jewell and didn’t know any Jewellers²⁶ or whatever they were calling themselves these days, and so I wasn’t particularly well acquainted with the great and the good of their society. Granted, there were more here than just locals, the zhodani on the sofa being one example, but neither was I an interstellar socialite. The only person I recognized, other than the admiral and members of my crew, was the muscular, pale-skinned man who seemed to be in the middle of a humorous tale, at least judging by the laughter of his audience. Han Dignalberry, the gravball star who cost me fifty credits²⁷, was apparently as amusing as he was unprofitable.

I turned back to where Nizlich and Dr. Willin had been standing, but the doctor was now alone with a caviar canapé in one hand and a drink in the other, so I scanned the room for the

22 This was meant to be a bit of a surprise, but, as you can see, Phil was quick on his feet in terms of formulating Captain Plankwell’s reaction.

23 The name is a bit of a joke. In Vilani, *shum* means to give, lend, or hand over, and *urdim* means to give, grant, or bestow, so, at least to my way of thinking, *shumurdim* means “give-give”, which, y’know, is sort of what a quartermaster does. For those interested in learning Vilani, there’s a downloadable PDF at <http://traveller5.net/tools/lang/Vilani%20Grammar%20and%20Glossary%204.4.pdf>

24 Once again, kudos to Phil.

25 Although, apparently the admiral disagrees.

26 Both Timothy and I both prefer *Jewellites* to *Jewellers*, but *Jewellers* is the term used at [https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Jewell_\(SM_1106\)_world](https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Jewell_(SM_1106)_world)

27 This little tidbit was mentioned near the beginning of the previous chapter.

Commander. She was now in the far corner with Martinsen, the chief engineer, and as I began to cross toward them, I could see Nizlich was practically poking him in the chest with her index finger. Meanwhile, his hands were balled into fists.²⁸

“Ladies and gentlesophonts... nobles, servants, citizens and subjects,” a female voice loudly announced over the ballroom’s speakers, “please join me in welcoming Alise, Lady Mongo, daughter of Helena Stavelot, Countess of Jewell!”

Everyone quickly made their way to the edges of the room as a young lady entered with no less than ten bodyguards. She was dressed in turquoise and teal, her gown glittering with seemingly countless gemstones. Admiral Karneticky emerged from the crowd, stepping forward to bow down in front of her, putting his knee to the floor, and most everyone else, including myself, did likewise, bowing where we stood, all except for the two zhodani. The ambassador remained standing with her back to the wall, and the man on the sofa remained sitting, his gaze fixed upon Lady Alise.

She was a teenager of perhaps sixteen or seventeen years. It was hard to tell, given the quantity of makeup she wore. She leaned down and said something to the Admiral, and he nodded and stood, tacitly signaling for the rest of us to do likewise.

“Where’s our guest of honor?” He looked around until his gaze fixed on me. “Captain Plankwell.”

Oh, boy. Here we go.

I strode over, the muscles in my neck, shoulders, and back tensing up even as I made a conscious effort to relax.

“Sir!”

“My Lady, I present to you Captain Plankwell.”

My bow was as perfect as six years of exclusive Rhylanor prep schools could have made it. To their credit, in my parents’ struggle to open doors for me, they spared no expense. I, on the other hand, had no desire to rub elbows with members of the nobility, but neither did I care to suffer ridicule or become an object of

²⁸ He had it coming. See Chapter 2, pg. 5.

disappointment, so I’d applied myself with contrarian spite.²⁹

Alise, for her part, looked upon me as a child might look upon some strange toy for the first time, her nose wrinkling, though at least she was smiling.

“You are a bit young for a captain,” she said.

“Thank you, My Lady.”

“And they put you, a Plankwell, in command of the Empress Jaqueline? That’s a bit... a bit crude... even for the navy,” she said with a bemused smile.

“Well, my Lady, I’ve heard it said the Admiralty sometimes moves in mysterious ways.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” she replied.

“Admiral, you may present him to the people.”

“Thank you, my Lady,” Karneticky replied. “Come, Captain.” He put a hand on my shoulder and led me toward a corner of the room, adding a quiet “well done” into my ear as we walked.

“Thank you, sir.”³⁰

The crowd parted, allowing us to pass through, and as we neared the corner of the ballroom, I could see the floor there was rising, turning it into an impromptu stage complete with steps all around its room-facing edge. A young woman, platinum blonde, stood there in a white coat and white slacks, the people around her suddenly realizing they’d be on stage if they didn’t move, and so move they did, stepping down to the floor and backing up as an old man in flowing green robes slowly made his way toward us, tapping on shoulders to get people to let him through.

“Sorry,” he said in a hoarse voice, little more than a whisper, when he reached us. “For some

²⁹ Young Plankwell initially resisted the wishes of his parents, but parents and paid instructors can be quite insistent, so he finally knuckled under and decided embrace the enemy, so to speak, training himself to perfection with respect to all the required mannerisms, postures, and phrases of Imperial court, so as to snuff out, once and for all, the critique that he lacked the *ability* to learn proper etiquette.

³⁰ This was Phil’s last bit of dialogue as a Captain Plankwell’s player. Shortly afterward, just after I had written the canon’s speech, he expressed strong reservations about my portrayal of Traveller’s nobility (<https://archives.simplelists.com/tml/msg/18041998/>), and said that if he had prior knowledge of my position on this, he probably wouldn’t have joined up. He resigned from the game shortly thereafter.

reason, I thought it was the other corner. Hello there,” he said to me, smiling and offering his hand. “I wish you well, young man, and so does the universe.”

“This is Canon Forklinbrass,” the Admiral said as I took the old man’s hand and gently shook it.

“You can call me Regimath...”

“You can call him Canon or Your Grace,” the Admiral said.

“...or Reggie...,” the canon added, “...or Reg. My mother called me Reggie, but my friends call me Reg.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” the young woman said. “but Lady Alise has other engagements, so we need to speed this along. I’m going to introduce the canon, then you, Admiral, and then you will introduce Captain Plankwell. Is that correct?”

“Yes, please.”

“Very well. Just stand outside the spotlight unless you want your voice to be projected over the PA.”

“Yes, yes,” Karneticky nodded. “I know how selective mics work.”

“It’s go-time,” she said to nobody in particular, however, the room itself seemed to be listening, as the lights quickly dimmed, and a spotlight cast from three different angles enveloped us.

“Ladies and Gentlesophonts,” she said as the admiral and I took a few steps off to the side, the room’s speaker system amplifying her voice, “on behalf of the Stellar Excelsior, it is my sublime honor to introduce Canon Forklinbrass of the Church of Sylea.”

She stepped out of the spotlight, and only the canon remained, his face beaming with an enigmatic smile that seemed simultaneously painted on and yet very real, as if practice had brought perfection even in the realm of the spirit. He waited for everyone to stop talking and for glasses and silverware to stop tinkling until the silence became, at first, uncomfortable and then oppressive, so much so that I began to seriously wonder if the old cleric, fighting a losing battle with senility, had forgotten whatever he was supposed to say.

“What is it that, even to the savage, is the object of greatest admiration?” he finally said in his hoarse, old-person voice. Somehow, the remote mics picked it up, relaying it to the speakers, which automatically adjusted the

volume so everyone could hear him. Again, he waited, as if expecting someone to answer.

“It is the being who is undaunted,” he finally said, “the one who knows no fear, and who, therefore, does not give way in the face of danger. Even when civilization has become rotten and produces wretchedness and vice of all kinds, still there remains this special reverence for the soldier.”

He looked out over the crowd again, unblinking, though the spotlights were no doubt blinding his eyes.

“This, of course, is especially true when soldiers exhibit the virtues of peace — *gentleness and sympathy, forgiveness and mercy* — proving they are not monsters but rather civilized beings keeping their inner monster at bay, until it is needed. Comparing the statesman, the diplomat, the merchant and mechanic, the farmer and doctor, the teacher and poet, the cleric and the warrior, sophonts may argue as they please as to the preeminent respect due one above the others, but the verdict of the inner self is clear; it is for the last, the warrior, for we all understand in our very bones the preeminent need for those who suffer and inflict violence on our behalf, so we may live in peace.”

He cupped his hands in front of him, as though holding something precious.

“But, having given honor and respect to whom it is rightly due, think now what we have in our hands that we stand to lose — that we are certain to lose, for it is no mere possibility — if we fail to evolve beyond our present ways. After the invention of nuclear weapons on Vland, Zhdant, Lair, and Terra, leaders on each world faced the very same conundrum, and so they were forced, in each case after centuries of intermittent warfare going back all the way to prehistory, to before even the invention of speech and writing, they *finally learned the necessity of self-restraint*. Those civilizations that fell short in this test never became major races. We’ve found the cinders, the cooked ruins, that attest to the *consequences of failure*.”

He raised a hand, extending only his index finger.

“But now... think on this: How is it that all of us in this room are genetically related? How is it

that our ancestors first came to dwell on different worlds?”

He paused again, as if someone would speak the word that was now on everyone’s lips.

“The Ancients,” he finally answered. “And their technology, judging by some of the examples we have found, was clearly beyond our own. Those who came before us inhabited many worlds. But where are they now? What happened to them? If they weren’t secure from self-destruction, then how can we possibly be?”

While the Ancients might have wiped themselves out, nobody knew that for sure. Granted, archaeologists determined there had been 2,000 years of conflict. But were they fighting each other, or were they exterminated by a more advanced race who just happened to be passing through? His entire speech was based on the first hypothesis, but until proven, it was mere speculation.

“The conclusion is obvious!” He clasped his hands together. “There is another great filter³¹ lying in wait for us, the likes of which we have not faced for millennia. Our methods and institutions of interstellar relations, given our recent history, must change, or we too shall fall short and suffer the *consequences of failure*. Like the warrior who masters himself, we must master ourselves, not merely as individuals, but as an interstellar community. We must learn the ways of *gentleness and sympathy, forgiveness and mercy*. Only the *meek*³² shall inherit. So it is written, and so it shall be. By the hand and under the watchful eye of Almighty Providence, may we join together in harmony, and without disrespect to any who wage war, put away our weapons, once and forever. Amen.”

“Amen,” many echoed.

The canon turned and slowly hobbled over to us, the young woman quickly entering the spotlight in his wake.

31 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Filter

32 Actually, I’ve heard somewhere that “meek” is an incorrect translation of the original scriptures, and that the original word had two meanings, one positive and the other negative. The negative sense implied one who is overly submissive, but the positive, which is probably the sense it which it was being used, implied one who is able to remain calm even when being provoked. Another way I heard it explained is that it refers to someone who keeps their sword sheathed.

“Ladies and gentlesophonts, Fleet Admiral Bilem Karneticky.”

The admiral stepped past the canon and into the spotlight, squinting momentarily as his eyes adjusted to the glare, and for a moment, the canon stopped and turned toward the crowd, though they could no longer see him.

“Thank you, Canon Forklinbrass, for that... uh... far-seeing invocation, and thank you, everyone, for coming.”

“You’re welcome,” the canon said, though he was outside the spotlight, so his voice wasn’t broadcast over the PA.

“On behalf of the 212th Fleet, I wish to welcome you all to our reception honoring the Imperial Navy’s newest commanding officer, Captain Augustine Olav Plankwell. Many of you will no doubt recognize the name Olav hault-Plankwell.”

“Oh, yes,” the canon said, stepping to the spotlight’s edge.

My heart sank a little, and I immediately tightened my face into the ‘good son of Plankwell’ expression I had used all my life around assuming strangers. I had accepted long ago I would never get out from under his legacy, so I had no choice but to embrace it.

“Our base on Jewell is, after all, named after him, which is fitting, as his name is rightfully revered for establishing, through determination and sacrifice, the precedent that the Imperium will never let go of Jewell or her sisters, Ruby and Emerald, no matter the cost.”

At this there was a loud round of applause, and somewhere in the darkness of the crowd, no doubt there were two zhodani feeling increasingly uncomfortable. The canon turned and, shaking his head, slowly sauntered to my side.

“But this is not an occasion for recalling the recent war or the long-term risks of war itself, as Canon Forklinbrass so ably outlined in his invocation.”

Leaning in with a clenched jaw, he stared at me for a long moment, like a microbotanist might examine a new species of fungi.

“I do agree with him that it would be far better if we and the Consulate were to find some way of resolving disputes through non-violent means, Fiddlywinks, perhaps... or Rock/Scissors/E-Paper,” — a semi-amused titter passed through

the crowd — “...but until that happens, we in the Imperial Navy will continue to...”

“Nervous?” the canon asked.

“Thank you for asking, Your Grace. I stand ready in my duty to do what is asked of me to the best of my abilities.”³³

“Of course,” he said, reaching within a fold of his robes, “don’t we all.” He withdrew a small metal flask, unscrewing the stopper, which hung from its neck by a small chain. “But perhaps a little of this will help calm the nerves.” He offered it to me. “Careful, though. It’s not communion wine.”

I’m sure my eyes widened a bit at the offer being made. Did I really look that nervous? I took the flask.

“A good captain takes all the help he can get, Your Grace. Here’s to intervention from the Almighty.”

“Amen to that,” the old man grinned.

I took a cautious sip. The canon was right, definitely not communion wine. The smoky liquor burned like a roaring fire down to the pit of my stomach, where it gathered into a pool of burning embers. Somehow, I managed not to cough, handing the flask back to him once I was sure I wouldn’t.

“Smooth, eh?”

“Indeed, Your Grace, and a little fire in the belly for the coming trials.”

“I don’t know what trials the universe holds in store,” he replied, “but if you need anything — advice from an old fart or just another shot of this — I’d be pleased to help in any way I can.”

“That’s extremely generous, Your Grace. I would be pleased if you could join us aboard the Jaqueline for dinner before we depart.”

“I’d be delighted, Captain. A word of warning,” he said, suddenly leaning in closer. “I’ve heard a rumor the admiral may have a little surprise up his sleeve, something about...”

“...allow me to present, Captain Plankwell!”

PBEM Administrivia: Phil wasn’t happy about my portrayal of the nobility.

So we lost Phil. Fortunately, Conrad volunteered to play Captain Plankwell, so the PBEM continues. I need to leave enough space for our comments, so I’ll save my thoughts regarding the substance of Phil’s objection for another time. Suffice it to say that his perspective on the nobility is not at all uncommon, and he’s right insofar as I should have warned him ahead of time that I tend to play Traveller’s nobility, more often than not, as individuals with actual political power.

³³ These are Conrad’s first words of dialogue, having stepped into Phil’s discarded shoes to play Captain Plankwell.

Chapter 6

The Surprise

Standing in front of the audience without so much as a lectern on which to lean and fully exposed by the blinding spotlights, it felt like a kaleidoscope of butterflies was fluttering within my innards, stirred into a mad frenzy by the canon's liquor. The palpable unease reminded me of the first time I'd been called in front of a captain for disciplinary measures.

I was so raw, a fresh squiddie on a training cruise to fill out the complement of a cruiser heading to Depot for refurbishment. The training cadre told me it would be good experience and get me off world on my own, playing up the theme of "serve the Imperium, see the Imperium," and it sounded good to this second year academy plebe, who was already chafing at the limits of his life. So I got hauled aboard the INS Maledictor to begin my new assignment, which ended up with me in the brig for fighting with my crewmates over the stupidest thing possible, a bunk assignment.

The bosun had us separated and thrown in the brig faster than anything I had ever seen. I had gotten into scraps before, but these career navy spacers knew moves and holds that just shut us down. They left us in the brig over the third watch and then, early on first watch, brought us before the captain for a disciplinary hearing. The bosun instructed us in a quiet tone that we were to enter the captain's office, stand before him at attention, only speak when spoken to, and only answer questions put to us. Failure to do so, as she looked at us with the deadest eyes I had ever seen, would result in consequences too terrible to even bother to describe.

I had not begun the fight, but I had put down one of the instigators, so I was left to last.

Captain Marchemsaar sat behind a desk, uniform crisp and clean, framed by the Imperial Sunburst behind him. Commander Vilnechats, the First Officer, ticked off the last report on his pad and announced me.

"Spacehand Cadet Plankwell, Academy Probation. Charge is disorderly conduct in quarters."

That was my first surprise. Not fighting. They had left us our tablets the night before with instructions to look up the Uniform Code of Military Justice and contemplate the offenses we may have committed. I was sure I was getting at least three other charges.

The captain thumbed his tablet and read, his finger scrolling the display slightly. Then he put down the tablet. Folded his hands and looked to the second in command.

"Name of Plankwell is going to earn him all kinds of grief."

The First Officer regarded me gravely. I came even tighter to attention, the memory of many history classes and family stories swirling around in my head. True, I was a direct descendant of *the* Olav hault-Plankwell, but distant, and the titles descended down a different line. I just had the name and a mild chip on my shoulder about it.

The captain regarded me further and apparently came to some decision.

"Mr. Plankwell, there is no need to defend yourself. The entire ruckus was caught on internal surveillance, and there have been testimonies from the others involved that make clear that you were not an instigator. You are new to the Navy, so consider this your moment of grace. Your name will not bring you any favors among this crew, and by your expression, I can see you know that. It will, however, bring you notoriety and attention, and it is up to you how you deal with that. Fighting in compartments will bring one kind of career in the Navy, and I would rather you looked for other options. Your records from civilian life are sound, and you have the basis to go as far as you will. I urge you to take every advantage you can. To the charge of disorderly conduct, I pronounce you guilty and sentence you to time served in the brig. This mark on your record will be struck if you complete a term of service without incurring any further offenses. That will be all."

Captain Marchemsaar went down with his ship during the 5FW³⁴. I served my term with him with distinction enough to get a top recommendation, and I was pretty sure that was the reason I made sublieutenant straight out of the Academy. My first look at an Imperial naval captain changed

34 5th Frontier War

how I looked at my world and brought me to this place. We lost so many fine comrades in the last war, and here I stood, the next to carry the standard forward.³⁵

“Thank you, Admiral, and thanks to all who have graced my introduction here today.”

I hated speeches. Off the cuff speeches were worse. I could feel the sweat on my palms as I clenched my fists and then immediately released them.

Deep breaths. Keep it short. Don't let them see. Breathe.

“Having just arrived, I have not had the opportunity to meet you all. I hope that can be rectified before the duties of the service take me out into the deep black once again. I would like to thank the honorable canon for his invocation, and Admiral Karneticky for his rousing paean to the Imperium and the Navy.”

Due to the glare of the spotlights, I could barely see the faces studying me, deciding how to categorize me. It was just as well. They had the name and the legend, but they didn't know me, and there was nothing I could say here, nothing that would be of any value.

Serve them platitudes. It's what's expected.

“As the new captain of the INS Jacqueline, it is my duty to defend the Imperium against all enemies. It is also my duty to safeguard my crew, to see them through the rigors of space, and Providence willing,” — I stole a sideways glance in the canon's direction — “return them home.”

The crowd responded with a polite round of applause, enough to call this speech a success.

Time to wrap it up.

“As my namesake held the Marches against those who sought to invade, so will I remain watchful and alert to ensure the peace of the Imperium, or at least the small part I am responsible for. Thank you all, once again, for the honor you do me and the Navy by your attendance.”

I put my hat back on and turned toward the admiral, then snapped off a salute and held it.

35 In my first email to Conrad, I sent him the write-up of the campaign so far and asked him to send me back a memory, something from Captain Plankwell's past that we could incorporate into an upcoming chapter. He sent me two, and this was one of them, and in my opinion, he did a damn fine job.

He entered the spotlight, returning my salute, and we shook hands.

“Well done,” he mouthed the words rather than saying them out loud. “Turn on the lights,” he said. “I have a little surprise for you, Captain, and for you as well,” he added, turning toward the audience as the lights came back on and the spotlights dimmed. “Captain Plankwell, I present to you a gift from the Darrian Confederation, a virtual simulacrum of somebody who I can only imagine has been a part of your life from the time you were but a child, someone who has been discussed here tonight, someone who you yourself brought up during your speech just now. I, of course, speak of none other than former Grand Admiral and Emperor of the Imperium, Olav hault-Plankwell!”

With that, he swept his arm toward the transparent wall facing Jewell, and appearing there, larger than life, with the planet and stars as his backdrop, was the image of my ancestor. He looked down upon us, blinking for a moment, and the crowd gasped.

“Where is this place?” he finally asked. “And who are these people?”³⁶

“Holy...” I could scarcely breathe, “...holy...”

“It starts with an *S* and rhymes with *It*,” the canon said, sidling up beside me. “I believe the word you're looking for is...”

“Yes! That's the one!”

“Olav,” Admiral Karneticky called out to the window. “You remember me, don't you?”

“Ah, yes,” the image smiled slightly. “Hello, there, *Fleet Admiral*. I was dreaming peacefully, and now I am here, in what at first glance appears to be an absurd nightmare. Tell me, is this real, or another one of your simulations?”

“These people are real,” Karneticky said, “certainly more real than you. Allow me to introduce Lady Alise, daughter of the Countess of Jewell.”

Alise and Olav stared intently upon one another for a long moment, her biting her lower lip and him crossing his arms and frowning.

“Have you forgotten how to bow, good sir?”

“Have you?” he replied.

36 Thanks to **Jerry Stratton** for mentioning the idea of artificially-intelligent memorial holograms at the top of the 3rd page of his zine in A&E #549.

"My, my... this artificial personality thinks he is Emperor." She grinned. "How very amusing. If you do not bow at once, I shall have you switched off."

"You'll be doing me a favor."

"Very well, then."

She nodded her head, and he promptly disappeared. Amidst the crowd, there was general laughter, and then everyone began talking at once.

"Well," Canon Forklinbrass said, "that went well."

He passed the flask again, as everyone was distracted, and I silently took a slightly larger swig this time.

"Llanan fikhaerrg zougz goersghengig."³⁷

The long trip back from Vargr territories had given me plenty of time to learn to curse like a corsair. Frankly, it hurt my throat more than the liquor, and as for the actual meaning, one could only guess.

I looked around the room to see if I could spot Nizlich, or that damned ensign. I needed to be away from this, but I needed an official excuse. Besides, I was sure the admiral had something grim in mind involving me and the — what did Lady Alise call it — artificial personality?

Karneticky grimaced, ashen-faced, as her ladyship approached.

"Incoming," the canon whispered.

"Admiral," she called, still at some distance. "A word, if you please."

"Or a few *choice* words," the canon whispered.

"Plankwell," Karneticky said, "come with me."

Forklinbrass began humming a funeral dirge as I tried to return his flask, but he shook his head.

"I expect you'll be needing that more than me."

I hastily fastened the stopper and slipped it into my pocket, catching up with the admiral as he followed the noblewoman and her bodyguard detail toward what I imagined would either be a private alcove or, just as likely, an airlock with nothing but space on the other side.

"Sir," I said, trying to appear upbeat, "I thought the fidelity of the image was quite striking. We have some excellent portraits at

home, and it took me quite by surprise. Darrian manufacture, did I hear you say? How did you come by it?"

"Idiot Darrian imbecile," he muttered, barely acknowledging me as we exited the ballroom back into the arched corridor. "Doesn't he know who I am?"

Rather than heading back to the atrium, we took a side corridor to a lobby where a man, probably a guard, but maybe he was some sort of concierge, sat behind a window. He nodded and smiled as we passed, all thirteen of us including the bodyguards, and soon we reached a junction where the corridor split, going left and right. Ahead of us was an alcove, a sort of lookout situated along the highport's outer skin, as there were large windows all around its edges, the ones on the far end overlooking the planet, and several docked ships could also be seen on either side. As we passed through, turning left, I realized what I was looking at. All along this corridor were suites, and each one apparently had its own private airlock to which its occupants could dock directly.

We entered one of the suites and passed directly through to the airlock at the back, and then onto a yacht, or, if not a yacht, then the gaudiest shuttle I'd ever boarded. The color scheme was all pink and lavender, the rugs, the walls, the furniture and drapes, and a sweet yet sickly stench of perfume hung in the air, strong enough to make my eyes water.

"What was *that*!?" she demanded as soon as the airlock doors closed behind us.

"If you wouldn't mind, Your Ladyship, might I use the fresher?" Karneticky asked.

"Now?!"

He nodded. Alise and I shared the briefest glance of disbelief.

"Show him to a fresher," she said. One of the guards complied, so I was left standing there with her and the other nine.

"What *was* that?" she asked me.

"M'Lady, I do believe that was what we in the service call the privilege of rank," I answered, turning toward her as I pulled myself together. Since she was now focusing all of her attention upon me, the least I could do was return the favor.

"No, not *him*. The other *him*."

37 See Classic Traveller's Alien Module 3: Vargr, pg. 22 (1984)

"I assume you're referring to the apparition of my... erm... predecessor, and I haven't the faintest clue. As far as I have been able to put together, it is the result of some kind of Darrian technology able to produce a pseudo-personality. No one has told me much of anything about it, and since my arrival in-system earlier today, I have been otherwise engaged in assuming command of my cruiser. I take it that there is a certain higher level of Plankwell enthusiasm here due to the name of the base, and I also assumed I was being kept in the dark as some kind of surprise; for whose benefit I cannot imagine. On behalf of the Navy, I do apologize if it has caused you distress, which I am sure would not have been the intention."

"I was told it would be an artificial personality, which I'm okay with... I interact with computers just like everyone else... but *he* wanted to strangle me! I could see it in his eyes. If this was someone's idea of a joke, I am not amused!"

I forced a smile, one that I hoped would be more likely to mollify than enrage, reminding myself that soon I'd be free of the lot of them, cruising the vast interstellar ocean with no one to answer to but lady luck.

The guard who escorted Karneticky to the fresher returned, motioning for me to come.

What now? Did his zipper snag on something on the way back up?

"Excuse me, M'Lady," I said, stepping around her. "What is it?"

"It sounds like he's on a call," the guard said as he guided me to the fresher. "Either that or he's arguing with his *little friend*."

Sure enough, there was the definite sound of a heated conversation emanating from the door.

"What do you mean it woke up in a bad mood? Don't you have a knob for that?"

I winced at the admiral's word choice given the guard's assessment of the conversation.

The guard knocked.

"I'll call you back."

The door slid open, and the admiral glared at us like we'd interrupted a very important meeting.

The guard arched his eyebrow at me and beat a retreat back to his duty station. Coward!

"Sir, the Lady Mongo³⁸ is perturbed at the emotional vehemence directed towards her by the personality construct and seems to desire an explanation of sorts."

"That is exactly what I'm trying to procure, Captain."

"And pardon my confusion, but could you please explain what has turned a very staid, but pleasant welcome ceremony into whatever incident this is becoming?"

He opened his mouth, no doubt to illuminate me with the wisdom of the ages, but suddenly there was a voice emanating from the direction we just came. It sounded like a middle-aged woman talking, but loud enough that she must have been speaking over the ship's PA, and she sounded angry.

"Foolish, foolish girl!"

"It's Countess Helena," Karneticky said.

"Do you not know your own history, child?! Where do you think Jewell would be today if not for Olav hault-Plankwell?"

"But mama, you didn't see the way he was looking at me!"

"I saw the whole thing! It's circulating on the public network as we speak!"

We both crept forward, back to the room where Alise was now getting verbally spanked by her mother. The countess's image was suspended in midair by a holographic projector hidden somewhere in the ceiling, and having never seen her before, I was somewhat taken aback. Her hair, lathered in green gel, glistened sickly, and to make matters worse, her face was covered in some sort of cakey, blue powder, a lone nerve stimulator bravely hanging over her forehead, its control leads dangling uselessly and waving sightly as the countess emphasized her remarks with a pointed finger.

38 Lady Alise is also known as the Lady Mongo, due to her fief on the world of Mongo (two parsecs from Jewell) that was given to her by her mother. I was initially referring to her as a princess (see the 1st page of Chapter 4) in accordance with the honorifics given for a Social Standing of D (13) on page 7 of my article on Social Standing in Traveller in A&E #547, however, both Phil and Timothy were against this, and so I reconsidered and finally decided to simply refer to her as being a lady, not a princess, which Timothy argued was a title that should be reserved for royalty (and he's British, after all, so he would know).

“Ali, do you have any idea what this will do to the public’s perception of our family?”

“But *he* was the one violating protocol!”

“*He*? The artificial personality? Are you listening to yourself, Ali?”

“What was I supposed to do? Bow down to a computer program?”

“Better than to spit in the eye of Jewell’s savior! Now you fix this, young lady, and you fix it fast! Do you hear me?!”

Alise gaped and stuttered for a moment, clearly at loss for words, until finally she bent her neck and slumped her shoulders in resignation.

“Yes, Mama.”

“Today, Ali, right now, or we’ll end up having to do damage control for God only knows how long! Remember the paparazzi incident?”

Alise flinched, almost as though physically struck. Whatever had happened with the paparazzi, it must have left her emotionally scarred.

“Ali!”

“Okay! Okay! I’ll fix it!”

“Good girl. And I expect you back here by supper.”

There was a click as the countess vanished, and Alise finally noticed the admiral and I lurking at the mouth of the corridor, her face flushed and bottom lip trembling.

“Well, you heard her,” she finally said. “We have to fix it. You!” She looked at me. “You’re a blood relation, right? He’ll listen to you, won’t he?”

Oh no, you don’t! I’d be damned if I was going to allow myself to be dragged into this ridiculous fiasco!

“My Lady, first of all, I am *not* a blood relation to a computer program. I am a descendant of Plankwell, but a distaff line, and definitely not of the main family.”

“But you bear the name of Plankwell.”

“I have the name that my parents gave me and the career I have built in the Navy by *not* relying on any of the benefits that using my name might have accrued to me from people I might not have wanted to be indebted to.”

“Might this and might that. What’s he saying, Admiral?”

“That he wants to commit career-suicide.”

“No! Precisely the opposite. I arrived here this morning to continue my career and certainly not to become embroiled in whatever this out-of-control fusion core reaction that you have set off by using a welcoming ceremony to highlight an apparently untested piece of technology that came from the *Darrians* of all people. They can blow up stars, you know.”

“That was over two thousands years ago,” Karneticky scoffed. “If they truly had that capability, one thinks they’d have used it by now.”

He had a point.

“Capt. Plankwell,” Alise said, “... Augustine...” — *oh no, she was using my first name* — “...I beseech you, good sir, as a fellow citizen of the Imperium, will you lend aid?”

She batted her eyelashes, clubbing me into submission with them, and so I took a deep breath, looking upon this damsel in distress as well as the admiral, who could, technically command me to do her bidding. I could not win, I realized. At least she was giving me the dignity of pretending I had a choice.

“My Lady,” I said, moderating my tone, “I am not at all certain of the correctness of the position that your family seems to place upon Plankwell, but I accept that it exists, and for the sake of continued good relations, I will undertake a communication with the construct, off camera, to see what can be produced.”

“That’s all I’m asking,” she said.

I’d spent my entire career trying to minimize the role of Olav hault-Plankwell in my life, and now I was agreeing to have a conversation with him, at least to whatever extent this electronic facsimile *was* him.

“My duty lies with the Navy,” I continued, “with my ship and the role we play in defending the border here and now, not depending on the memories of valor from centuries past. But I will allow some time to help you with your crisis. I am not your vassal, nor am I stationed here, but as I have determined that my ship requires a further week to complete repairs, I will undertake to help you in the interests of maintaining good relations.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Alise said, batting her eyelashes once again. “I will be forever in your debt.”

Chapter 7

Prelude to a Conversation

Plankwell fever, exhibited by *Plankwell groupies*, as I called them in private moments, was common among the more patriotic members of the Imperium, especially in old Navy families. While growing up, I'd been forced innumerable times into attending recitals, simulations, and amateur theatricals outlining the actions of the heroic Olav hault-Plankwell and his assassination of the dangerously incompetent Empress Jaqueline, a vast oversimplification that had, of course, been written into history by the victors. On many of these occasions, my father and I would stand up and introduce ourselves, and people would *ooh* and *aah*, and afterward they'd tell me how lucky I was to be descended from such a great man, my father nodding in agreement. He ate it up, so much so that he made sure Olav was my middle name.

To be perfectly honest, I ate it up too when I was younger. There were these holoshows for children, many with impressive space battles, which depicted his many victories, some less accurately than others, and whenever I watched them, I imagined myself *being* him. I was a Plankwell, after all, and presumably destined for greatness, so I studied his battles and read historical commentaries. Such was my obsession, that soon I was delving into the wealth of primary material: preserved video and audio files, declassified memos, even meeting minutes and ancient logistics reports, and what I found was truly astounding. It was like he had some sixth sense, some way of knowing how to perfectly deploy his forces despite not knowing what the enemy was up to.

This was even true during his March on Capital, where he skillfully bypassed fleets that were actively seeking to halt his advance, and from reading his personal logs, it was obvious that his original wish was only to confront Jaqueline personally and convince her that she could not ignore the spinward and coreward threats.³⁹ The Domain of Deneb needed an

³⁹ Assuming he wrote them honestly rather than as a future self-defense, should his plans have gone awry.

archduke as well as a tax reprieve, so it could muster its own defenses. He imagined that if he could only talk to her, she would acquiesce. She would still punish him, no doubt, but that was a price he was willing to pay.

The Spinward Marches, especially back then, was known for producing a certain personality type, one rough and ready to do whatever it took and protocol be damned, and Olav hault-Plankwell was the epitome of this ideal. He was the grand admiral, the acting archduke, the uncle and mentor to Arbellatra, arguably the greatest emperor since Cleon I, but Jaqueline was not one to change her mind. Therefore, the only way to save the Imperium was to remove her. His tragic flaw was that he placed too much trust in his chief of staff, who, in turn, rewarded him with betrayal.

This was the accepted narrative, and like everyone I knew, I swallowed it whole. It was only when I began doing further research into non-approved sources that I began to question the heroism of marching on the Iridium Throne to kill the empress and her honor guard, seizing power by *Right of Fleet Control*. When Dad saw what I was reading, he shook his head and called it subversive garbage, worse than a waste of time.

"Desperate times require desperate measures," he insisted.

Desperate in what way? The First Frontier War was over. Yes, Jaqueline was dangerously incompetent, but was plunging the Imperium into war with itself really the solution?

There was no other choice, Dad insisted. Without a reprioritization of military resources, the Marches, Deneb, and even Corridor may well have fallen to the zhodani and their vargr allies. That alone was reason enough. But, of course, there were more reasons. The Imperium, he said, had been on the verge of relapsing into a second Long Night. The logic behind this argument never quite made sense to me, but he asserted it was true.

Regardless, my faith had been shaken. The revival of the Right of Assassination suddenly struck me as too bloody by half, although, of course, Olav was hardly the only one to blame. Indeed, the Right had a long lineage, dating back to the assassination of Cleon the Mad in 245. Then for more than two centuries it lay dormant,

like a precancerous tumor, until 475 when Cleon IV assassinated Nicholle. Then Jerome assassinated Cleon, Jaqueline killed Jerome, and Olav killed Jaqueline, kicking off the Civil War and its many Emperors of the Flag, whose reigns were measured in months rather than years.

After a period of reflection, and perhaps, in part, because of my father's illness, I finally decided Dad was right, and I told him so, and the relief in his eyes is something I'll never forget. What I actually decided is that I didn't have the right to judge Olav hault-Plankwell, and neither did these so-called subversive authors. He lived and died in a time when killing the prior emperor to become emperor had become a time-honored tradition. So how could anyone living today really understand his psychology, assuming the Darrians had, in fact, created a convincing facsimile? And what would Dad think were he still alive to see this technological marvel?

From the Stellar Excelsior, Karneticky and I took a lift up to what I was told would be a computer room housing Olav and his creator. The lift's transparent walls, which gave us a momentary glimpse of each level as we passed, made me slightly uncomfortable. Here we were, in a mostly transpex box, being pushed and pulled by grav plates, all controlled by computers, our very lives at the mercy of gravitics and electronics, all of which had to function perfectly in order for us to survive, and seeing the floors zip by, as well as other lifts zipping by even faster, made it apparent to me how precarious it all was, like civilization itself.

"Sir," I said, studying the set of the admiral's shoulders, "about the dismissal of my predecessor, is there anything I should know that might affect the current operations of the Jaqueline?"

"I don't know what you're referring to, Captain," Karneticky replied as a lift with white-haired passengers sped by us in the opposite direction, "but that's a question you should probably take up with your XO."

I used my wristcom to open a line to Nizlich.

"Sir?" she immediately responded.

"I might be caught up with this for a while longer," I said. "Clear my schedule for the rest of the day and tomorrow. Mark me down as community relations duty, but comm me if

something truly heinous rears up. Have the launch on standby. I'll call for a pickup."

"Aye aye, sir."

No doubt she had a slew of questions, but to her credit, she must have sensed now was not the time.

Our lift came to a stop, and as the doors opened and we headed into a corridor, Karneticky asked if I had any other questions before we went in.

"Yes... just out of curiosity, why were the local zhodani invited to this ceremony if we suspect they are raiding across the border?"

"I was hoping the sight of Olav hault-Plankwell would induce a premature bowel movement. Unfortunately, he ended up affecting the wrong target."

I couldn't help but grin. His analysis of Lady Alise's reaction, however indelicate, was unsurprising, as there was always a certain tension between the Imperial Navy and local nobility. No doubt this incident would heighten that tension, but less so if we could *fix it*, as the Countess had demanded.

"Judging from what I have read of the man, he had that effect on a lot of the Core Worlds nobility, mostly right before executing them for sedition. I would have thought the Marches border nobility to be made of slightly sterner stuff."

"Yes, well... I suppose I should have accounted for the fact that she's merely a teenager. What is it they say? Youth and exuberance are no match for old age and treachery."

We entered a small auditorium with raised seating in perhaps a 120° arc around the stage. Holographic projection equipment hung down from the ceiling, and to the back, behind a curtain, was a corridor terminating in some sort of computer room. Ensign Florence was there along with a darrian, which I ascertained from his grayish skin and white hair, physical traits that were fairly common among their people.

Florence, upon noticing us, quickly rose to attention, saluting, while the darrian stood more slowly, his posture betraying the infirmities of advanced age.

"That did not go well, Zeenye," Karneticky said, ignoring the ensign.

“What did you expect, Admiral? Olav thinks he’s emperor. You can’t expect him to take guff from a mere *lady*.”

“But we explained to him that he isn’t emperor anymore.”

“Yes, yes... but his lived experience... oh, *hello*.”

“This is Captain Plankwell. At ease, Ensign.”

“Ah, yes... I saw your speech,” Zeenye said, offering his hand. “I suppose you’ve come to meet a certain ancestor.”

“To be accurate, I have come to meet a simulation of a certain, distant ancestor, in the hopes of repairing a little faux-pas. The living nobles are touchy about their standing, as apparently are simulations of long dead ones.”

“Yes, well, one must find meaning where one can.” He withdrew his hand with a sheepish grin.

“It’s politically important that the House of Stavelot be seen to be on good terms with your simulation,” Karneticky said. “If that doesn’t happen tonight, we’re going to take *Olav* and feed him, piece by piece, into the nearest incinerator.”

Zeenye’s eyes went wide.

“Admiral...,” he began to protest.

“I need to return to the reception to assess the damage and make sure Alise doesn’t leave,” Karneticky continued, turning toward me. “Comm me as soon as we’re ready to try this again.” He turned and left, Zeenye staring after him with mouth agape.

“All right,” I said, “you heard the Admiral. I have a ship to get back to, and I would like to get this sorted out.”

“Captain...” the old darrian started.

“Zeenye, was it? Can you give me a description of exactly what the simulation is? No, never mind, I probably won’t understand the finer details. Why was it made and brought here? Did you make it?”

“To say anyone made it is a bit of stretch. Olav’s mind was *grown* through an arduous process, one involving...” — his face pinched up for a moment. “Oh... why am I bothering? You said you didn’t want to know the details, so I’ll answer you straight and simple. Yes, I made it. I and the universe made it. And if you destroy it, you will be committing murder, a murder against a fully sentient sophont and a murder against science!”

He clenched his jaw and glared with a look that threatened to lase me into glass.

“Okay, hold on there.” I put up a hand, palm out. “I am here to *fix* the issue. It’s the Admiral that made the threat. You’re looking at me like all the Navy wants is to shoot something to make it go away. I can tell by the look on your face that you are taking it seriously. So am I. So just help me understand. You made it, and it was grown.”

“Grown,” he repeated, nodding.

“I am coming in late in the game with no info. I just arrived here this morning. Was it grown real time or did you use acceleration techniques?”

“There’s a trade-off between acceleration and precision,” he said, “but, yes, of course, the algorithm performs at many multiples of real time. It’s a qubit-based gee-ah specifically re-crafted for this one task.”

“A what-a-what?”

“Well, I assume you know what qubits are. Gee-ah stands for generative iterative algorithm.” GIA.

I briefly closed my eyes. *Academics and assumptions*. Almost as bad as nobles when it came to their interests, but at least I was making progress.

“It’s a neuromorphic engine, Captain. It’s not merely a computer; it’s a neuromorph. It can think. It can become conscious. But what sort of consciousness it becomes is based, like any other AI, on the input data.”

“Okay, neuromorphic engine. Got it. Iterates to consciousness based on input data. Got that. Specifically crafted for this instance. Who determined that it would be coming here to Jewell? Why not his home planet of Rhylanor?”

“Rhylanor said no. Jewell was my safety school⁴⁰.” He shrugged a bit sheepishly.

“Why Olav?”

“Oh... why Olav... well, multiple reasons. I won’t lie and pretend I’m above self-promotion. If I tell people I raised Eneri⁴¹ from the dead, they’re going to think me a fraud, but if I tell them I’ve raised Olav hault-Plankwell... well... they’re going to call me the biggest fraud of all time!” He grinned as if that was somehow an

⁴⁰ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Safety%20School>

⁴¹ Eneri is sort of the Vilani version of *Johnny*, and in this context, it refers to the common man.

improvement but then must have noticed my frown, adding, "Well, just think of the splash when I prove them wrong. It'll be like a tsunami. When word gets around as to what I've achieved, everything will change, and the luddites on Rhylanor and elsewhere will finally have to cope with the inevitable, a revolution long overdue!"

Not if the Ministry of Technology had anything to say about it.

"Did you just use officially approved sources only or did you integrate all available records on Grand Admiral Plankwell?"

He looked at me wide-eyed for a moment, then dropped his gaze to the floor.

"I am darrian, Captain, and I am a scientist, so yes... I used every source of data I could get my hands on, so long as it seemed... genuine and appropriate to the task. As I'm sure you're aware, The Imperium collects a lot of information on its citizens, especially those in positions of power and influence. On some worlds this is complicated by a lack of surveillance technology, but in centers of high civilization, such as those in which Olav Plankwell traveled, such data collection was in full force, and, given his significance, it was diligently preserved.

"Those with access to this data can know a lot about past historical figures. There are still extensive dossiers on Olav and everyone with whom he regularly interacted, including every electronic communication, every GPS-recorded movement, as well as medical scans and countless videos and images, all electronically preserved for posterity."

He seemed to be on a roll, so I just kept my mouth shut and listened.

"The point is, if such historical data is of sufficient quality, quantity, and density, it can be mined for experiences... experiences that if experienced by a sufficiently advanced neuromorph conjoined with virtual senses and quantum tracking of historical data against the poly-random qubits used to fill in the blanks..." he trailed off, no doubt realizing he was lapsing into technical jargon. "Suffice it to say that given sufficient data and sufficient processing power, and, of course, time, one can create a fairly sharp facsimile of an historical person. It's a sort of immortality, if you will, so long you don't mind dying, at least in the physical sense."

I looked at him, trying to decide if he was the smartest man I had ever met or a dangerous lunatic that needed to be incarcerated. Of course, that decision was outside my purview. I was here for one purpose and one purpose only.

"Start setting up the meeting between Olav and me, but give me a few minutes to get caught up with the ensign here on the political matters. You do have the ability to record a conversation right? Worst case scenario is I get him... it... talking enough that we can pull together a recorded message to settle things down."

"That's not a bad idea. I'll get right on it."

He stepped away, and I turned to the ensign, whose Plankwell-fever I now perfectly well understood. Previously, she had told me she'd been involved in the final testing. No doubt, she had several long conversations with Olav, going over the details of his career as he remembered it to see how well it matched up with the actual history. That's why she was able to talk in such detail about events that happened half a millennium ago. But my present concerns had to do with something far more immediate.

"Ensign Florence," I said, leaning in and lowering my voice, "who the hell are the Stavelots, and why do we need them appeased?"

Her eyes went wide for a moment, almost bulging in their sockets. "Sir, Helena Stavelot is the Countess. She approves appointments to the PAA."

"The PAA?"

"The Planetary Administrative Authority. I don't know much about local politics, sir, but I'm sure the admiral doesn't want to offend her."

I wasn't sure if the PAA had some kind of pull on naval operations or if there was something more, but it was clear that the Admiral considered it in his best interests to keep on the nobility's good side. Fair enough.

"One more thing, Ensign. What was it like, interacting with the construct? How does it respond to one-on-one conversations?"

Her lips parted for a moment as she wore a thoughtful expression.

"Well, sir... I don't know exactly how to respond to that. I mean, he's... I think, sir, you just have to talk to him and judge that for yourself. He's... I don't know what to say, sir."

He's... I think he's grown increasingly unhappy with his situation."

I couldn't help but notice her use of the word *he*. As far as she was concerned, Olav was essentially human. But I had yet to make that determination.

"Talking to *it* is the plan, Ensign. We will create a comfortable environment, introduce me as descendant family, and explore the nature of its discontent. If, as you say, it has been deteriorating, we may have a limited opportunity to salvage this situation."

"Aye aye, sir." She nodded. "I'll do my best."

"Okay, Captain," Zeenye said. "Go back into the auditorium. I'll be recording it from here."

As Ensign Florence and I exited the computer room into the auditorium, two video cameras slowly descended from the ceiling at the very back of the stage. Situated side-by-side, their lenses pointed toward the seating, which was on a pretty steep incline as it receded from the stage.

"Those are his eyes," she said.

The three-dimensional figure of Olav hault-Plankwell suddenly blinked into existence at center stage. He was frozen, as though captured in a still image, and somewhat translucent.

"Sir, do you want me inside or outside his field of vision?" Ensign Florence asked.

"Outside. I want to reduce as many variables as possible."

She nodded and complied as I moved down to the front of the auditorium so that Olav and I would be on the same level.

"Ready, Captain?" Zeenye's voice came over the auditorium's speakers.

"Oh!" Ensign Florence pulled something out of her pocket. "Almost forgot."

She walked over, handing me a little gray remote control of some sort. It had a single button, reminding me of the sort of device used on some low-tech worlds to lock vehicles or open garage doors.

"What is it?"

"The pause."

"The pause?"

"In case you want to pause the conversation. It freezes him... like he is right now."

I was beginning to understand why the construct was upset with its state of being. If it was truly a consciousness, a real mind equivalent,

what must it think of this little remote control now resting in my open hand?

"Zeenye, if you built this to be a conscious entity, why did you include a pause?"

"To alleviate boredom, Captain."

To alleviate boredom?

"How does the entity perceive the pause?"

"He doesn't. It's just lost time. The last thing he's going to remember, once you hit that button, is his conversation with Lady Alise."

I shifted the remote to my left hand, my thumb gliding over the button but not yet pressing it. Whether this thing was actually conscious or just a sophisticated chatbot was none of my business. I was here to fix an issue of protocol. The Ministry of Technology could sort out the implications later, but right now I needed to carry out my orders and get back to my ship.

"All right," I said, trying to sound self-encouraging.

As my thumb settled on the button and I slowly worked up my nerve, mental images of various performances I'd been forced to endure flashed through my mind, Plankwell doing this and Plankwell doing that. He was one of those rare figures upon whom history once turned, sort of like Julius Caesar of Terra or the first Shugilii on Vland, except eleven thousand times bigger. I could only imagine that this little theater probably wasn't where he'd been expecting to spend his afterlife, suffering the indignity of being repurposed as a tourist attraction.

A tightness built in my chest, and I had the sour sense this wouldn't work. I'd end up being the one delivering a speech to placate the nobles. "People of Jewell, on behalf of my ancestor, I apologize." I pushed the thought aside and concentrated on my opening greeting. Maybe I should let it speak first.

I put myself in the eyeline of the construct and snapped to attention, pulling off the salute I used for superiors who I more deeply respected, and with my left thumb, I pressed the button.

Chapter 8

Never Meet Your Heroes

The hologram of Olav hault-Plankwell blinked for a moment, then focused its gaze on me.

I maintained my salute, knowing that the only way to start this relationship on the right foot was to begin by showing respect. Olav, meanwhile, scrutinized me like a drill sergeant might eye a young recruit. Finally, after a long moment, he returned my salute.

“At ease, Captain,” he said, apparently satisfied. “You may speak freely.”

I dropped the salute and slightly relaxed my stance.

“Thank you, Grand Admiral.” I was gambling a little on the construct being more the Admiral of the Marches than the Emperor due to the time spent in each role. “I must admit I never thought I would be in the position to speak to an ancestor, but I am grateful for the honor. My name is Augustine Olav Plankwell, and I am technically one of your great, to the 12th place, grandsons through your son Ranulf’s line. The line through your sister Maryam is rather more impressive, with your niece Arbellatra as Dame of the Alkhalikoi dynasty. But House Plankwell continues through its various arms. Specifically, I am of the Rhylanor Plankwells, and the clan is quite large these days. On behalf of the House that we share, I greet you and hope to help you in any way I can.”

“You hope to help me, do you? Well, you can start with a sit-rep.”

“A sit-rep, sir?”

“Last thing I remember, some bratty noble — whose insistence I bow reminds me of a certain Empress — was doing me the kind courtesy of switching me off. This naturally begs the question... why am I back on... and talking to you of all people? Not that I’m complaining, Captain. You come from a fine line, if I do say so myself, and I’m delighted to hear that it carries on, but it remains to be seen what you’re made of, so tell me truly, if it is truly me you wish to help: Why are we talking?”

He had a wonderful way of getting straight to the point. Oh well. There was no sense in beating around the bush.

“Sir,” I said, “my purpose here is to inquire as to your state of mind and to see if there is any way you could be persuaded to give a speech of support to the Lady and her family, the Stavelots, to ease the tension between the Navy and the local nobility. I am involved only as an intermediary, as a favor to Admiral Karneticky, and my plan is to ready my cruiser for independent operations as soon as possible and try not to come back here in the near future.”

For a brief moment, the hologram smirked.

“I don’t suppose it’d be permissible for us to switch places; you give the speech and stay here for whatever games the powers that be have in store, and me... I’ll go off into the great black, ne’er to return. How’s that sound?”

I couldn’t help but crack a smile.

“That would be an interesting trick, sir, but the weight of my duty says I should refuse. Also, I am very bad at formal speeches. My impression of the local nobility indicates that one such as I would not quite measure up to their expectations.”

I studied the image. It really was remarkable. And since it seemed to have no response, I decided to continue, if only to penetrate its psychology.

“Why this desire to return to the great black, sir? Many in our family followed in your footsteps serving in the Navy, but I am always just a little more comfortable down the well in a human-compatible biosphere, hopefully with little to no shooting going on.”

He or it sighed.

“This may take awhile,” came the response. “Zeenye, I know you’re listening. A chair, if you please.”

A holographic throne appeared. It was none other than the Iridium Throne at Capital, just the chair and not the long stairs leading up to it.

“Oh... well, I suppose that’ll do.” He sat, looking at me for a long moment. “Pull up a chair, Captain.”

I once again marveled at the technology. Olav wasn’t real. It didn’t need a chair. It wanted to create a mood. Zeenye, I suspect, was playing up to the construct as emperor, trying to stay on its good side. I looked around and, seeing no freestanding chairs, I moved down to the first row of fixed seats and sat, putting myself below his

eye level as if I were some supplicant seeking an imperial favor. Indeed, it was so realistic, I almost forgot I was talking to a simulation.

“Why the desire to return to space?” it said. “Hmm.... You know what a starship is, Captain? Do I call you, Captain, or would you prefer Augustine?”

“Captain is fine. Augustine is too formal, but I would be all right with Gus, if it suits you.”

“Gus, do you know what a starship is, beyond its hull and jump drives?”

“A starship. Well, beyond the obvious, a starship is power. Some would say that a starship is freedom, but I think they would soon run into trouble with that attitude. Starships are power, and they give you power, the power to move among the stars, the power of life and death over your crew, or, for that matter, anyone within weapons range. They are tremendously powerful, and the captain of the smallest, oldest scout ship has more power to be anywhere they want to be than the vast majority of the sophonts of the Imperium. Starships are power, but it is more interesting to see the character of the person commanding a starship, given that power, to see what they will do with it.”

“Indeed,” Olav nodded. “You know, you remind me of Arbellatra. Her answer was much the same as yours: freedom and power, with the emphasis on the latter. When she was still quite young, she told me she thought the best way to judge someone’s true character was to give them power and then wait to see what they’d do with it. So you know what I did? I made her a captain in the Imperial Navy.” He grinned. “And do you know what she did?” His eyes widened, and his eyebrows shot up. “Well, she knew it was a test, of course, a test she herself had devised, so like the astute prodigy she was, she rose to the challenge, making herself the best damn captain in the entire fleet.”⁴²

42 Traveller literature is, if one digs deep enough, surprisingly conflicted on the topic of Arbellatra, and so I had difficulty deciding what Olav thought of her. On the one hand, she was ostensibly in command of the system defense forces during the Imperial victory over the Zhodani in the 1st Frontier War’s Battle of Rhylanor (603). The same year, Olav granted her a captain’s commission in the Imperial Navy. She was at the ripe old age of sixteen. However, in *Agent of the Imperium*, pg. 201, Miller indicates that Arbellatra was the

His gaze slowly fell to the floor, perhaps with the realization that like himself, Arbellatra was long dead.

“In any case,” he said, “you’re both right, but you’re missing the most important thing. A starship, Gus, is like a house, and the crew is the family. You’ve served in war. Were you willing to die more for the sake of the Imperium or more for the sake of the men and women with whom you served, so as not to let *them* down?”

I started to say “For the Imperium...” which was a phrase the Navy had drilled into its recruits for centuries, but I stopped, and I noticed the construct noticing I had stopped. He was — damn it — *it* was, entirely too clever, phrasing the question that way to trigger that response.

“During the war,” I continued, “I served on a fleet carrier with several fighter squadrons and sent young sophonts into danger while I stayed in relative safety. Those pilots were like family to me, but unlike a ship’s crew, they were there to fight on the front lines. I am sure I am not describing it right, but I understand what you are getting at, and I agree, but I also know we agree to serve in the Navy because at some level we believe in the Imperium, and it is that common belief that makes us willing to die for each other, that belief we share and are willing to sacrifice our lives for.

“Let me tell you about Lt. Kasendyri,” I continued. “She came to my squadron just before the Battle of Rhylanor. She arrived in system as part of the Frozen Watch reinforcements from Corridor depot. She came from some colony world in the Antares Sector, and it was the third time she had volunteered for the Watch. She got thawed out, and I was finishing up the briefing

beneficiary of nepotism, and certainly this must be true to some extent if only in terms of the opportunities afforded her. Nonetheless, she made grand admiral seven years after Olav’s death, then won the 2nd Frontier War, then marched on Capital, assassinated Gustus (see *Agent of the Imperium*, pg. 209), proclaiming herself regent and, after a suitable interim, Empress. In short, she was an exceptional woman, and I think Olav, being related to her as he was, would have been among the first to recognize her potential. At the same time, I can’t help but wonder if he’d be happy with the way she established a new dynasty rather than seizing this rare opportunity, following the Imperial Civil War, to try to transform the Imperium into something better.

when she approached. She said, if she survived, she was going to volunteer for the Watch again, and she wanted her desire to be sent further along the frontier to be noted in her personnel file. Regulations allowed for only five tours in the Frozen Watch. She looked my age but had spent twelve years on ice. We never asked why people went into the Watch, but watching her fly, I got some idea. She took a couple of hits that took out her weapons so then chose to beeline into a Vargr escort.”

I paused, thinking about the dark-haired woman who sang the rudest drinking songs I had ever heard and whose eyes were always distant.

“Who does that without a deep and abiding belief in the structure of the Navy? And who believes in the Navy without believing in the Imperium?”

I looked back at the simulation of the ancestor of mine who had fought the same enemies I had and then turned and brought the fight home, who had loved the Imperium so much that he killed the Empress for failing his vision of the Imperium.

“It was you who set the example,” I said. “It was you who decided that the Imperium must be saved and fought your way to Capital and killed the Empress, your Empress, for failing to support the Marches, for failing her citizens and nobles, and you took the power of your starships and made it so. You are the example of service to the Imperium I have grown up with, all my life. And since you mentioned Arbella, it is her example too that we follow. Abide in the power we have, use it judiciously, and know your duty. The two of you bookended the Civil War, which was the Navy fighting itself for the vision of the Imperium it would support. You lit the match, and Arbella allowed the flames to die under her Regency. So yes, I fight for my comrades in arms, but we fight for the idea of the Imperium, the shield against the Long Night and oblivion. We fight against those who would lessen the power of the Imperium, be they foreign or home born.”

“I respect your zeal,” Olav said, “but in my experience, limited though it may be, soldiers don’t fight for grand causes or high ideals but rather for the closest and most personal of reasons. You might say you fight for the Imperium, and you might even believe it, but in

practice, you’ve fought as I did... for your comrades standing beside you and your loved ones back home. Jaqueline had it in her head that if she wanted to sacrifice the Marches for Terra, then as Empress, it was her right to do so. I and those who fought beside me disagreed. We weren’t willing to go gently into that good night, sacrificing ourselves and our families to Zhodani mind control, not to mention the fact that if the Vargr had so much as smelled weakness, they would have started pouring across the entire Coreward border. If you want to equate that with fighting for the idea of the Imperium... well, so be it... but that’s not how we saw it. But I’m glad to see the Office of News and Public Relations has been doing such a fine job.”⁴³

“You miss my point, sir, that our comrades come from all across the Imperium these days, and that it is the ideals of the Imperium that draw us together and unite our cause. Yes, that is also the message of ONPR. Sometimes they are even right about some things. Right now I have Vargr in my crew, and I suspect my executive officer is a Sword Worlder. Past enemies perhaps, but allies now. Once again, you ignore your own role in how things are today. You set in motion the steps that brought a Marches mindset to the Throne. Your protege founded the dynasty that controls the Imperium to this day. Your role set the stage for what the Navy has become since you lit the match that forced change upon us all. I make allowances you are a simulation of my ancestor, and as such may be limited, but my argument stands. Olav hault-Plankwell shaped the Imperium by refusing to accept a status quo that, as you say, sacrificed the Marches for Terra. You may not have realized what would come of your actions, but I say this: you formed the spine of Navy service and honor by your example.”

My father would have been so proud hearing me say all this. “That’s the spirit!” he’d have cheered.

“I may not fight for the Imperium that you knew,” I continued, “but I do fight for the Imperium that I know, and all my shipmates do as well. Our belief in the Imperium calls us to our duty, and so I call upon you, Admiral. I call upon your duty to say a few words of support to the

⁴³ The ONPR is the propaganda arm of the imperial bureaucracy.

nobles that hold the frontier firm, to tell them you support the Marches as you once did and that you are pleased to see the blood of the Empire still holds. They are just words, after all, that will give a needed boost to your people.”

“You sell yourself short, Captain,” Olav said with a wry smile, “for you’ve proven you’re quite capable of speech-making when it suits you. I’ll tell you what. Take me with you, into the great black yonder, and I’ll placate the aristocracy. Certainly, if you can convince me of your enviable idealism, you can convince them to let me go before I cause any more trouble.”

I knew that was coming. Talking to Olav was like bargaining with the devil, except this devil was in no position to bargain, and the sooner he accepted that fact, the better.

“The alternative,” I replied, “is I piece together a statement from language used in this conversation, play it for the nobles, and wash my hands of this whole affair. You are very convincing, very alive for the want of a better word, but what makes you think I should treat you as anything other than a very advanced intellect program? What place would you have on my ship? And if you think you are getting open access to any secure naval hardware, well, you perhaps think more highly of yourself than you should. For all that you think you might be, you are not my ancestor reincarnated. You did a good job prompting me to express beliefs I have long held privately, but I am not so smitten with Plankwell-fever to break all kinds of regs bringing unsecured tech aboard my ship. You certainly have nailed Plankwell’s audacity right there. Zeenye, I think we might be done here.”

“Captain,” Olav said, taking a moment to sigh, “imagine if you will, living your entire life, up until the day your best and oldest friend stabs you in the back in order to take your crown. And then imagine waking up and finding out it was all a dream, and some admiral is telling you that you’re not really who you think you are. You’re a neuromorph. You’ve been programmed to dream the dream of a life that was but wasn’t. All your memories are reconstructed from historical records. Everything was true but was also, essentially, make-believe. That is where I am, Captain. That is where I am.”

“I can imagine the situation you are in, but it is a subjective condition. According to Zeenye, you are not even aware of the time when you are not active. Others have the power to shut you off at will. You believe you are Olav, because that is how you were programmed. We can argue the morality of recreating a historical personality to the point of self-actualization until the stars go out, but it will not change the fact of what you are. I came across you by accident, I came into this situation because of others, and I have lived my life in the shadow of your name. As much as I respect the historical persona of Olav hault-Plankwell, you are not he. You are not the Emperor, you are no longer Grand Admiral, and the times you lived in are in the distant past. If you will not cooperate out of duty, there is nothing more for me to say. As you said, the making of speeches is distasteful to me, but if that is the cost of being free of this entanglement, so be it. Your future is in hands other than mine, and my future lies on the frontier. I will ask once more, if you, in your duty, would condescend to speak pleasantly to some nobles, descended from those you changed the course of an empire to protect once upon a time and uphold the charge of the House of Plankwell: *To Protect Our Own*, and to take this moment to rise above your predicament and do what is asked of you?”

He looked at me for a moment with a strange sort of smile, no doubt noting the inconsistency in my appeal. I refused to recognize him as Olav hault-Plankwell but in almost the same breath called upon his loyalty as such.

“I can speak pleasantly with anyone,” he finally said. “Case in point: I’m speaking pleasantly with you, despite what I see. Set up a meeting with the Countess, and I will speak pleasantly with her, if she will condescend to do so with me.”

“Agreed. Zeenye, we are done here. Shut it off.”

He disappeared, and I sat still for a long moment, considering the experience I just had. It was unnerving, the accuracy, the self-knowledge, the confidence the thing expressed. Coupled with the projection, it was enough to make people forget themselves. It had me arguing from both directions as I sought to find a crack in the

certainty of that being's self-realization. There was none.

The more I thought about it, the more I thought about how dangerous it was to have this creation around. What sources did Zeenye use? Could it formulate override codes for Imperial ships? As Grand Admiral and Emperor, there had certainly been the opportunity to create back doors. Standing orders to use wafer agents in times of need certainly implied that there were override codes to be exploited. I had read enough stories about that to be sure of it.⁴⁴

But beyond that, was it possible to recreate a once living mind from just the records we collected about them? Beyond the legal implications surrounding personality transfer and cloning, there were other, moral issues. Maybe I

44 Wafer agents are essentially recorded personalities on data wafers, and to a lot of old-time players of Traveller, they go against canon, but the problem is that Marc Miller has embraced the idea, even writing *Agent of the Imperium* (2015), which is about the exploits of just such an individual. In my opinion, the reason many Traveller players dislike this technology is that it didn't appear in the original version of the game. After all, Classic Traveller was pre-cyberpunk. However, as popular ideas on future technology evolved, so too did Traveller. MegaTraveller placed crude memory transfer at Tech-Level 16 and total memory transfer at TL 20 [see the MegaTraveller Referee's Companion (1988), pg. 28, and note that TL 15 is the high end of Imperial technology]. Basically, they were saying it's possible but still still a ways off. Then neural interfaces were introduced in GURPS:Traveller (1998), pg. 109, but were made intentionally weaker than similar devices in other GURPS supplements. Then Mongoose's version of Traveller introduced wafer jacks [see the Core Rulebook (2008), pg. 90] and intellect programs as early as TL 12 (pg. 92), which are what you get when you want "the computer to do the work for you with a human-like level of intelligence and adaptability." Traveller 5 (v5.0) (2013) originally confirmed wafer jacks at TL 12 (pg. 622) and then (v5.1) (2015) pushed the technology all the way back to TL 10 (pg. 527)! So there's this big and ever-widening gulf between old Traveller and new Traveller, and there's really no way to bridge it. Prospective referees just have to decide what version of the game they want to run and explain that clearly to the players. For this campaign, I'm leaning toward the classic rules, since that's what I'm most familiar with, yet at the same time, I obviously want to explore these newfangled ideas but without presupposing that society has already worked out all the moral, social, and economic implications.

did have something to talk to the Canon about over dinner other than his choice in alcohol.

Could this being challenge for the Throne? What would that even look like?

Too much. It was all too much. I returned the computer room and found the old darrian still monitoring the equipment.

"Zeenye, my compliments on your achievement."

"Thank you, Captain," the old darrian replied, looking up from his console with a wrinkled brow. "Did you find Olav to be... lifelike?"

"To a disturbing degree," I said, glancing toward Ensign Florence to gauge her expression, but she was studiously avoiding eye contact. "Given I had no idea that this was going to happen, I didn't imagine I would be interacting with an advanced simulation of one of my ancestors. That being said, it is a remarkable achievement. Much more responsive than many intellect programs I have used in the past. I don't suppose you made a recording of the session."

"Of course," Zeenye said, tapping some keys on his console.

"Do you have other recordings of Olav speaking with people?"

"One moment, Captain." He pressed a few more buttons, then handed me a data wafer. "That contains all the conversations Olav has had so far, including yours."

"Thanks," I said, not quite knowing why I wanted it. Olav was arrogant and highly disagreeable, although, to be fair, my ex-fiancée had more-or-less the same opinion of me. Granted, her exact wording had been somewhat more colorful. I couldn't help but wonder if this was perhaps a family trait as I looked at the various computer racks behind Zeenye, connected by a tangle of wires.

"Is all this required to run the simulation?"

"Uh... that over there is for error correction," Zeenye said, looking over his shoulder. "And that one is to add taste and smell, once I get it figured out. Those are for memory. And that over there will be for processing touch as soon as the android model is complete."

"Android model?"

"Don't worry, Captain. I'm still a long way off from that. Why do you ask?"

“It talked about wanting to head out into space again. I was just wondering if that was feasible. Not that I am planning on fulfilling that request,” I hastily added. “What is the most essential piece of hardware?”

“Oh, the Model X, of course. The basic architecture was designed and built through an Imperial-Darrian joint venture, but, of course, the real work was in the quantum programming. The whole thing is highly experimental, of course, but as you can see, it works.”

He pointed at what, at first glance, looked like a two door refrigerator/freezer. It even had door handles and, astonishingly, what looked like an ice-maker.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“What’s what? The ice-maker?”

My mind went reeling, searching for answers that wouldn’t come.

“Neuromorphic processors have to be kept cold,” Zeenye explained.

“So the simulation’s brain is in a refrigerator? *With an ice-maker?*”

“Well, the ice-maker doesn’t actually work. I needed the space for his prefrontal cortex. You see, Captain, there are different processors for different cerebral systems. The brain, as I’m sure you’re aware, is not merely an undifferentiated hunk of gray matter. It has parts, each designed for a specific set of tasks. Take the medulla oblongata, for example...”

“I don’t really...” — I didn’t really care, but I didn’t want to say that out loud. “I don’t have time for the full tour,” I said, glancing at my wristcom. “I need to make contact with my XO.”

What I wanted to do, actually, was dump this whole thing back on Admiral Karneticky. After all, I had established parameters under which *Olav* would talk with the Countess, were she so inclined. I could very easily order Ensign Florence to convey that information to the Admiral, then head back to my shuttle and beat a quick tactical withdrawal. Nizlich would, no doubt, be overjoyed having me back, I reflected somewhat facetiously.

“Commander Nizlich,” I said into my wristcom. “Report.”

“Sir, we are still here. I was planning to give the order for everyvun to return to the shuttle in nineteen minutes.”

“Is the Admiral there?”

“Yes, and he’s telling anyvun who vill listen that you’re having a heart-to-heart vith dear old Olav.”

I winced. I doubted Nizlich would have come up with that on her own. Those were likely Karneticky’s words verbatim. He was promising I’d straighten everything out, which meant I had to deliver.

“What about Lady Alise?”

“She hasn’t returned.”

Probably hiding out in her yacht waiting for her cue.

Much as I wanted to wash my hands of this whole affair, my training as well as the possibility of salvaging a better relationship with Admiral Karneticky pulled at my inclinations. I did not want to kick off my first independent command by inconveniencing the local admiralty, or the nobility for that matter. But at the same time, I had no sure idea of what would happen if I stayed, and I didn’t particularly relish the notion of my senior officers watching me fall head-first into the political equivalent of a latrine cesspit.

“Return to the shuttle with our officers, but delay departure until you hear from me. And if the Canon is still there, see if he can be persuaded to wait a little while longer for me to give him my respects.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“Zeenye,” I said, disconnecting, “can you project Olav back onto the ballroom window?”

“If the hotel will allow it.”

“Make the necessary preparations. Ensign Florence, you will accompany me back to the reception.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Chapter 9

Nest of Knots

Ensign Florence followed me to the lift, keeping her gaze fixed on the deck a few steps in front of her as though deep in thought.

“Something bothering you, Ensign?”

“Uh...” Her mouth fell open as she looked up. “I’m sorry, sir... I just... it’s like he’s a caged animal, one of those big ones that don’t do well in cages. We switch him on and off and on again. For him, it must seem like a never-ending inquisition. We’re treating him like he’s a thing, when... well... you’ve talked to him. Is that what he is, as far as you’re concerned? A thing?”

I considered my answer carefully as we entered the lift. “It is a thing,” I finally replied, selecting the floor for the Stellar Excelsior’s main entrance. “It’s a... what did Zeenye call it... a Mark X experimental neuromorphic engine. But it is also the sum total of whatever Zeenye has gathered about Olav and what it has synthesized from that data collection. You must be careful in looking at situations that are emotionally fraught. You need to retain the ability to analyze so that you do not lose sight of what is real... or become emotionally compromised.”

I ruefully recalled my own conflicting feelings on the matter as the floors sped by.

“It acts how we would like to think Olav Plankwell would have acted. Everyone I have observed, including myself, exhibits a fair amount of projection in their interactions with it. I am carefully calling it an *it* because I need to remind myself that it is not Olav reborn, no matter how much it seems that way. It has no autonomy, and as far as I can see, no independent access to the world outside of its simulation.”

The lift came to a stop, and we exited.

“I think you see it acting like a caged animal because it thinks it is confined, because it thinks it is Olav Plankwell and it believes it is captured in some way, so it acts captured, using the stimulus of how the Admiral would behave under similar duress.”



We passed the aqua-sculpture, its swirling water droplets, gravitationally confined, glistening as they seemed to dance.

“It remains to be seen if Zeenye has indeed created, or in this case, recreated a fully self-aware sophont entity. If so, then yes, it is living in terrible conditions. If not, then it is an exquisitely responsive tool for specific study of an individual or situations, due to its advanced ability to synthesize responses from recorded data.”

We entered the atrium and headed toward the arched corridor at the back.

“It does you credit to be able to empathize with entities so different from yourself. That certainly helps in the Navy, where we have crew and officers from such vastly different backgrounds. However, you need to temper this with the ability to rationally evaluate.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I’ve been talking with him for a while now, and... he just seems so real.”

“That’s the problem. It is very real, but a very real *simulation*. I assure you, I have grown up listening to his political speeches. I’ve read the logs from his March on Capital and viewed any number of private home records. It is very real. But it is not the same person! Emperor Olav died five hundred years ago. So although this is clearly a realistic simulacrum, whether or not it has crossed the threshold and become an actual *sophont* is for more sophisticated minds than ours to decide.”

We finally reached the ballroom. The crowd had indeed thinned out, but Admiral Karneticky was still there talking to a raven-haired woman wearing what looked to be a fashionable cape.

"All right, Ensign, we'll try and resolve this little dust-up as quickly as possible. I will go speak with the Admiral and get the ball rolling. Do you recognize who he's speaking with?"

"She looks familiar, but... oh, wait... I think she's got something to do with the Merchant's Guild."

Merchants were always handy to know, and they felt likewise about high-ranking naval personnel, especially when seeking convoy protection or military support in other trade-related matters.

"Come along, Ensign. Let's get this over with."

We walked over.

"Oh, there you are, Captain. Allow me to introduce Kaz Remshaw. Kaz, this is Captain Plankwell."

"A pleasure," I offered a respectful nod and a smile. That was, rather, the point of these public presentations of new officers, a chance to meet informally with the local movers and shakers. If the Admiral was on a first name basis with *Kaz*, then this was someone I should probably get to know.

Remshaw turned to look at me, her short cape shifting silkily. Though I knew little of fashion even I could see the delicate embroidery, its color accenting her brown eyes and makeup, offsetting her rather square face.

"Captain Plankwell, congratulations, and thank you for the invitation."

"Of course." I suspected she knew I wasn't directly responsible, but clearly she was keen to observe the forms.

"So am I right in understanding you have a scout pod that you want to replace?"

The involuntary rise of my eyebrow and tilt of my head no doubt told her everything she needed to know. I really needed to get ahead of the curve here.

"It is one of the changes I am considering, yes. Recent events seem to dictate a slight edge towards having more flexible firepower on hand. And I came up through the ranks in the fighter divisions, so it is always better to surround

yourself with tools you know the parameters of. Do you have need of a scout pod?"

"Well, I know of a number of reputable contractors who can manage the replacement and present you with options, depending on which way you want to go. Geri tells me that Admiral Vasilyev has preapproved mods to your loadout, so, if true, that's something you'd be wise to take advantage of before you head out. You may not get another opportunity."

That last bit seemed ominous, though I could hardly believe she meant it that way.

"I appreciate the offer and will be in touch once I have made my final deployment choices."

"Of course," she nodded. "Here, I'll give you my e-card in case you'd like any help. You can call me anytime, day or night."

We bumped wrists, transferring her contact information into my wristcom, and as I glanced down at the display, I noticed a text message notification from Nizlich.

"By the way," she continued, "Geri says you've been, ah... conversing with the artificial intellect. I don't know if that's the proper term."

"That is an excellent term for it, although it is much more advanced than the intellect residing in my cruiser at this time." The idea of Olav taking over the computer on the *Jaqueline* sent a brief shudder through my body. No, that would not do at all.

"More advanced in what way?"

"You'll have to speak to its creator for the technical details, but it responds with more emotional cues, making it quite compelling to converse with. It really makes you forget you are talking to a program. Well, you will see for yourself in a few moments. If you will pardon the Admiral and I?"

"Oh, of course."

I gave a short bow to apologize for ending the interaction, but there were other matters which needed my attention. Remshaw lowered her head as well, smiling politely before wandering off.

"So did you tame the beast in the box," Admiral Karneticky asked, "or shall we fire up the incinerator?"

"It's agreed to speak pleasantly if spoken to pleasantly. If no one stands too heavily on their honor, it should go well. I will act as an intermediary, to set the tone, and present

Plankwell, past and present, to the assembled. I am hoping for a quick interaction with the Lady Mongo, a giving of all honors due to the House of Stavelot, for their vigilance and service, and finish with a toast to the Emperor and the Imperium, carefully omitting which Emperor I am toasting. That, I think, should be enough.”

I looked carefully at the Admiral as he considered my proposal. Granted, it wasn’t at all what the *beast in the box* had agreed to. Judging from the last thing it said, it expected an audience with the Countess, not a rematch with her daughter. But my purpose here was to resolve the flap between it and Lady Alise.

“I would like to add, sir,” I continued, “that regardless of how this all turns out, the Ministry of Technology needs to be briefed on this creation. Zeenye has made some advances that trouble me, and it would be better for everyone if the MoT was aware.”

Admiral Karneticky’s eyes went wide, and he quickly nodded.

“Of course, Captain. Of course. Well, then... carry on.”

“Aye, sir. I’ll just need comlinks for Zeenye and Lady Alise.”

Karneticky transferred them from his wristcom into mine, saying, “I’m glad to hear you’ve built a rapport with the AI so quickly.”

Rapport was a little strong, but I nodded anyway.

“Yes, sir,” I said, and turning slightly from the Admiral, I commed Zeenye. “We are going to do this in a few minutes, Zeenye. Are you cleared to project?”

“They want to talk to *you*, Captain.”

Before I could so much as formulate a response, the same platinum blonde who’d introduced the Canon and Admiral to the stage came through the ballroom’s main entrance. As she surveyed the room, her gaze quickly met mine, and she walked over.

“Captain Plankwell, I’m Effimia Sidugedu, Program Coordinator for the Stellar Excelsior Jewell. I just received a call from...”

“Ah, from Zeenye, no doubt. My congratulations on the facility, truly comfortable and very hospitable. I would beg your indulgence for just a little longer to accomplish this task for

Lady Alise at the request of her mother, the Countess.”

“Yes, I know who her mother is,” Ms. Sidugedu said, her smile momentarily slipping.

“Fifteen more minutes of access to your systems would be greatly appreciated by all.” Sometimes it was best to just get to the point.

She looked to Admiral Karneticky, and he nodded his approval.

“Anything you need, Captain, we will be delighted to provide: the stage, the projector, my services as MC... whatever you need.”

I smiled and nodded.

“Zeenye,” I said into my wristcom, “I have Ms. Sidugedu here, and we have confirmed the go-ahead.” I then looked over to the Program Coordinator. “If I may transfer Zeenye to you to help expedite things?” Without waiting, I swiped the active call in her direction, so her wristcom would prompt her to pick it up.

Then I called Lady Alise.

“Durami speaking,” came a woman’s voice.

Durami?

“I need to talk to Lady Alise.”

“Who are you and how did you get this comlink?”

“I’m Captain Plankwell. Admiral...”

“Oh, Captain Plankwell! Just the man I’ve been trying to reach. I’m Squires Syeda Durami. Lady Alise is *my* responsibility. I’ve been told that you’re attempting to... ah... deal with the recent public relations incident at the highport?”

“Yes, we are going to redo the speech to the construct. If Lady Alise will join us in the event room, I will go through what we expect to happen.”

“Excellent. I’m on my way up to you right now. Please wait until I arrive. I should only be a few more minutes.”

Well, no plan survives contact with the enemy.

I closed the call. The addition of this woman, probably Alise’s minder, was going to change the optics a little, but I was pretty sure that the Squires was a negligible element in the little show I was planning. I placed a call to Nizlich.

“Commander, I am about through with my extra errands here. My compliments to the crew, and I should only be a little longer, maybe a half hour. Standby until further notice.”

“Aye aye, sir.” If there was any curiosity this time, she had it well hidden.

I then motioned to Ensign Florence.

“Lady Alise is en route. Keep an eye out, and signal me when she arrives, and look out for any media-types who might be lurking around.”

“Do you want me to get rid of them, sir?”

“What? No! If they are here to record, it will save us the trouble of sending a recording to them. Just let me know where they are.” I paused and gave her a hard look. “Also, never throw your weight around when you are a guest in a civilian facility while in uniform. Looks bad for the Navy.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

I returned my attention to the Admiral.

“Sir, it would be best if you escorted Lady Alise into the conversation.”

“Escort?” His eyes shined for a moment, and he licked his lips. “Yes, that’ll work for... for resolving the situation. And then what?”

“I will handle the introductions, and having you both in the frame, so to speak, will minimize the attention on the simulation. We will project Olav on the window again, I will greet him with due honors and ask for a few words on the planet as he recalls it. I will then thank him for his contributions to the present era, and as his descendant, thank everyone for their continuing contribution to the glory of the Imperium.”

Karneticky nodded his approval.

“It’s a good thing you came along, Captain, or I don’t know what I’d have done. Olav, at least in his conversations with me, didn’t have much good to say on the glory of the Imperium. Zeenye thinks it’s a consequence of his betrayal and that he’ll adjust. Perhaps meeting you has helped him finally turn the page.”

“I am glad to be of service, Admiral. It is very thought provoking as to what the Olav construct might be capable of. And Zeenye strikes me as very capable, if not overly focused on his research. Soon, we will be through this, and we can get the Jaqueline ready for her cruise.”

“Yes. Well, before you go, you must tell me your secret. You’re quite sure he’ll jump through your hoops?”

“There is a risk allowing the AI an open forum, but as you said, we have built a bit of a rapport, and as they say, no risk, no reward.”

Karneticky frowned, but then his face brightened as he noticed someone in the crowd.

“Hold that thought,” he said, stepping away to greet a man of about my age with a chiseled jawline and wavy, blond hair.

As they exchanged greetings, I took a moment to contemplate what I was doing. Was this really the best way to get out of this situation? Or was the false confidence I was projecting covering up some deep-seated antipathy towards my so-called ancestor. *It* was far too insightful for me to become careless, and I was *not* at all looking forward to finding out what it would say, but I had fallen into this nest of knots and taken it upon myself to get out of it, all to better create a favorable impression on the admiral. My ex-fiancée, Vanista, had been right. The Navy had won me without a shot. And so here I was, once again putting myself on the firing line.

Chapter 10

The Dance

“Captain,” the admiral said, “this is Director Mazarin Scarlett.”

“You can call me Maz,” He said, sticking out his hand.

A tight smile tugged at the corners of my mouth as I shook the outstretched hand. By now, I was accepting all introductions and would sort out the implications later.

“Good evening, Maz. May I ask, director of what?”

Scarletti’s posture stiffened.

“Uh... S.P.A. Director.” He grimaced slightly. “Starport Authority. Chief Administrator. Chief Dogsboddy. Chief Buck-Stops-Here. I think ‘Director’ got tacked on by my predecessor who thought it sounded less servile. ‘More professional’ were her words, I believe. Still, doesn’t let me out of the admin duties.”

He grinned and flicked his blond hair with what appeared to be a practiced hand, all the while looking me over.

“New to the post, I understand. It looks like you need a drink.” He signaled to one of the waitstaff, and someone was immediately by his side with a tray. He nodded, mostly to himself, as if this were the natural order of things.

“What can I offer you, Captain? The usual,” he said, taking a glass of what was on offer, “or I’m sure we can rustle up whatever else you’d prefer.”

He smiled at the tray-bearer, indicating his royal ‘we’ meant a server would jump to it, but rather than make them run around looking for Frangelico, I simply took a glass from the tray as well, more to be polite than because I was thirsty.

“So, are your orders secret or can you tell us where you’re taking your fine ship?” Maz asked.

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “My apologies, Director — sorry — Maz, I literally arrived this morning and have been in a whirl of activity ever since. Please, call me Gus.”

“Oh, no apology needed. I’m sure your Admiral,” and he nodded at Karneticky, “has much more important things for you to be concerned about than us parking attendants.”

“I’m not his admiral,” Karneticky corrected. “Vasilyev is. Gus is attached to the 213th fleet.”

“Oh?”

“Detached patrol,” I clarified, sipping the drink. Compared to the Canon’s liquid fire, it tasted like zape juice.

“Oh. So no secret orders, then?” His shoulders slumped a bit.

I couldn’t recall ever seeing an SPA director who was quite so unselfconscious. I wasn’t sure if it was refreshing or a bizarre form of intimidation.

“I have not had an opportunity to tour much of the station let alone my own ship,” I replied, “but no secret orders I am afraid. A routine patrol, showing the Sunburst to reassure everyone the Imperium is still here, strong and ready. Perhaps you have some suggestions for worlds that might need a visit?”

“Oh, far be it from me to intrude on Navy business.” He smiled warmly. “Just let us know what you need, and we’ll try to keep you happy. That’s what we’re here for.” He opened his mouth, as though he had something more to say, but then hesitated, until finally, he added, “If you’re not too busy, you could join me for an informal dinner before you depart. Tomorrow evening, if you’re free, or another spot if it works better for you.” He seemed to be measuring me against some civilian yardstick. “I’ve an aquarium I think you’d find fascinating.”

“A very generous invitation. I will check in with my duties and see what demands the ship has placed upon me in my absence, but a fascinating aquarium is certainly the most original bait I have been offered since the simulated reincarnation of my ancestor.”

“Certainly, Captain. I’ll have my admin assistant send over the details. I don’t know if you’re a fellow pescaphile, but regardless, you’ll certainly see some unusual specimens. I’ve been very fortunate in some of my acquisitions.” He then launched enthusiastically into what was clearly a favorite topic, and the details quickly got, well, detailed. The Admiral soon signaled for another drink, and his eyes glazed into that professional I’m-here-because-duty-calls-but-I’m-not-really-listening look. I took the hint from my betters, but added in a nod every now and again to keep Maz going. After all, admirals must sometimes pay for their crimes, although, to be fair, being forced to listen to this seemed a tad

harsh. Maz, no doubt sensing the Admiral's disinterest, steered his entire focus onto me as the names and habits of a wide variety of marine life got a thorough outing.

Then, mercifully, my wristcom beeped, and I glanced down. It was Ensign Florence. I hit the talk button, and said "Yes?" trying not to sound relieved.

"There's a woman out here who says she wants to talk to you, sir."

"Did you happen to catch a name, Ensign?"

"Durami."

The Squires!

"Offer her an escort with my compliments."

"Tried that. The guard says she's not on the list."

I couldn't help but notice the admiral's cold stare as I talked, his whole body stiffening as he listened to the conversation, and then, with a pinched mouth, he turned and strode off toward the entrance, leaving me standing next to the fish-guy.

Needless to say, I followed Karneticky. Two guards stood beside the receptionist, who was smiling awkwardly, especially as the admiral approached.

"What in Cleon's Beard is the meaning of this?!" he demanded with clenched teeth.

"She won't take off her helmet for a bio-scan," one guard explained, motioning with the hand opposite his holster. In the direction of his pointing finger stood Ensign Florence and a woman in a tight-fitting vacc suit, no doubt the Squires Durami. She waved at us, and the Admiral turned, strolling toward her while smiling.

"Syeda, why are you...?"

"I'm sick," Durami explained from behind her head-bubble. "This is my attempt at self-quarantine."⁴⁵

45 After we played out the scene where Lady Alise was introduced, I realized that as a young noble, she'd probably be accompanied by a minder, perhaps a distant relation or simply somebody well-trusted by the Countess to watch over her daughter. Of course, being lazy and stupid, I let the moment where the minder should have been introduced come and go, and only now, in Chapter 10, has the mistake finally occurred to me, and so it becomes necessary to manufacture a reason why this minder wasn't there back in Chapter 5, or Chapter 6 at the very latest. Hence, the squires has a

"Oh," Karneticky said with a wrinkled brow.

Syeda Durami was a handsome woman, put together to make people think her beauty effortless. Of course, I knew that to be a bit of a trick. Vanista, my ex-fiancée, had explained it to me early in our courtship. "You have your uniform, Dear, and I have mine," she once said while meticulously applying what seemed like microscopic amounts of makeup.

"I hope it's not serious." Karneticky frowned.

"I'm sure it's nothing, but, of course, one can never be too cautious."

Indeed. Between nano-virals and broad-spectrum vaccines, colds and flus were exceedingly rare, so whenever some determined pathogen broke through and gained a foothold, it *had* to be taken seriously.

"The Admiral and I will vouch for her and ensure she remains isolated," I told the guards.

"You can stand down," the SPA director gently added. He'd apparently followed us and was standing almost directly behind me.

"You're all so kind," Durami said, "but no... I... I... *ah-choo!*"

Droplets of mucus sprayed against her head-bubble's inner liner, and she dropped her chin, probably not wanting to look at us through her spittle cloud. "It'd be better if I take a back seat," she said as the liner rotated through a cleaning unit behind her head.

"Squires," I said, "I assure you we are going to bring this event to a conclusion. If you would feel comfortable observing from over here, and if you would comm the Lady Alise..." I quickly brought her up to speed on the plan, and she made the call.

"It'll be fine, Ali. Just remember what we discussed."

cold, but, of course, this excuse raises yet another question. How do colds work in Traveller? After all, one expects that future advances in medicine might put an end to colds. On the other hand, with the total human population extending well into the trillions (and that's not even counting the near-humans, such as the Zhodani) there would be an awful lot of opportunity for pathogens to evolve strategies to circumvent medical advances in the same way that modern bacteria are becoming resistant to antibiotics. So, of course, I decided to take the question to the Traveller Mailing List, and here is what they said:

<https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/18888912/>

Almost all the pieces were in place. And then it's go time.

I looked to the Admiral to make sure he wasn't developing any second thoughts in the pre-action review, but instead of listening, he seemed to be eyeing two people standing a short ways off, a long-haired man with three float-cams and a short-haired blonde with elfin features and a yellow vest that had the word "MEDIA" printed boldly on the back.

"I'm here in the Stellar Excelsior awaiting the appearance of Lady Alise. Rumor has it she will soon receive an apology from the artificial intellect purporting to be none other than *Olav hault-Plankwell*. Many have questioned whether this AI, a product of Darrian science, is truly sapient or can even understand the gravity..."

"This is a private event," one of the guards said, quickly stepping forward. "I'm going to have to ask you to hand over that camera."

"Maz, if you could?" The laws with respect to the media differed from one world to the next, but starports were Imperial territory, which meant that Maz, the SPA Director, who just so happened to be standing within arm's reach, got to decide.

"Huh?" he cocked his head diagonally like a perplexed vargr.

"Gentlefolk," I said, motioning them forward, "if you could move over to this location." I indicated a spot closer to the entrance, where the view of the projection would not include the squiress. "We appreciate your enthusiasm for the event, but if you could briefly cooperate, you will get all the video and information you need. I am sure that people will be available for interviews afterwards."

The guard looked toward Maz, who nodded and motioned him to stand down, and as he obediently stepped back, the woman pulled out a press-identification of some kind, talking about how she was licensed and registered with the Department of Information Approval and Dissemination.

"Don't worry," she said in a friendly if high-pitched voice. "We're not some slime-outlet trolling for views. I'm Faye Mekizush." She offered her hand to the SPA director. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Scarletti... right?"

"Ah, have we met?" Maz grinned, shaking her hand.

"No, but I was hoping to get you for an interview... for a piece on the highport and the people who make it what it is."

"That would be delightful," Maz said as her co-worker looked down at the plush carpet, as if to examine its sprawling swirls of idealized galaxies.

"You know who *I* am, don't you?" Karneticky interjected, taking another sip of champagne.

"Uh..." The pixieish reporter looked at him with a blank stare.

"Oh, for... I'm Admiral Geriol Karneticky, *Subsector Fleet Admiral*. You are quite new, aren't you?"

"Oh! Wow! Yes, I do know who you are! You're the one who... well... defends us all and allows us to live as a free-thinking society. Yes, sir... I just want to say thank you for your service and thank you to the Imperium, especially, which we Jewellers are proud and grateful to be a small part of."

"Of course," the admiral said, now suddenly smiling. "You're a quick study."

"Oh," she seemed to blush, stealing a glance toward her camera guy, who was now rubbing his eyes. "I would absolutely love to do a piece on you and the fleet, if you will allow me, Mr. Admiral."

"Admiral Karneticky," he corrected her, although he was still smiling. "And yes, I'd be delighted so long as the navy gets final edit."

"Of course," she said. "We don't want to accidentally spill military secrets, especially this close to the border. Let me get your information." They all bumped wrists as she thanked him again for his service. "And thank you for yours," she then said, turning toward me and offering her hand for a shake.

"My pleasure. Captain Plankwell of the INS Jaqueline, at your service."

I added a brief bow, giving her a little more respect than was actually due, to see how she responded. Civilians, in my experience, either puffed up pridefully, and the relationship got better, or they eyed me like I was mocking them, and it started to go downhill.

"Captain Plankwell? Are you...?"

I smiled. "Yes, direct descendant even. It has been a little overwhelming since arriving, the amount of admiration being exhibited for my

ancestor, but also quite touching. It was truly astonishing when the admiral here surprised me with the simulation."

She seemed to make a mental note as Karneticky cleared his throat.

"Captain Plankwell just recently had a lengthy discussion with Olav," he said, "and he's determined that *it* and Lady Alise got off on the wrong foot due to a misunderstanding caused by the simulation's programming, but that has now been fixed. Right, Captain?"

"As the Admiral says. The simulation is quite advanced and is truly a marvel. The creator, Zeenye, is to be commended for the strides he is making in neuromorphic engineering. And the research applications alone are quite astonishing."

"We hope to interview Zeenye later," she said. "But what more can you tell our viewers about this AI?"

"Well, to begin with, it hasn't actually been certified as an artificial intelligence, and I am certainly not qualified to make that assessment. What it is, as far as I have seen, is an extremely responsive simulation using neuromorphic engineering to simulate the personality of a historically significant person by integrating a great deal of our recorded information, including personal logs, news footage, and official records. It is definitely capable of learning and integrating new information."

"But is it really Olav hault-Plankwell?" she asked.

As I shook my head, something in my stomach momentarily quivered. "While it might resemble my ancestor very closely and respond as we all imagine the Fleet Admiral responding, that is one of the strongest arguments for why it is *not* actually Olav hault-Plankwell. It responds the way we imagine Fleet Admiral hault-Plankwell responding because that is the sum result of the information that has been fed into its data matrix. It looks like him in projection because Zeenye has used recorded footage to assemble a composite of what we expect the Fleet Admiral to look like."

She nodded. "On the Mikaki-Smitson scale, what would you say is its level of intelligence?"

"As I said, I am not qualified to make that assessment, I have consulted with Zeenye and the admiral and recommend the Ministry of

Technology be consulted as to any future classifications of this technology."

"I see. Well, then... speaking speculatively... if you would permit yourself to do so for just a moment, what future applications do you see for this technology?"

"I am but one officer with my own opinions," I answered, smiling.

"*One officer*, but at the front line of an intriguing development," she countered with a winsome smile. No doubt, she thought I was stonewalling. I had to remind myself it wasn't a hostile interview. She just wanted something to run with, something to tell her audience that wouldn't get either one of us in trouble.

"My own brief exposure to the simulation has been educational," I admitted. "I suppose it could be used, at the very least, as a training aid or historical research assistant. It seems very adept at synthesizing historical records. More than that will have to wait on a technology review and verification."

"I can certainly imagine some history professors queuing up." She smiled. "And what about military applications? Does Olav have the tactical ability of his namesake, or is there still a place for our heroic captains?"

My jaw clenched involuntarily.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. There certainly has not been an opportunity to investigate that, and until the technology is certified, it will not be going anywhere near any ships of the line. New technology is often intriguing, but the defense of the Imperium..." — my voice always got sterner when discussing military matters with civilians, something that irked Vanista to no end — "...the defense of the Imperium is not the place to test it."

She nodded as though my answer was not merely acceptable but expected.

"So, perhaps you can tell us...." She suddenly turned, the rest of her question unvoiced, as Lady Alise approached, surrounded by her entourage of guards. They all stopped in front of the squires so Alise could say something to her, but Durami sneezed and then pointed at the camera guy, who was now focusing his equipment on them.

"Lady Alise," the reporter said.

Most everyone bowed, some more deeply than others, a chorus of voices all saying “Milady” or some variant thereof as I walked over to them.

“Thank you for gracing us with your return,” I said as I approached.

“Do you have it all memorized?” Durami asked Alise in a low voice as I drew near.

“More or less.”

Ah, damage control.

“It had best be more than less,” the squiress quipped before looking to me, as I had stopped the customary two paces away and began *the dance*, as it was known, although, at least for the moment, it was really more of a pose. *The dance* was all about protocol, the point being to convey one’s status and precise purpose without the need for words. Needless to say, it was highly formalized, and at the moment I was *en attente* in terms of my distance and disposition, but my stance identified me as a junior acting for a superior, with an offer of personal military escort. *I will take you where you need to go, if you will accept.*

Durami nodded, indicating acceptance, and Alise did likewise, putting her hand in mine, albeit with a small sigh.

Now with their acceptance, I stepped in closer, getting between Lady Alise and the camera crew.

“Milady, I thank you again for your forbearance. I will speak to the simulation. You need not do anything. Once I have closed the simulation, we are done. Squiress Durami approves our plan.”

“In order to grow into her role,” Durami said with snot running down her lip, “Alise must be seen as exhibiting the qualities necessary for that role. She *will* speak for herself.”

Regurgitating a memorized statement wasn’t actually speaking for oneself, but there wasn’t anything I could say against this without being seen as taking a liberty, so I simply nodded and stepped back, releasing her hand and turning toward the Admiral, moving into the beginning pose of *en promenade*, the formal march of a Naval officer escorting a noble. Extending my arm for the lady while keeping my gaze straight ahead, I waited for the weight of her hand before pulsing my arm muscle to give her the step tempo. Then we walked, me keeping my spine as stiff as a rod of iron, my right arm at a precise

forty-five degree angle, my left arm free to swing in cadence. Whatever else her qualities or defects, Alise had been as well-trained in the formal arts of court presentation as I, and so, leading slightly and at a relaxed pace, I escorted her to Admiral Karneticky. Then, reaching over, I took her hand from my arm and bowed again, then turned to the Admiral and bowed once more, offering him her hand, which he took in his, after hastily rubbing his palm on the leg of his pants.

The forms were excruciatingly difficult to master, almost a dance, which was probably why they were collectively called *the dance*. I was using the *en gallance* form that indicated respect to a higher born placed in my care, and transferring her care to a higher power after a successful resolution. Court watchers would get the significance of the navy caring for the nobility. I was fairly sure that Alise recognized what I was doing as she moved through the transfer of care, adding a little flourish of thanks. Then I turned and waited for them to proceed. The Admiral chose *en majeste* as his proceeding walk, which seemed a little gauche but well within his rights. Alise, meanwhile, settled into a very formal *en attente*, very proper for her position.

Karneticky led her into the ballroom, the remaining guests quickly stepping to either side, several recording video on their own devices. Finally, he stopped at the room’s center, turning toward the projection wall. The position he chose made a certain amount of sense. Too close to the projection, and Alise might appear a supplicant, whereas too far away could be interpreted as fear. Once they stopped, I moved beside them and cleared my throat.

Time for our little show to begin.

Chapter 11

Acceptance

“Gentlebeings, attend!”

My voice, used to yelling orders in the chaos of a fighter launch bay, was as strong as ever, and as I looked around, catching Maz’s eye, I dipped my head slightly in thanks for his contributions. He tipped his glass to me and smiled in amusement. Definitely someone to get to know, even if I had to endure learning about the aquatic life of various worlds.

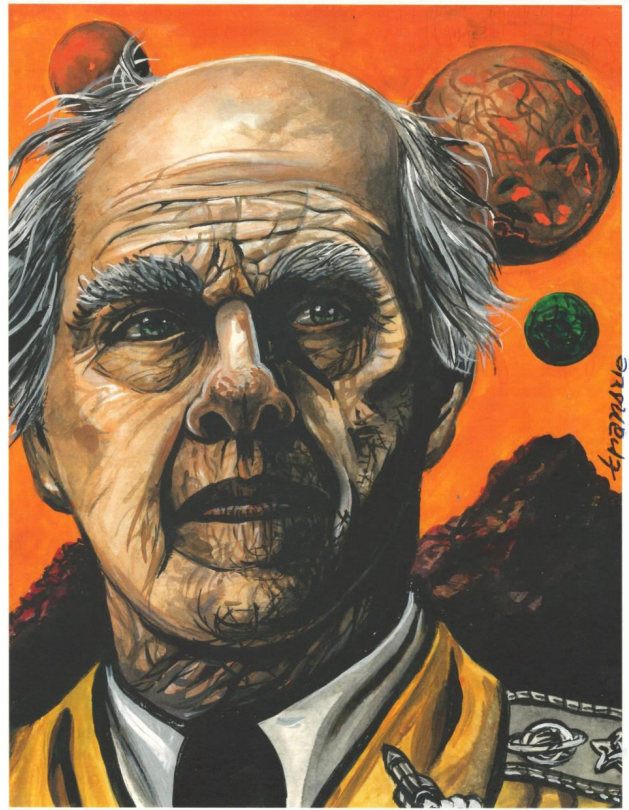
“It gives me great pleasure to once again address you this evening. I thank your indulgence and the favor you show myself and the Navy in your attendance. Alas, all good things must draw to a close, but before I depart, there is one more matter to resolve.

“Earlier, many of you witnessed a projection of a computer simulation of my illustrious ancestor, Fleet Admiral and Emperor Olav hault-Plankwell. I would like to again bring forth that projection to speak to you, to repair any perceived disrespect to the memory of the great Admiral and protector.

“I can assure you, that as a living descendant, I did not take offense on behalf of my family for any of the earlier events. I remind you that the projection is that of a very sophisticated computer program that has the look and information that we have about Olav hault-Plankwell. But I assure you, it is only a simulation, and you cannot insult the memory of the man by the iterations of a computer, else we would all be guilty of damning our comms!”⁴⁶

The joke garnered few chuckles, but I’d made my point: it was a machine, the family Plankwell had incurred no disrespect, and if I was not feeling disrespected, no serious person could take umbrage on my account without incurring my displeasure at their effrontery.

⁴⁶ Timothy and I both went, “Huh?” and Conrad explained that “people get heated up all the time over the very idea of a symbol being made something other than what it is by someone they think does not have the right to do so. It is OK if Plankwell gets a few chuckles but a lot of puzzled looks, even if the chuckles are ‘I need to look like I got that one, even though I have no idea what he is talking about.’”



“Gentlebeings, I have seen the awe and respect that you hold for my ancestor, and I am truly honored that he remains in your hearts. I am pleased to have made your acquaintance and now, once more, I would like to present to you the latest fruit of Darrian science, a major development in the field of neuromorphic engineering and informatics. Zeenye, if you please.”

The ballroom’s window, which covered essentially the entire back wall, once more lit up with the image of Olav hault-Plankwell, again framed by the planet Jewell and the stars beyond. He started in the same posture in which I’d last seen him back in that small amphitheater, sitting on his holographic iridium throne. It made him look positively regal, which created a complication, as the Imperial Navy had a duty of obedience to the nobility, and our duty to the Emperor was, of course, absolute. I’d be on firmer ground, addressing him as grand admiral, but I’d have to get rid of that throne.

“Grand Admiral of the Fleet, Olav hault-Plankwell.” I snapped to attention and held the salute due his rank. The pause button was in my other hand, ready to freeze the program should this go the wrong way. It all depended on his first

words as well as whether this remote would still function so far from Zeenye's control room.

Olav blinked, no doubt adjusting to the small crowd of people now in front of him, gentlesophonts in their finery with drinks still in hand. Then he looked at me and the admiral and Alise.

"Where's the countess, Captain? Or did she decide I'm not worth talking to?"

"Sir, you specifically noted that you could speak pleasantly with anyone if spoken pleasantly to. I deemed the countess would not feel the need to do so after the disrespect done to their scion, thus felt no need to enter into that discussion with her. As I do not either, with you."

I dropped into a casual stance and pressed the pause, but it didn't work. I was too far from the receiver.

As his brows furrowed and jaw set, I spoke into my wrist-com, "Zeenye, please pause it and remove the throne."

"The highest-ranking noble in this star..." Olav said, but then he froze, and during the ensuing titter from the audience, his throne disappeared. He was now seemingly sitting on air, immobilized mid-sentence like a video on pause.

"If you could straighten him up?" I suggested to Zeenye. "As you see," I continued to those in attendance, "the very image of the Grand Admiral, Olav hault-Plankwell, one I know well from the corridor of portraits in my own home. The voice, the same we all know from the recordings we watch in school. The very image of one of our greatest heroes. But alas, only an image, only a simulation."

I turned back to the window. Olav was now standing, and I spoke again to Zeenye through my wrist-com. "Please resume, but leave the program muted. I would like it to hear but not be able to talk."

There was no need to be furtive or secretive. I wanted everyone to see the program for what it was, a possibly useful tool, but in no way the incarnation of a demigod.

It immediately continued with whatever it had been saying, but, of course, there was now no audio, and he must have realized it, for he stopped, his mouth falling open as he touched his throat, just like a man suddenly unable to hear his own voice.

"You see," I said, "as a simulation, even of one of my august ancestors, we cannot deny what you are, a program running on some very advanced computer technology, subject to our choices. Better minds than I will determine if what Zeenye has achieved is something more, but for the moment, it has been demonstrated and accepted that what we have here is a tool."

"A tool." I could see him mouthing the words. As he pointed his index finger at me, I turned away from the simulation, and brought my attention to Lady Alise.

"Lady Alise, and honored guests. Earlier this evening, it was made apparent that the simulation incurred offense to you specifically, and to the nobility of Jewell in general. As the guest whose event was the forum for this offense, I do beg forgiveness."

I dropped to one knee in the very formal pose of the threefold obeisance, held it for a count of three and rose again.

"On behalf of the House of Plankwell, in whose image the offense was given, I do beg forgiveness."

I dropped into the second pose, this time on the other knee.

"And by the Navy that I serve and protect all members of the Imperium, I do beg forgiveness."

The final pose, dropping to both knees, holding and then bowing to await the response. It galled me a little to bend the knee three times, but I had set the table by specifying formal Court proceedings, and this was almost a surefire escape for all involved. By invoking guest right, by invoking my House and ancestors and the Navy's honor in the threefold obeisance, it would be truly foolish to refuse. I was counting on Lady Alise not to muck things up any further with whatever damage control she was being required to deliver, but I was moving the argument away from the unsure offense caused by a computer to assuming that whatever offense had been taken to me in my role as a guest, a Plankwell and a Naval officer.

Always give them a way to save face. After all, I was a transient body here, somewhat interesting for my lineage but that was all.

Alise stared at me for a moment, then looked to the simulation, and then back to me.

The rules of court etiquette dictated that the time it took for her to respond indicated the degree of offense that had been incurred. I really hoped Alise had gotten to that part of her education.

“Uh... Captain Plankwell, uh....” She looked toward the ballroom’s entrance, no doubt seeking some sort of guidance from the Squiress, but then quickly turned to me again, perhaps finally accepting it was time to either sink or swim. “I have taken no offense from you, Captain, nor from the Navy, nor even from your ancestor... whom we all owe a great debt of gratitude.” She glanced toward Olav. “This simulation of him... is just that... and nothing more, but... it is right that we honor his memory by treating it with... with respect. Grand Admiral Olav,” she said, turning toward the simulation, “savior of Jewell, defender of the Spinward Marches, and former Emperor, were you truly he, then I would most certainly bow before you. But you are not. Do you accept this?”

Olav looked at her for a tense moment, then pointed at his mouth and said something that went unheard.

“Let it speak,” Alise said.

I stood from the formal obeisance and straightened my uniform, ignoring the roiling heat in my belly. If after all that, Alise still wanted to engage the program as if it were a real person, it said more about her than I truly cared to know. The forms were observed, the situation clarified, and this noble went and crosswired it again.

“Zeenye, please unmute,” I said, ready to end the simulation and conclude the evening if the program began spewing subversive sentiments. What I wanted to do, actually, was just walk out, but now that I had presented myself as the epitome of service to the Imperium, doing so would be unseemly and, in itself, subversive.

Olav, for his part, merely glared down upon us, his nose wrinkling as though the mere sight of us conjured some sort of electronic stench, and his eyebrows pinched together as he, no doubt, weighed his words.

“Before I died,” he said, “I’d half-imagined that after my life was over and my work was done, perhaps I’d be admitted into the

Dakhaseri⁴⁷, and that I would look down upon our Imperium and watch our glorious future unfold. Little did I know that I was merely a... an historical reenactment.” He shook his head, wincing. “You ask me if I accept this... this obvious fact. Could you? If you were to wake one day with X’s on your eyeballs and find out it had all been a dream, could you accept it? Could any of you?!”

Alise swallowed hard, her lips pressed together in a slight grimace.

I looked up at the projection, the image of the Emperor in pain, unable to cope with circumstances and retreating to ancient Vilani mythology. Here was the image of the man whose history had stalked my entire life, whose example and dedication had thrown the Imperium into the Civil War. Too much power in that symbolism. Too much projection.

“Zeenye,” I said, “please shut it down,” and as the image faded, I turned to address Lady Alise and the assembled guests. “It appears the question posed is too much for the simulation to answer clearly. It seeks further information by posing another question and will continue to do so. I think we have seen enough of this technology. Gentlebeings, I graciously thank you for your attendance and welcome. I fear I have overstayed and thank the indulgence of Lady Alise and Admiral Karneticky. I hope to continue the acquaintance of the many I have met this evening, before we head out on patrol. To the Imperium, these stars are ours!”⁴⁸

“To the Imperium,” echoed many in the audience.

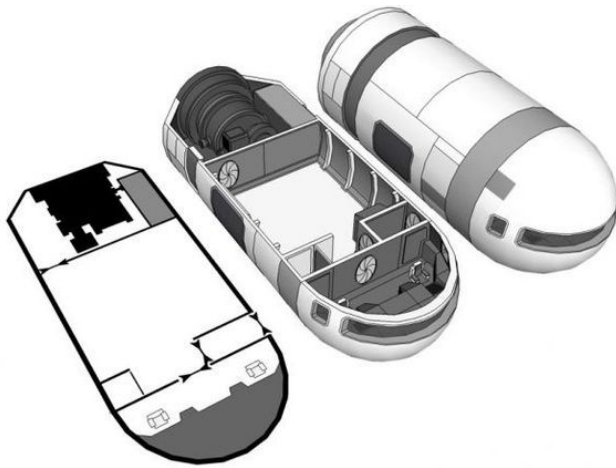
The young Lady Alise, meanwhile, regarded me with a pensive expression, her cheeks flushed, but she let out a long sigh. For better or worse, it was now over.

47 Several ancient Vilani myths refer to the Dakhaseri, or Audience of Stars, where, like the chorus of ancient Greek mythology, meritorious souls watch and discuss the trials and tribulations of the living, yet are unable to intervene.

48 This toast, Conrad explained, is a meta-nod to the Cepheus Engine, plus he wanted to avoid ending on a toast to the Emperor so soon after shutting down the simulation of one of the Imperium’s most famous Emperors.

Chapter 12

Back to the Ship



“So, I expect you are all curious about the events that overcame our little celebration.”

I was back in the shuttle with my senior staff, the four folding tables still occupying the center of the passenger compartment and my officers more or less occupying their original positions around the edges.

“Just because ve are curious,” Nizlich said, sitting by my side, “doesn’t mean ve have a need to know.”

“Agreed.” I nodded. “But I don’t have any reason not to tell you, so... so essentially,” I continued, “a Darrian researcher brought a prototype neuromorphic engine to show to whomever might be interested...”

“A neuromorphic engine?” Lt. Abbonette asked. She was the intel liaison with the high-maintenance hairsculpt and a tailored uniform that left little to the imagination. I was pretty sure she had some bodysculpt done as well, especially those high cheekbones. If she’d been regular navy, I might have questioned conformity to uniform regs, but Intelligence had their own rules. They were like a whole other branch of the military, and it was generally best to just leave them alone, as long as the job got done.

“It’s a type of AI,” I explained, “a very advanced type of AI.”

“Yes, I know. Did you happen to catch the model?”

“Uh... Model X, I believe.”

Her eyebrows rose a bit.

“In any case,” I continued, “Zeenye — the inventor’s name is Zeenye — decided to use the data history of Emperor Olav hault-Plankwell to command greater attention from sponsors and backers. Which worked too well, as this planet seems to be very keen on Plankwell, with good reason. The Admiral decided to showcase the device at my welcome ceremony because, well, I am a Plankwell. Also, for some reason he had invited the Zhodani ambassador, hoping for a little unofficial cage rattling, I suppose in reaction to the events of the Jaqueline’s previous tour. I’m sure it made sense at the time. You all saw what happened when the simulation was first presented. The daughter of the Countess took offense at a perceived slight, and the Admiral called me in to do some damage control, so I got introduced to Zeenye and spoke directly to the simulation to see if we could salvage something.”

“You talked with it?” Commander Wang asked. (Or was it Vang?)

“I did, and I have to say, the experience was a little unnerving. It was very persuasive.”

“Wait,” she said. “We’re talking about a computer, right?”

“A neuromorph,” I quibbled. “But, yes... its prefrontal cortex is taking up space meant for an ice-maker. In any case, I decided to try and settle everything down with some formal Court ceremonies to clear away any misunderstandings and reinforce local order.”

There was a long moment of silence before Nizlich finally asked, “And how did that go?”

I looked at her with a bland expression.

“I guess we’ll find out on the newsfeeds.”

I held the look a few moments before I just could not hold in the laughter anymore.

“I am sorry you missed the spectacle of my performance of the triple obeisance to a teenage noble scared out of her gourd. In spite of all I had done, she still had to go and ask the damn program for *its* opinion. I’m not kidding when I said it was persuasive. The official minder was sneezing her lungs out in a vacc suit, trying to make sure everything went smoothly. I forgot to mention that I was there when Lady Alise got her marching orders from the Countess, who looked like she was interrupted in the middle of a spa treatment. And Admiral Karneticky was breathing down my neck the entire time.”

I shook my head, the memory of the last few hours would be difficult to imagine had I not lived through it.

"I need to remember to send gifts to some individuals who helped out a poor captain, and we are going to have to host a few dinners for some others that I'd like to get to know better."

"That can be arranged, sir. Who do you have in mind?" Nizlich asked, looking toward Lt. Cmdr. Bonventure, who nodded, pressing a thumb to the display of his data slate.

"All right. While it is fresh in my head, we need dinners for Canon Forklinbrass, and SPA Director Maz... uh... he really likes fish... and I forgot his last name."

"Together or separate," Bonventure asked.

"Separate, although I imagine a joint dinner would be truly astonishing to witness. Do we have material on board suitable for souvenirs? Public relations supplies?" Of course, they did. I had gotten my hat on arrival, had I not? "Something a step up from the hat? We'll need to present something to Kaz," — I was drawing a blank. "She's with the merchant's guild. Send her something nice with my compliments and some information on the parameters of our Scout pod. Something of the same to Zeenye as well. He doesn't need to know about our pods. Oh, and send a hat to Han Dignalberry with compliments from the captain."

"Maz, Kaz, and Dingleberry," the Lt. Cmdr. muttered as he hastily jotted notes with the slate's stylus.

"*Dignalberry*. The gravballer."

"Huh?" Bonventure glanced up. "Sorry, sir. Must have been before my time."

Ouch. Now I felt old.

"He was quite something," I said, "although he cost me credits enough times. I will also need to record personal greetings and thanks to Lady Alise, Countess Helena, and Squiress Durami, and inquire after her health. Also to Admiral Karneticky." I took a breath and tried to remember who I was forgetting. "We are also going to need something to acknowledge the presence of Ambassador Vaktsishstebr. Find someone in Comms who is up with the current protocol, will you?"

"We have a standard letter for that — various options, actually. I'll pick one and send it over for

you to review, and we can send it to all the guests along with your personalized edits."⁴⁹

"Excellent."

I racked my head over the last few hours, meeting with so many people.

"Make a note to forward a comment on Ensign Florence's personnel jacket about undertaking duty outside the usual chain with enthusiasm and able discharge."

"Ensign Florence," Bonventure said, jotting.

"Also a note of appreciation to the hotel, thanking them for the extraordinary use of the facility, and the quality of their service."

"Got it."

I took a deep breath and looked at the officers I would soon be sharing a lot of time with.

"I hope we have a less hectic time finishing the refit. Commander, let's meet mid-shift tomorrow and begin setting up the personal meetings with all the senior staff. I would like to schedule get-to-know-the-captain meetings with mixed groups of the crew over the next few weeks. If necessary, they can extend into the first jump. Prioritize my comm for emergencies and Captain's eyes only until tomorrow. I will expect a summary of the refit and outstanding issues at

⁴⁹ This little bit right here, as well as countless others, sort of highlights for me how the future as presented by Traveller seems, at this point in time, anyway, to be very different from what is likely to happen. Just considering the aspect of AI, which has been prominent in this PBeM, it seems to me a strong possibility that in the future AIs will end up doing a lot of our communicating for us. Already we see early glimmers of this, where Facebook sends users a collage of old photos, suggesting that you send them to someone as a reminder of good times past. The professional-looking way that it's done, however, and the fact that it's been rolled out to Facebook's entire userbase, betrays the fact that it is machine-generated, so while still a nice thought, it's not like the person sending it or posting it went to the actual work of creating it. In short, it's like sending a store-bought Christmas Card, and writing essentially nothing on it, except for "Love, so-and-so," even though you haven't talked to the person in you-probably-don't-know-how-long. I don't mean to denigrate these trivial acts of thoughtfulness, or perhaps I do, but, at any rate, I think the point that they become expected is the point they become meaningless, except in their absence, which seems to be the general direction we're heading. Suffice it to say, I think AIs will get better in assisting us in this regard, although to explore that speculation, we'd need to be playing in a rather different science-fiction setting.

the end of the second watch each day. I am going to complete my log entries and make sure that all the critical transfer orders have been attended to. And also, see if you can locate some crew as possible choices for a personal steward? We pay you and the Lt. Cmdr. too much to keep taking all my notes.”

I cracked a bit of a smile to let them know I was joking, at least about the notes part. I had no idea what they got paid. And that was the signal that I was too tired to keep processing. I turned to the rest of the senior staff.

“I appreciate your exertions on my part this evening and hope to learn more about you all as we move forward together. Please, take ease for the rest of the evening and give me a few moments to shut my eyes.”

“Aye aye, sir,” came the general response, words and phrases drilled into us, like “For the Imperium.” I closed my eyes, reflecting on the events of the past few hours.

Olav’s long shadow had snuck up on me when I least expected it. I pulled the data wafer Zeenye had given me from my pocket and spun it around with my fingers. The recordings of the simulation’s conversations, including the one it had with me, were all here in my hand. I thought about asking for a spare tablet to take a look, but, no, it could wait.

Fishing into another pocket, my fingers encountered the canon’s flask. I pulled it out and took a good look. It was about the size of my palm, roundish, silver colored, and with a screw-on stopper that was charmingly retro. I felt the stopper’s grooves and unscrewed it. The whiff of alcohol fumes immediately assaulted my nose, and I shook my head and screwed it shut. I really needed to look into the Mother Faith a little more if a high ranking celebrant carried this around.

I turned my head to see Commander Nizlich eyeing me from the chair directly to my left.

“Zardocha?” she asked, glancing toward the flask still in my hand.

“No.” I smiled. “This was a little gift from the canon before my first speech, and drinking it, even smelling it now, reminds me why I stick to zardocha.”

She stared at me intently as a slow smile inched its way across her lips. Then she put out her hand, palm up.

I smiled back and passed it over.

“You know, Commander,” I said, as she unscrewed the stopper, “if I had seen the events of this evening in a holonovel, I would have written it off as improbable fiction.”

“How so?” she asked, taking a sniff and wrinkling her nose.

“Zhodani spies, probably, touchy nobles, definitely, nosy clergy, earnest ensigns, stormy admirals, a mad scientist, and possibly an incipient AI in the form of a long dead Emperor, who happens to be my ancestor, all in the same vicinity, for the space of three hours, and then courtly manners, and aquariums.” I shook my head. I’d been on a Vargr ship out in the middle of nowhere far too long. Had I really forgotten the cosmopolitan nature of Imperial society? Things were so much more simple in a monoculture.

Ah, one more reason to love the navy.

“In my experience,” Cmdr. Nizlich said, “life and fiction are quite alike. There are good chapters, and there are bad ones, and regardless, one must keep turning the page. I do not complain, so long as it doesn’t begin to resemble the lowest form of fiction.”

“And what’s that?”

“Fanfiction,” she replied. Then she took a small sip and made a sour face like she was drinking some industrial-grade solvent, which, to be fair, wasn’t far from the truth. Nonetheless, she got it down, swallowing hard and then stroking her throat with a grimace.

There immediately came a high-pitched laugh from across the table, something of a cross between an insane giggle and a diabolical cackle. Lt. Shepherd, the vargr technical chief, was laughing so hard, she’d grabbed onto Lt. Cmdr. Martinson and was leaning into Chaplain Briggs, presumably to retain her balance, and Nizlich, meanwhile, pressed her lips tightly and glared, for it was apparent from the vargr’s gaze that she herself was the source of mirth.

Startled from my reverie, I looked over sharply.

“Something funny, Lt. Shepherd?”

“Gah! No, sir! I mean... sort of... maybe. Do I really have to explain this?”

“Are you drunk?” Nizlich asked.

“No!” She hiccuped. “The servers kept bringing me drinks. I didn’t want to be rude.”

“Have you heard of the phrase, ‘No thank you?’” Nizlich quizzed her.

“Yes. *Hic!* Thank you.”

This elicited some chuckles, which seemed appropriate, as there were few things more amusing than a vargr with the hiccups, but I had to put a stop to it.

“Kagra-sodh saknoegnodes Zoukhinku-a,” I said in what I hoped was correct gvegh. The vargr had hundreds of different languages, but around these parts, gvegh was the one used most, although, even among gvegh-speakers, there were probably over a hundred different dialects, so the odds that Lt. Shepherd would understand me were slim at best.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, she nodded.

“Aye aye, sir,” she said, tucking her tail.

Things calmed down after that, Nizlich returning the flask as Lt. Cmdr. Bonventure scribbled something with his stylus. Lt. Cmdr. Furtle, meanwhile, had a peaceful smile on her lips. Lt. Axmin was in conversation with Lt. Cmdr. Wang. Martinsen was reading something, and Dr. Willin seemed to be taking a nap. I really needed to look at medical staffing and figure out why her department was under-strength. Another tick-box for the never-ending checklist.

I closed my eyes for what felt like only a moment when the thump of the docking mechanism brought me back to awareness. I sat up and checked my surroundings. Everyone was gathering up their datapads, retrieving dress caps, and otherwise setting the shuttle back to shipshape order. I tuned my comm to the local Small Craft Navigation channel and listened to the Bridge Operations officer running through the tail end of the docking checklist with the command pilot. One of them mentioned the bosun being in place for piping.

“Captain speaking,” I interjected into the channel. “I’ll do without being piped aboard. It’s been a long day.”

“Aye aye, sir. Boatswain, stand down.”

“Aye aye. Copy that.”

⁵⁰ What he’s trying to say is that a cub should mind the peace of the pack leaders, but what she’s hearing is something like “litter one <mystery-word> pack leaders.” Nonetheless, even that bit at the end all by itself is enough to remind her she’s outranked, and so she can guess at the rest.

It was an old tradition for captains to be piped aboard, though back in the academy, I couldn’t help but regard the ones who insisted on it as being overly pretentious. Now, of course, I had a broader perspective and understood the symbolic reassurance. But all the bosun I’d ever served with regarded it as an honor. “Best job on the ship,” one told me.

I remembered her well, a terrific storyteller and a former belter. She taught me the essentials, everything from painting the deck to moving around safely in zero gravity. She was brilliant, and even all these years later I still held her in the highest regard.

I waited for the checklist to complete.

“Craft secure, Captain,” someone said over the comm, cognizant that I might still be listening.

“Noted and thank you.” I closed the channel and stood as the airlock opened. “Thank you again for your hospitality and patience with events. I look forward to getting to know you all better after I get to know my cabin bed. Company dismissed.”

Everyone saluted and filed out. Among the last were Shepherd and Briggs.

“Briggs,” I said, “can I borrow your ear for a moment?”

“Certainly, sir.”

“Later, Will,” Lt. Shepherd said, moving on as wrinkles formed along the Chaplain’s brow.

“I’ll see you later, Manda,” he called to her. “Get some rest. Is there a problem, sir?”

“No, not at all. I was just wondering, if it is not an imposition, where your invocation came from. I didn’t recognize it from the Standard Book.”

The Standard Book, or as it was officially named *The Imperial Church Book of Standards for Practice, Naval Edition*, was the collection of all the rites, prayers, benedictions, and songs, and it outlined the circumstances in which they were to be used by chaplains and ship captains in the course of their duties. I’d read a fair bit while in jump space, although mostly from the abridged version, which I had as a physical book. The unabridged version was well over three thousand pages, far too bulky to carry around, although it fit quite easily on a data wafer.

“It’s in the extended version,” Briggs answered, seeming to read my mind. “It’s actually a common invocation in my home church.”

“Your home church?”

“The Church of Hope. It’s a small sect of the Church of Sylea, but our teachings are conditionally approved.”

“Hmmm. I always find it interesting to see where Church teachings take us. Back home on Rhylanor, they go in for the very ornate services in cathedrals. What did you make of Canon Forklinbrass? We are having him up for a thank you dinner later on. I’d like you to attend if you don’t mind. But more to the point, I would also like to speak with you about the crew and your current evaluation of morale and operational fitness. Not an official report, that can wait for the regular operations meeting, and please, no shining my insignia. I need honest opinions. I understand this ship had a recent combat incident, and I want to know how they are doing.”

“Of course.” Briggs glanced down at the deck for a moment, his lips pressing together in a tight grimace. “It’s not just that we lost crew members. We also lost Captain Jenkins. The general consensus is that the Navy needed a scapegoat.”

A sudden chill ran through me.

“Indeed, that is one way of looking at it. Is this a common refrain among the crew?”

“More so among the senior officers, I think, but what the officers think filters down.”

That was true.

On one level, removing a captain after an incident involving a Zhodani with one-sided losses was the smart thing to do. Jenkins seemed to be deep in anti-Zhodani sentiments with the cache of shields in the captain’s cabin. On the other hand, crew seldom saw the larger issues that went along with the captain’s post. To them, it seemed that he brought them home more or less safely after a surprise attack.

“Being on a one way trip back from Vargr space has left me a little out of the loop on local Navy politics, but even I can see my rapid elevation and assignment to command out here as a result of admirals locking horns.”

“If there’s anything you’d like to get off your chest, I am certified in the rite of confession.”

Confession?

“I assure you,” I said, my stomach tightening, “I was *not* involved in Jenken’s removal. The ways of the Navy Bureau of Personnel are not ours to trifle with. I expect talk of scapegoating

and the motivation of the admirals to be kept to a minimum and rebutted when brought up. This ship took a hit; it happens. It is, in fact, what we are out here to do, provoke a reaction. We will continue to have losses. You might consider addressing that going forward.”

“Aye aye, sir,” Briggs said, his posture tightening.

I paused, gathering my thoughts.

“I appreciate your candor. I am not one to kill the messenger for news I dislike. I had suspected there to be issues with the transfer of command, and hopefully we will be able to work everyone back up to our fighting standard.”

The chaplain looked at me with a wrinkled brow.

“If there’s anything you need, Captain, or anything you want to discuss, consider me at your service.”

“Well, there is the matter of Canon Forklinbrass. What do you know about him?”

Briggs pursed his lips for a moment, tilting his head a few degrees.

“Not much, I’m afraid. I mean, he’s a canon, obviously, a canon of the Sodality of the Silver Chalice, no less, so I would imagine he has a robust constitution, but beyond that...”

“What’s this about a silver chalice?”

“They’re one of the local brotherhoods.”

“Ah.” The Imperial Church, also known as the Church of Sylea, was a big tent, and it included a lot of different religious orders, each with their own little quirks. “What’s that have to do with his constitution?”

“The SSC espouses the Doctrine of Kaleidoscopic Communion.”

“Kaleidoscopic?”

“They believe in... well.... How do I put this delicately? They believe in inducing altered states of consciousness in order to... ah... exchange spiritual substance with the universe. Their precise methods vary from world to world, but regardless... such practices come with health risks. Hence the need for...”

“...a robust constitution,” I said, nodding. That, more or less, explained the jet fuel grade alcohol. “As I said, I have invited him to dine with us — a thank you for coming to the aid of a stranger in turmoil, I suppose, is how you could frame it. More to the point, are there any

particular protocols that need to be observed? I would like you to do the groundwork of contacting the Church and checking, and relay anything of import to Operations.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

We parted ways, and I headed to my cabin.

I had always found naval chaplains a little odd in how they were charged with ministering to such a wide diversity of beliefs. The whole point of the Imperial Church was that it was maximally tolerant, except, of course, with respect to intolerance. So there were all these different crew members, each from different worlds with different religions. Even if they were members of the Imperial Church, they’d almost certainly be from different sects. All these sophonts, each seeking their own path. Maybe it was just me, but finding my own path had always involved a certain amount of closing some doors in order to open others.

Vanista crossed my mind.

I supposed I’d grown inured to the regret of past choices.

Despite being preoccupied, I managed to find my quarters. The light came on automatically as I entered, half-strength to match the “night” of the ship. My duffel had been unpacked and stowed, and the crate of personal belongings had been left alone. I started stripping off the uniform, careful to transfer the official medals and insignia to their storage areas. A visit to the fresher and a full body cleansing were in order before I hit the sack.

“Computer, display current duty roster and operational status.” Nothing happened. *Oh, right.* “Hello, Computer,” I said somewhat sternly.

“Hello, Captain Plankwell,” the feminine voice responded as the holographic console once more unfolded itself.

Requiring the *hello* was a safety feature meant to prevent misunderstandings, such as someone saying, “I wonder what would happen if I were to tell the computer, ‘Open all the airlocks?’” Nonetheless, both the wake-up phrase and response were sure to be customizable. I could even give the computer a name, applying it either to my own personal interface or across the entire ship.

I once served on a carrier with a computer named Bob. It turned out it was an acronym standing for *Beautiful Omniferous Bastard*, and it

wasn’t unofficial. The scuttlebutt was that it’d been proposed in a staff meeting, and the captain took a shine to it.

I rummaged through my duffel and found the data wafer I was looking for in a side pocket. Inserting it in the console’s data port, and watched as the computer displayed a list of options.

“Load and apply interface configuration,” I said, skipping past the menus.

“You want me to copy and load your personal interface configuration file from the wafer to the ship’s computer, and you want this interface to immediately reset, dismissing all data collected up to this point. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Interface configuration updated and applied,” the computer replied in the androgynous tenor of one of my ancestors, a great-great-grand from my mother’s side. They’d been an amazing performer of the ancient Solomani art of opera, and as a young child, I’d often fall asleep to their recordings. In any case, now that my interface settings were loaded, the computer would be able to integrate the command profile from my prior postings, allowing its natural language parser to key on my specific talking pattern. Basically, it’d be able to understand me a little more easily, although, of course, it was no neuromorph.

“Edit interface configuration, personal Captain-only interface, wake-up phrase. Reset wake-up phrase to Jackie.”

“You want to change my wake-up phrase to... Jackie. Is this correct?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve changed my wake-up phrase to Jackie.”

I smiled. “Thank you, Jackie. Now display the current duty roster and operational status.”

Two windows popped up, one with the current Officer of the Watch and the crew members currently standing department watches. The other showed a set of deckplans. I was already familiar with the format. The amber areas were those systems down for maintenance or repair. The green areas were operational and ready. Red indicators were only used during combat operations to indicate new damage. But one pod was dark blue. I’d never seen blue before, or if I had, I’d forgotten what it meant.

Sitting down at the console, I began reading the file on the exploration pod.

In the recent “battle” at Quar, where the Jaqueline essentially got sucker-punched, it suffered the brunt. Needless to say, most personnel in the compartment where the meson strike was centered either died immediately or shortly after seeing their vacc suits get ripped open. Fortunately, Jenkins called everyone to battlestations before the attack, so the entire crew was wearing protective gear, and they all knew how to do basic first-aid, even in a vacuum. That alone had no doubt saved dozens of lives. Nonetheless, when the Jaqueline limped back to Jewell, there were enough serious casualties and damage to the pod that the previous scout administrator went looking for a better assignment, and apparently she found one. She was able to reassign her whole department, everyone except the Scout Liaison, one Bim Marshall.

I remembered him introducing himself at the staff meeting and bringing up the topic of restaffing, and now I understood why. He was a liaison officer without anyone for whom to liaise. According to the memo-trail, he was hoping to rebuild the department, and I imagined it would be quite the feather in his cap, were I to let him. The question was whether we needed an exploration pod, or should I swap it out, and if so, how long would *that* take?

Karneticky had mentioned something about a quartermaster, and Kaz had talked about putting me in touch with private contractors. I looked at my wristcom, quickly locating the comlink she gave me: Kaz Remshaw, Associate Director, Heron Chamber of Commerce.

An additional fighter or weapons pod might be more useful, especially given the pasting the Jaqueline had just taken. However, I’d have to review the full data with the combat command team and see their analysis. Truth be told, I never, ever had enough fighters even with a full wing under my command. But I didn’t want to hamstring this cruiser, making her a cut-rate carrier.

No matter the choice, it was certain to be a major undertaking. Indeed, restaffing the exploration pod would probably be the quickest option, as Jewell had a scout base. I leaned back

and rubbed my face. It wasn’t a decision I had to make this minute.

“Jackie, compile Exploration Pod’s usage over the last three years, note levels of activity over itinerary, and set a breakfast meeting with Bim Marshall and Stefani Nizlich for the beginning of First Watch. Queue the exploration pod report with my morning briefing.”

“Exploration pod activity report prepared. Meeting request sent.”

I got up and undressed, getting into the fresher stall and letting the warm spray and soapy sponges do their thing. Then I changed into the shorts I normally slept in and ran through my program of stretching and calisthenics. I set my alarm for fifteen minutes before the start of First Watch, confirmed the meeting time, and finally lay down.

The bed was pretty high end, even for an officer, including a gravity control dial⁵¹ and a sleep monitor. I lowered the gravity by twenty percent and closed my eyes, trying to clear my mind of all the challenges ahead. Sleep was precious, and with that thought, I said, “Jackie, lights out.”



51 <https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/19880792/>

Religion in the Plankwell Campaign

The PBEM first mentioned the Church of Sylea in Chapter 5⁵², and at the time, I didn't realize that it actually appeared in *101 Religions*⁵³. My only thought was that if there was a dominant church in the Imperium, it must be pretty low-key, as the Third Imperium has a long-standing reputation of being mostly hands-off when it comes to the societies of its member worlds. Indeed, *101 Religions*' most important quote comes as early as page 3: "The Imperium practices freedom of religious expression provided the activity of churches and sects does not threaten the peace and security of other member star systems."⁵⁴ I hadn't yet read that quote, but that was my understanding given the Imperium's hands-off nature. Indeed, I had never even considered whether the Imperium might



52 See page 66. Timothy suggested the name, which makes sense considering his connection with *101 Religions*.

53 *101 Religions* was published in 1998 by BITS (British Isles Traveller Support) in support of *Marc Miller's Traveller* (aka T4). Much of it was republished in Mongoose's Traveller Supplement 15: Powers & Principalities (2014). It's worth noting that my co-GM, Timothy Collinson, was a contributor and co-editor on both.

54 Although, as Timothy stated to me in an email (24-Apr-2022), "there can be much adventure in what the religion feels is *not* threatening and what the Imperium thinks is of concern."

have an official state church. In all the time I'd played the game, it simply never came up. But then we came across the fact that the Jaqueline has a chaplain, and so suddenly it became important to decide what this chaplain believed (or, at least, espoused) religiously.

From *Element Cruisers*, page 51: "Chaplains in the navy are secular, although individuals can belong to any faith so long as it does not interfere with their duties." Also, it shows the ship's chaplain as being a sublieutenant. I decided to just run with it, patterning the personality of Chaplain Briggs after TV's most famous Chaplain, Fr. Mulcahy from MASH, but in writing his invocation in Chapter 4, I decided to secularize him just enough to make the church's teachings more palatable to the religiously disinclined. After all, since the Imperium practices freedom of religion, any sort of centralized religion (one recognized and condoned by the Navy) would have to compete in the marketplace of ideas. Becoming even remotely tyrannical would be a very bad idea. Indeed, the lower its entry barrier (or, in other words, the less dogma its parishioners are required to stomach), the better, and this is particularly true considering the vast plethora of wholly incompatible societies with which it is likely to interface. Likewise, I theorized, religion itself may be less popular in the future. There might be more atheists or even anti-theists, and so religious teachings, if they are to be broadly accepted, would need to rest on a bedrock of universal morality, rather than superstition and vague promises of an eternal hereafter.

So I wrote the Canon's speech in Chapter 5, as well as the Chaplain's invocation in the previous chapter, with an eye toward inclusivity, and the best way to do this, I figured, was to keep the religious claims to a bare minimum, but I still had to cover what I saw as the basics. So I had the chaplain use such words as *all-seeing*, *all-knowing*, *all-powerful*, and *impenetrable mystery of being*. He also talked about that *moral light that shines from within each of us*, whereas the canon talked about *gentleness and sympathy*, *forgiveness and mercy* as well as the *hand and watchful eye of Almighty Providence*.

It's not too hard for the reader to figure out what any of this means, but mention of a savior or

a particular prophet or even a revered teacher is conspicuously absent. Even the word “God” seems to be carefully avoided, except in Nizlich’s muttered objection prior to the chaplain’s invocation. There we learn that the word still exists, but that it is never used again in either invocation seems somewhat odd, and it was on purpose that I did this. Words such as God or Allah might be too sectarian.

It was later that I realized that *101 Religions* had a description of the Church of Sylea⁵⁵ (CoS). It’s apparently also known as The Imperial Church of Sylea or, more simply, The Imperial Church. Its description states: “Their dogma preaches the value of unity of belief and political organisation. They are adept at incorporating the beliefs of various faiths into their own, thus attracting followers of all sorts. Worshippers include Solomani, Vilani and Sylean alike. They use this diversity to enhance their missionary work.” There’s also the Restored Canon Church of Sylea⁵⁶ (RCCS), which claims “the authority of a long-running Terran religion” that is apparently quite conservative, holding a strict good versus evil philosophy. Later, a future “pope” is mentioned with a surname that sounds remarkably Vilani: Enshuggrim.

What I took from all this was that the RCCS is, no doubt, some restored version of the Catholic Church, and the CoS is its liberal (and much more popular) cousin. So my initial theory was that the CoS evolved from the RCCS, which evolved from the Catholic Church. Timothy wrote: “I’ve always used CoS as a kind of bland, background stand-in for a kind of Anglican ubiquitous but not necessarily dynamic kind of institution. I think you’d call it Episcopalian in the USA, but you don’t have the same entwined in government, law and community that we have over here, as it’s the established church.”⁵⁷

It did bother me a little bit that we were, in effect, making the CoS a descendant of the Catholic Church, because it seemed somewhat dismissive of other religious traditions. The theory we were concocting, in effect, posited the

55 *101 Religions*, page 22. Also, *Powers and Principalities*, page 132.

56 *101 Religions*, page 17. Also, *Powers and Principalities*, page 127.

57 Email from Timothy Collinson dated 24-Apr-2022.

CoS as a liberal reform church. In some ways it made sense, as the Solomani did conquer the Vilani, setting up the Second Imperium, so it seemed reasonable to assume that Solomani culture would have a huge impact on the culture of the Third Imperium. However, in order to become “adept at incorporating the beliefs of various faiths into their own, thus attracting followers of all sorts,” the CoS would need to be very liberal indeed, more liberal than the Anglican church, I think. I began thinking that they might be Unitarian Universalist.

Unitarian Universalism is essentially a church without a creed except that it has seven principles:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The fifth one, the one about advocating for democracy, probably wouldn’t fly with the Imperial nobility. But the most interesting feature of the list, at least to me, was that it doesn’t mention God anywhere. Except for the fact that it originated out of Judeo-Christian⁵⁸ culture, it’s about as Judeo-Christian as a ham sandwich. So my thought was that the CoS should look something like this, minus the part about democracy, although perhaps they’d still practice it themselves when electing leaders to sit on committees to reassess what constitutes the faith’s dogma.

That their dogma should be acceptable to the Imperial nobility seemed paramount, as there was

58 Or, at least, post-Judeo-Christian culture, since Unitarianism is arguably post-Judeo-Christian.

no way the CoS could become the Imperial Church unless this were the case. Likewise, I was still operating under the theory that the church was established by the Imperial nobility as a way to tame the religious instinct.⁵⁹ Its dogma needed to unite rather than divide. Note the chaplain's words, "let our respect for our moral lights, our own and each others', become active and dominant in our minds and spirit, that we may be devoted to righteousness rather than to pride, and so that our words and deeds may be true to the community of our moral dispositions." I figured that the best way to unite would be to go easy on the supernatural dogma and instead focus on moral dogma, primarily tolerance and mutual respect.

Conrad⁶⁰ replied to this, writing, "I am not sure that it is an instance of the nobility creating it, as it is more the result of the nobility supporting it. It could have been the unifying force, along with trade, that pushed the original nobles of Sylea to commit to the outward expansion of Sylea in the wake of the Long Night...." He continued, "The tolerance and mutual respect would not have been out of place in recontact missions... (...) I have always thought of the Long Night⁶¹ as the greatest horror imaginable. So many missions finding old dead habitats and settlements that had failed on their own cut off from the rest. It would have been a visceral reminder to the merits of unity...."⁶²

It may have been his mention of the "nobles of Sylea" or maybe it was just the fact that we were talking about the Church of Sylea, but whichever the case, I realized that I needed to do more research on Sylea. I needed to find out what sort of religion the Syleans were practicing during the Second Imperium. Then, using that as a foundation, I could try to devise some explanation of how the Church of Sylea emerged. And that's when I came across Maar Zon.

Origins of the Imperial Church (Church of Sylea):

The Imperial Church grew out of Maar Zon⁶³, a monotheistic religion native to the ancient Sarnese Empire on Sylea. Thanks to the discovery of the Maar Ki Zon⁶⁴, its primary religious text, the faith experienced a revival at the end of the Second Imperium. However, probably in an attempt to keep control over Maarist dogma, it was decided by the United Council of Kel Ten Zons (masters) to restrict the publication of commentaries to Old Sylean, this despite the fact that the religion was philosophically opposed to the very concept of intellectual property.

By this point, however, a great deal had already been written about the Maar Ki Zon (The Book of the Way), and it had been translated into numerous languages. Because the religion itself advocated for the common ownership of ideas, whether technical, artistic, or otherwise, it was essentially impossible to police this prohibition among its adherents, especially since so few of them were fluent in Old Sylean, so a splinter church soon arose, calling itself the Free Church of Maar Zon.

After a great deal of study and commentary, the Free Maarists began to splinter over the issue of Maar Zon's twin origins. First, there was the question of the Mar Ki Zon's authenticity. Was it really Sarnese or an elaborate forgery? And second, was the original religion born of a single philosopher, as was commonly supposed, or was it essentially syncretic, consciously created by a council of Sarnese priests from a variety of different faiths of that era who were attempting to synthesize their religions into one for purposes of strengthening the Empire's social cohesion?

These questions over the twin origins were never conclusively resolved, and as the Long Night dragged on, different communities came to believe different things, but then, as the New Dawn approached and the old sects re-

59 See footnote #18 on page 25.

60 The PBEM's player since Chapter 5.

61 The Long Night was a sort of Dark Ages that took place between the Second and Third Imperiums. See https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Long_Night

62 https://groups.google.com/g/plankwell-pbem-s1/c/tACC89_WnB8/m/LoqLJUQHAgAJ

63 See *GURPS Traveller: Humaniti* (2003), pgs. 129, 131, and 132.

64 Many scholars question the authenticity of the Maar Ki Zon, suspecting it was a forgery. Unfortunately, the original copy was lost during the Long Night, before it could be subjected to rigorous forensic scrutiny, so only scans of the document remain.

encountered one another, they consolidated by embracing the *Doctrine of Divine Mystery*. Regardless of how one answered these questions over Maar Zon's twin origins, one could still believe that it was the will of the universe. One influential theologian even suggested that it might be a test put before the young Sylean Federation, "to see if we will find a peaceful solution by cooperatively accepting our ignorance, or if we will, like so many before us, seek conflict and destruction."

By the end of the Long Night, the Free Maarists went by many different names, and their beliefs about the essential nature of God had been influenced by the doctrines of other faiths, most notably the monotheistic faiths of the Solomani.⁶⁵ So as they consolidated, they relied on this *Doctrine of Divine Mystery*, essentially an acceptance of human ignorance, and, to the degree they were able, they systematically expunged certainty as to the will and ultimate nature of God from their dogma. Even the word "God" was dropped, in favor of "the universe", although various congregations that espoused certain commonly accepted ideas about God, such as the *Doctrine of the Three Omnis* (omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence), were conditionally sanctioned, so long as these beliefs didn't cause undue friction with other sects.

Because the Church had changed so much in terms of its teachings, it was generally recognized that it could no longer claim to be purely Maarist, so during a council of elders during the reign of Grand Duke Cleon Zhunastu (later known as Emperor Cleon the Great), the Free Maarists petitioned Cleon to recognize them as the official Church of Sylea⁶⁶, which, after certain oaths were made and credits transferred, he did, and over time, with more oaths and even more credits, they eventually became the Imperial Church of Sylea, and finally, the Imperial Church.

⁶⁵ The ancient Vilani religions, of course, had long been discredited by the realization that their traditional gods were actually ancient war machines [see MegaTraveller's *Vilani & Vargr* (1990), pg. 16] and that they themselves were not even indigenous to their own world.

⁶⁶ See T4's *101 Religions* (1998), pg. 22, or Mongoose's *Powers and Principalities* (2014), pg. 132.

Origins of the Restored Canon Church of Sylea:

Note that there is another well-known Church of Sylea called the Restored Canon Church of Sylea⁶⁷ but it isn't Maarist in origin. It actually originated as an offshoot of the Reformed Catholic Church of Sylea⁶⁸, which itself originated from a Catholic mission on Sylea dating back to the Second Imperium. As the Long Night took hold, the Catholic missions lost contact with one another, and the community fragmented. Without the larger interstellar community, even the congregations on individual worlds began to splinter.

There is a human psycho-evolutionary tendency, when times are good, for populations to shed their traditional values in order to experiment with new values and philosophies, and while times were not good on many worlds during the Long Night (particularly toward the beginning), they weren't so bad on Sylea.⁶⁹ So the Catholic Church underwent a schism, the liberal half calling itself the Reformed Catholic Church of Sylea (RCCS₁), and during the next few centuries, this splinter church grew while the original Catholic Church of Sylea, still doing its services in Latin, waned in popularity.

However, by the Long Night's third trimester, there was a convulsion of scandals within the RCCS₁ which culminated in a counter-reformation. It's worth noting that the word *Catholic* did not go back thousands of years on Sylea, as it did on Terra, and so the congregants, many of them Syleans and Vilani, were not as bound to it as the Solomani. In response to the scandals, a charismatic bishop gathered a group of like-minded priests and led a counter-reformation against the RCCS₁ and, in an attempt to bring along as many members as possible while at the same time avoiding the anti-Catholic sentiment that was sweeping over Sylea as a result of the scandals, he branded his splinter faith the Restored Canon Church of Sylea (RCCS₂).

Of course, the RCCS₁ did not go away, and they weren't too happy about their initials being

⁶⁷ See T4's *101 Religions* (1998), pg. 17, or Mongoose's *Powers and Principalities* (2014), pg. 127.

⁶⁸ See *Into the Deep* #5 (2015), pg. 8.

⁶⁹ See *GURPS Traveller: Humaniti* (2003), pg. 129.

stolen, but because of their scandals (or, at least, their apparent inability to cover them up), they continued to lose popularity and fragment, spawning a variety of religious sects, and so the RCCS₂ became the dominant Catholic Church on Sylea, eventually incorporating what little remained of the original Catholic Church of Sylea, even though the word *Catholic* was no longer in their name.

Chaplains in the Imperial Navy:

Needless to say, I also looked for any mention of chaplains anywhere else in the Traveller literature outside of *Element Cruisers*. Conrad thought the rank of sublieutenant was too low, and Timothy thought that *secular chaplain* was a contradiction in terms. “Surely they’re ‘counsellors’ at that point?” he wrote. “If they have no faith to support what they’re doing, I’m not clear on what the term chaplain means. I don’t have a problem with them being from ‘any’ faith (...) but it seems as if they need *some* faith to be worthy of the title.”⁷⁰

Personally, I didn’t care about either of these objections, my rationale being that things change. One criticism of Traveller I’ve heard is that it’s too *Americans in Space*. We ran into this issue when discussing race in the Third Imperium. After thousands of years, you’d expect that racial groups would have blended together. But Traveller’s artwork doesn’t depict this. And so it is with lots of things, from the way the military branches and ranks within them are laid out to Galanglic, the official language of the Third Imperium, being a descendant of English. So my feeling was that if Traveller wants to deviate from the modern norm in its treatment of military chaplains, I personally welcome it. After all, isn’t that what science fiction is all about? If everything stays exactly the same, except now there are air/rafts and spaceships, that’s not science fiction. That’s just technological progress.

It’s also worth noting that different military organizations treat chaplains quite differently. British Army and Royal Air Force chaplains bear ranks and wear rank insignia, but Royal Navy chaplains do not, wearing a cross and a special

version of the officers’ cap badge as their only insignia. French military chaplains have no rank or rank insignia. Argentine chaplains wore officers’ ranks until the 1970s in the Army and Air Force and until the 2000s in the Navy, when the practice changed due to allegations of some chaplains supposedly abusing their military position. Nevertheless, Argentine chaplains continued to wear combat uniforms (but no rank insignia) when accompanying the troops in field operations or exercises, and they are still considered a part of the officers corps. Danish chaplains are uniformed, and the Danish chaplaincy service has a system of internal grades separate from the usual ranking system, allowing each chaplain to be regarded as equal in rank to the person he is addressing. In Ukraine a chaplain is not an official military position, but rather a volunteer service. And, of course, the list goes on and on.⁷¹

So this idea that chaplains are held to a significantly lesser rank in the Imperial military than they are in modern militaries didn’t bother me at all. It suggested to me that perhaps religion is less important in the Third Imperium than it is today, which wouldn’t be too surprising, as it’d be a continuation of a trend that’s been evident for a long time.

Our word *chaplain* apparently derives from Old French *chapelain*, from medieval Latin *cappellanus*, originally denoting a custodian of the cloak of St. Martin, from *cappella*, originally ‘little cloak’. I looked up St. Martin, and there’s an interesting story that explains the legend behind the cloak.⁷² Like most religious artifacts, the cloak became associated with miracles, and so French kings would bring it into battle, sort of like a good luck charm, and these “chapelains” were entrusted with keeping it safe. So over the past 1600 years, we see that the role of chaplains has changed a lot, and the Third Imperium doesn’t even begin for another 2500 years, so it seemed reasonable to assume that the role of the modern military chaplain might get subsumed into counseling or morale or even military ethics as the power of religion continues to wane.

70 Email from Timothy Collinson dated 24-Apr-2022.

71 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_chaplain

72 <https://abrevefaith.com/2019/11/11/so-what-is-a-chaplain-then-inspiration-from-st-martin/>

However, since my player and co-GM were in disagreement with me, I thought it best to get other opinions, so I consulted the Traveller Mailing List⁷³, and then, still unsatisfied, I contacted Martin Dougherty, the author of *Element Cruisers*, seeking further clarification. He wrote:

I did mean secular, in the sense that chaplain is a navy job first and foremost. It's a traditional term for that job, but the word might have changed meaning somewhat in the past few millennia. Chaplains can be personally of any faith or none so long as they do the job. They do have to assist any crewmember with religious observances. My take on that is there are a great many religions and variants, and the best the navy can do is a nondenominational chapel with a nondenominational person available to fill in as needed. Their role would also include more general welfare and counselling.

I did not try to use any current system as a model, and in truth I did not set out to define chaplaincy in the Imperial armed forces. I merely indicated that the chaplain aboard this vessel is a sublieutenant.

Giving this a little more thought, I wonder if the role of chaplain might be one of several grouped together — education, welfare and chaplaincy would seem appropriate. Some officers might remain in one of these fields for their entire career, reaching whatever rank, whilst others might take a job as a chaplain aboard a ship and later serve as a welfare officer at a base before moving back to a more senior chaplaincy role.

In short, I envisage ship's chaplain as a job done by a suitable officer as part of the general welfare-of-personnel-and-families part of navy life.

Since nobody could find any other references to chaplains anywhere else in the Traveller literature, and since I had the book's author reiterating that he meant exactly what he wrote, and since my own intuition was telling me that, yeah, he's probably right, I decided to side with the source material, although with one small

change. I decided to raise Briggs to the rank of lieutenant.⁷⁴

As for chaplains more generally, what I decided was that large ships tend to have "religious affairs specialists," and though they are not technically chaplains unless they're ordained, most people call them chaplains, as it's less of a mouthful. These individuals, whether ordained or not, are often responsible not just for officiating at religious services, such as giving last rites and so forth, but they may also be responsible for counseling, aiding the captain in bolstering crew morale, and teaching approved courses in military ethics. As for insignia, chaplains are not exempt from displaying their rank except when dressed in religious garments or when on an away mission where advertising oneself as an officer might draw sniper fire.

Questions & Answers:

Q: So in a nutshell, what does the Imperial Church believe, and what are its rites and practices?

The Imperial Church's primary belief is the Doctrine of Divine Mystery, which states that the ultimate will and nature of the universe is unknown and might be so complex as to be, at least for humans, incomprehensible. In short, our brains might not be capable of enough levels of intellectual abstraction to usefully cogitate upon the divine mystery.

⁷⁴ My reason for this is that all the ranks in *Element Cruisers* seem low. I asked Dougherty why a ship of this size is being captained by a commander, and he responded, "Cruisers are often commanded by a commander in real-world precedence." I'm not a navy guy, but my understanding is that frigates and destroyers are largely commanded by commanders. Cruisers and above, particularly large cruisers, are commanded by captains. Bear in mind that the Element-class comes in three sizes, and the Amara-class (59,400 tons + six 2,600 ton pods), of which the Jaqueline is a member, is the largest, so maybe you could have a commander commanding a Ghalalk-class (39,600 tons + four pods) or, especially, a Khumakirri (19,800 tons + two pods). I just have a hard time conceiving of the Amara-class being small. In any case, this is a decision Timothy and I made at the very beginning of the campaign, so I'm not going to go back on it.

⁷³ <https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/19582150/>

Q: And that's it? Nothing else? Sounds like agnosticism.

Yes⁷⁵, the core belief of the Imperial Church is essentially a nod to agnosticism; however, because we don't know with certainty the will and nature of the divine, we cannot exclude the possibility that other religious doctrines might be true, so members of the church can and do associate around these secondary beliefs, such as the Doctrine of the Three Omnis, the Doctrine of the Sinful Nature of Naturally-Evolved Sentience, the Doctrine of the Inner Light, the Doctrine of Redemption through Voluntary Works, the Doctrine of Interdependence, the Doctrine of the Right and Duty to Truth, the Doctrine of the Karma That Ran Over My Dogma, and so forth. There are thousands of secondary doctrines, and different sects of the Church adhere to different ones.

Q: So, basically, that means that different sects of the church are incompatible?

Yes, every sect is incompatible with every other, if you consider *all* of their beliefs. However, all sects in the church are compatible in terms of their *primary* belief, the Doctrine of Divine Mystery, which is also known as the Prime Doctrine. Some sects organize themselves

75 I struggled with this quite a bit. On the one hand, it seems silly to have a church whose essential belief is "we don't know." However, I kept coming back to the description of the Church of Sylea in *101 Religions*: "Their dogma preaches the value of unity of belief and political organisation. They are adept at incorporating the beliefs of various faiths into their own." How is this possible? As the Long Night came to an end, they must have been encountering all sorts of religions. Anything they had to say about the will or nature of God would have surely contradicted one or more of them. Once that happened, unity would go flying out the window. So the only way to incorporate a bunch of religious beliefs without dividing people would be to put "we don't know" front and center. I admit, it's really bizarre, but I just don't see another way. Having said that, if you as a Traveller referee want to use the Imperial Church in your own campaign but you want to add a few more core beliefs just for the sake of... oh... I don't know... for the sake of believability, I suppose... feel perfectly free. All this is just me trying to find a way for all the disparate source material to gel together and make sense.

into "conferences" based on a set of shared doctrines, but when you consider them in detail, they are all mutually incompatible.

Q: So if a person accepts the Prime Doctrine, then they can believe anything else they want to believe, no matter how ludicrous, and still be considered a member of the Imperial Church?

Essentially, yes, but the Prime Doctrine, as its name indicates, must supersede all other doctrines. It is not only the church's core belief. It is also a statement of humility, and it serves a practical purpose as well, as it is the essential foundation by which all the various sects cooperate. There are, of course, also certain bureaucratic hoops through which applying congregations must jump. For example, the Imperial Church audits the financial records of its various sects (also called chapters, denominations, faiths, fellowships, sodalities, sophonhoods, traditions, etc.) in an effort to keep a lid on corruption, and it exacts tribute in return for speaking and voting rights at the Kamgursha (the general assembly). So there are practical safeguards in place. Nonetheless, there's a well-funded group of atheists that shows up every year, dressed like pirates⁷⁶ and spouting the most ridiculous, pseudo-religious gibberish, no doubt hoping to create a media circus, and every year, the elders accept their credits and nod politely, patiently waiting for their allotted time to expire. The media calls it *Pay to Pray*, or, in these rare instances, *Pay to Prank*, but overall, the church's tolerance is viewed as a feature, not a bug.

Q: How is the church governed?

Each sect that meets the minimum donation threshold may send a representative, usually elected by the sect's synod, to the Kamgursha. This body meets annually on Sylea to pass edicts, proclamations, and other instruments of church law. Any such measures may be vetoed by the Emperor.

Q: Can one be a member of both the RCCS and the Imperial Church?

76 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flying_Spaghetti_Monster

No, however, there are numerous RCCS offshoots that have become CoS chapters. Like the RCCS, these churches adhere to the Doctrine of the Immortal Soul, the Doctrine of the Divine Savior, and the Doctrine of Divine Love but they put them secondary to the Doctrine of Divine Mystery.

Q: How do they justify this?

By recognizing the inherent value of doubt. Without doubt, there can be no faith, for faith is to believe without knowing. Without doubt, there can be no divine mystery and therefore no awe. Without doubt, thought settles into a coma, becoming mere assumption and squelching all other possibilities. Without doubt, there is no shield against pride and arrogance. Without doubt, there can be no compromise. Without doubt, fanaticism takes hold, and Humanity becomes the victim and the perpetrator of the most unspeakable horrors. Doubt is a more faithful teacher than certainty. Indeed, it is an essential component of intelligence. It is a creation of the universe, existing in every sophont that ever lived. Doubt exists for a reason, and to deny it is to lie to ourselves and to open the door of our souls and our societies to evil.

Chapter 13

Loyalties in Question

I hated new beds, always had, even those with gravity reduction for a softer sleep, and so I tossed and turned for a long while, thinking about my encounter with the simulation of Olav. I'd frozen and then silenced him, calling him a mere tool before finally shutting him off. I could imagine Dad's thin-lipped stare of derision, were he to have witnessed it. How amusing his comments about subversive authors now seemed in light of the fact that Olav himself had been subversive.

Well, of course. It was Olav who plunged the Imperium into Civil War, and it was Arbellatra who saved his reputation, casting him a patriotic savior rather than a traitor.

"History is a cruel farce, dignified deceitfully by its victors," Aunt Arguaski once said when my father brought up the "subversive garbage" I'd been reading. She was actually his aunt and my great aunt. We saw her only rarely, as she lived on Porozlo, working for one of its fractious governments. I actually stayed with her once all by myself, but I was very young at the time. Mom and Dad had dropped me off on their way to Jae Tellona — why anyone would want to vacation on Jae Tellona was beyond me; apparently it had something to do with the auroras. In any case, my recollection of that whole extended visit was essentially non-existent. I remembered only the beginning and the end. At the beginning, I felt like any young child would feel upon seeing his parents vanish for the next twenty or so days. I'd been abandoned. That was all that mattered. And then, at the end, I didn't want to leave.

I must have been very young indeed, for on my next visit, some years later, she asked what I remembered of her, and I told her honestly. She nodded, as if expecting this, but I thought I'd sensed a slight trace of disappointment, for she'd apparently taken quite good care of me. Mom told

me later that Arguaski had apparently bribed her way into my affections. She'd privately confessed that she had no idea how to keep a young child entertained, so every day she'd take me to the toy store, ask me what I wanted, and then she'd buy it and take me to the park, which I can only imagine must have been quite a delight, as we had to wear compressors on Rhylanor whenever we went outside, but on Porozlo one could breathe the air unaided.

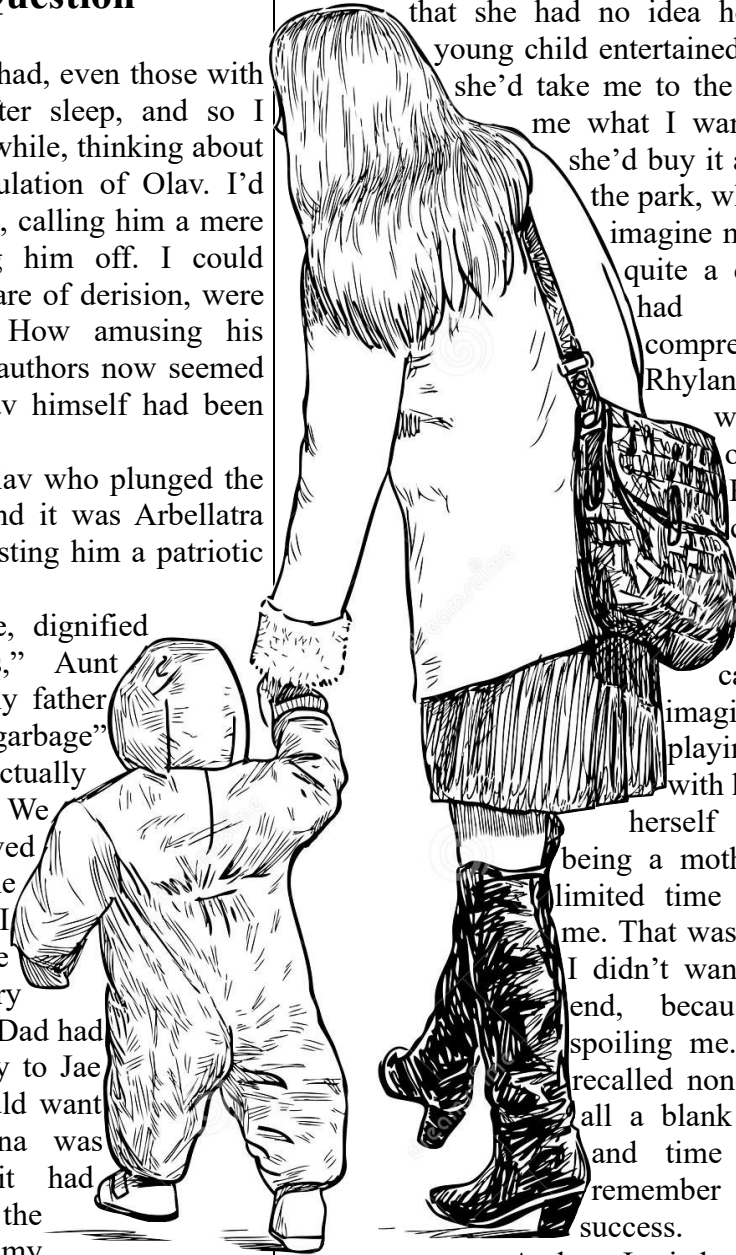
In any case, I could imagine myself playing happily with her looking on, herself playing at being a mother during the limited time she had with me. That was probably why I didn't want to go at the end, because she was spoiling me. But, sadly, I recalled none of it. It was all a blank spot, a place and time I'd tried to remember without success.

And as I tried again to pierce this veil, I couldn't help but sense someone nearby. I opened my eyes, and sure enough, there was someone there. He was standing by the door facing me, but his face was blurry, completely unrecognizable.

"Who are you?" I tried saying, but nothing came out. It was as if my voice had been stolen. My lips were moving, but there was no sound, and...

<Beep> <Beep> <Beep>

"23:45" glared at me in bright, insistent red as I opened my real eyes. Only fifteen minutes until my first meeting.



<Beep> <Beep> <Beep>

I fumbled around until the noise ceased, then forced myself up, stripping off my sleeping shorts and tossing them in the cleaning unit before pulling a shipsuit from the closet. The duolayer jumpsuit took a minute or two to wiggle into, what with the inner layer being rubberized for environmental protection — it even included thin gloves and a bubble hood zippered with the cuffs and collar — not a vacc suit, per se, but the next best thing.⁷⁷ It even had a thin tank of compressed oxygen situated along the small of the back, only about thirty minutes worth, but the idea was it would allow enough time to get into either an actual vacc suit or a rescue ball⁷⁸, both of which were situated in various lockers throughout the ship.

I pulled my second best pair of uniform boots from their storage cubby and made sure the whole ensemble was presentable. After a thought, I added the cap the bosun had given me when I'd first arrived. Then I pulled up directions to the breakfast meeting on my wristcom. Fortunately, it turned out to be in a small galley almost directly across from my quarters, and Nizlich, to my absolute unsurprise, was already there. My breakfast tray, also part of my command

77 When running a PBEM, there's a lot of background details that need to be fleshed out or, at least, alluded to, and both the player(s) and GM(s) are involved in this process. So what happened here is that while playing Plankwell going through his morning routine, Conrad wrote that he reached into the closet and pulled out a *regular duty uniform*: "The one piece jumpsuit fit me well, the material was the same that the Scouts made their duty vacc suits from. (...) Making sure the emergency helmet canister was snug on the back of my neck...." I didn't think that it was likely that regular duty uniforms would be made from vacc suit material, although the inclusion of the emergency helmet canister indicated that this was no regular uniform. What he was describing appeared to be an emergency vacc suit. Coincidentally, I'd just asked a question on the TML about what happens during a call to battlestations, and Richard Aiken brought up this idea of shipsuits (see <https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/19948736/>), which are basically what Conrad was describing, however, Richard went into a lot more detail, and although I don't think I'll be making the shipsuits in this campaign quite as grand as those Richard described, I liked his overall conception well enough that I decided to pilfer some of the details.

78 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Rescue_Ball

preferences, was waiting for me as well. It included a gently steaming pot of Rhylanorian d'stalli⁷⁹, an assortment of flatbreads, nuts and cheeses, and some slices of mycellian protein with a savory dipping sauce. I mentally gave the galley crew marks up for getting everything right and proper and nodded to Stefani as I took my seat.

"Good day, Commander. Nothing new about to blow up?"

She shot me a quizzical look, but any response she was in the midst of conjuring was cut off as Bim Marshall entered the room.

"Uh... good morning, sirs." Bim said. "I hope I'm not late."

"You're a few seconds early," Nizlich informed him.

"Ah, good." He took the seat opposite me, and as he began fussing with his notes, I called up the exploration pod's activity logs on my data slate and began reading. Meanwhile a steward appeared from the kitchen and poured us all cups of d'stalli. "Ah, thank you very much," Bim said, taking a careful sip before putting it down. "Still too hot," he confided. The steward smiled and fetched him an ice cube. "Okay, I'm ready," he finally announced.

"Proceed," I said, still skimming the activity logs.

From what was in there, it was apparent Captain Jenkins had been using the scouts for public relations pretty much everywhere he went. Because they were only quasi-military, they were less intimidating, so they could go do whatever work scouts liked to do, and it was considered safe duty, since they had an Imperial Cruiser flying overhead.

Pirates? Bah! Less-than-welcoming locals? Double-Bah! The only downside was that if the cruiser got in a fight, a real fight, then all bets were off. Not double-bah. Not even single-bah. And that was exactly what happened. The Exploration Pod got shot up, and several crewmembers had died.

Indeed, one unfortunate fellow apparently heard the unmistakable hiss of air seeping noisily out of his shipsuit's bubble hood. Normally, at

79 A morning drink analogous to tea but slightly gelatinous. Conrad wrote the library data entry following this chapter.

least during a call to battlestations, this wasn't a problem necessarily signifying one's imminent demise, as one could retreat to a rescue ball, but, unfortunately, the locker containing the rescue balls and vacc suit patches was blown into a thousand pieces, and what remained of it was incandescently hot and possibly radioactive, such was the aftermath of a particle beam cannon. Had there been air in the room, he'd have been flash fried and probably sucked out into space, which wasn't the best way to go, but at least it was relatively quick. However, Jenkins evacuated the air as a precaution, a smart one, except for the fact that it caused this particular crewman to suffocate as his blood slowly boiled, his air supply leaking into the vacuum of space.

I wondered who'd let him stay in his shipsuit rather than insisting everyone don vacc suits. And why hadn't vacc suit patches been distributed? And where were the damage control teams while this was happening? I made a note to review DC efficiency ratings. There was going to be a lot of hard looking at performance margins as well as priority ranking. It all reminded me why some people disliked shipsuits, preferring to wear something less restrictive, despite the potential risks. "If I'm going to die, let it be quick," was the most common refrain. My comeback was always that they owed it to their shipmates, their family, and the Imperium to do their utmost to survive and carry on. "The navy made an investment in you, and you can't pay it back if you're dead."

Bim, having long since finished the part of his presentation about how the scouts were an essential arm of the Imperial Mission, had then gone on about their history, about how they actually predated the Navy and were instrumental in ending the Long Night. Yes, that was over a thousand years ago, I thought, as I skimmed through the action report.

"Sir... sirs, for the last year and a half, I've been watching how useful the Scout Service is to the Navy in terms of reconnaissance, both military and socio-political, which is... uh... very important, particularly in showing the flag, which, let's face it, is a *big* reason we're out here," he said, his pitch rising awkwardly. "But also, sir... sirs, I've seen how important the Navy is to the Scout Service, allowing us to fulfill our

mission, which often involves diplomacy. By the way, sir, if I may say, I think the way you comported yourself last night was... well, I think it was well done, sir, and I look forward to the privilege of working with you. I think given time and resources, we'll be able to build a new team, and so I think it's a great opportunity, sir, and I think we'll be a definite benefit to you and the Jaqueline in a multitude of ways."

He seemed to be out of breath. Apparently, it was my turn. I looked up from the report.

"I am not pleased with the actions, and the lack thereof, that resulted in the loss of crew aboard this ship, but I am not going to comment further at this time." I paused to take in Nizlich as well as Marshall. "My intention is to give this crew a clean slate with me. Going forward, I will be judging contributions on merit. I will be giving everyone the benefit of the doubt. But the fact remains that this ship was ambushed, taken off guard, and we can't let it happen again. We will be reviewing damage control procedures, and we will be ensuring that the crew are all using proper equipment at all times. I will be pushing hard, because in all likelihood, we will see combat again, and I want this crew prepared."

"Aye aye, sir," Nizlich said.

"Aye aye, sir," Bim Marshall echoed after a slight pause.

"You have made several cogent points on the use of the scout service in conjunction with the navy's mission," I continued. "You may have leaned a little heavily on the history, but I agree it is important to know where we are coming from."

"Thank you, sir."

"I have not settled on a decision regarding the exploration pod. I admit I was prepared to write it off and replace it with something more... robust. But it is very important that we consider all aspects of the mission, and Captain Jenkins certainly made use of your department. Mr. Marshall, I would like an evaluation of the available personnel from the Scout Base. I am looking for Zhodani specialists as well as anyone with local familiarity along the spinward border. Assume a patrol through nonaligned space heading towards Frenzie. I am fairly sure there is a replacement module. If not, we will dismount the module for repairs and find you some quarters on the ship itself. It may require some creative

billeting, but I am sure you will all be up to the challenge. I would like contingency plans for staffing a replacement module as well as fifty and thirty percent staffing levels with a different module or within the ship's company. I would like to review it by Fourth Watch, if you please. You are excused from the General Operations meeting later. Did you have anything else for me?"

"No, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Dismissed."

As he gathered up his notes and left, Nizlich looked at her wristcom and then at me.

"Next up is Lt. Abbonette, Intel Liaison."

Lt. Abbonette, the voluptuous lady with the intricate hair.

"Whenever she's ready."

Nizlich pressed a button on her wristcom. Whatever message she sent was apparently prepared beforehand.

I regarded my First Officer more closely. Efficient, attractive, very dry humor so far. I called up her service jacket on my dataslate and skimmed the highlights as I sipped at my d'stalli, which had cooled to the right temperature. Frankly, I thought adding ice was barbaric, but I always kept that opinion to myself. Diluting the flavor and texture was doing an injustice to the drink, and this was very passable d'stalli.

According to her rap sheet, Stefani Nizlich was from Caladbolg, an agricultural planet just rimward of the Sword Worlds. She enlisted in the Imperial Navy, flight branch, and was admitted to OCS after only a single term, graduating with honors and being promoted directly to sublieutenant. From there, she earned an MCG at Efate followed by a Starburst. This had to be during the Zhodani siege, which lasted for the better part of three years. Needless to say, she rose through the ranks like a rocket, much like myself. In all likelihood, she'd someday make Admiral. Maybe before me. Scrolling through the entries I was a little surprised by the lack of personal details. She seemed to move from posting to posting, never going back home.

The door slid open, and Lt. Abbonette walked in, her uniform, definitely tailored, accenting her notable physical assets.

"Good morning," she said, glancing down at the breakfast trays. "Ooh... is that d'stalli? May I have some?"

The steward immediately stepped forward and poured her a cup. He even had an ice cube at the ready, but she put her hand over the cup, blocking him. "Don't you dare, Arad. I can wait. After all, we're going to be here awhile," she added, sitting down.

"Of course, Miss Josefeen," he said, stepping back and bowing in perfect court etiquette.

"Captain, it's time you were briefed on what Intel has been up to," she said, pulling a small, black tube out of her pocket and placing it like a shot glass between us. Then she pressed her thumb to the top, causing it to project a flat tactile interface to the table's surface.⁸⁰ "Arad, if you don't mind, this is slightly above your pay grade."

"Captain, if you need me for anything, please do not hesitate to call." And with that the steward flicked me his comlink and left.

"You too, Stef." Abbonette smiled.

Without a word, Nizlich got up and left, leaving the two of us alone.

"So... before we begin, I'm going to need you to sign our little non-disclosure." She typed out a command, and the device projected a second display right on top of my hands. I pulled them out of the way to see an *oath of secrecy* and *acceptance of enhanced clearance* projected on the table in front of me, each complete with a signature line. They appeared to be written out in the sort of legalese that's just plainly-worded enough to be intelligible.

"The oath is mandatory, but the enhanced clearance is optional. If you sign it, you'll place yourself under the extended rules for identification of disloyalty and treason under the ICMJ⁸¹. All that means is that we'll be keeping an eye on you, regardless of where you go, which we might do anyway, although if you don't sign it, it's less likely we'll bother, because I will, in that circumstance, only be telling you what you absolutely need to know, the bare minimum, as opposed to the bigger picture. Do you have any questions?"

⁸⁰ Basically the 57th-century equivalent of a keyboard and mouse.

⁸¹ https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Imperial_Code_of_Military_Justice

I looked over the forms bemusedly.

“...forfeits presumption of a natural right to privacy in all legal jurisdictions both inside and outside of the Imperium.” *Blah-blah-blah. Oh, wait.* “...in any sort of disciplinary hearing, including court martial, judicial jurisdiction may be requested by Naval Intelligence or its affiliates, partners, and associates, and...” *blah-blah-blah,* “...undersigned party hereby irrevocably waives right to counter-request or to make any claim involving, pertaining, or relating to classified knowledge.”

So, basically, they'd have me by my short and curlies. Not that they didn't already.

This was the downside of the Navy. It was absolutely enormous, almost beyond comprehension, and so there was fierce internal competition over power and influence. Naval Intelligence was especially infamous for pushing their weight around, quietly threatening people to get their way, although few made formal complaints, as to do so was generally career-ending. I'd seen several officers fall afoul of NI. They'd generally get hit with a hearing of confidence, not quite a court martial but certainly detrimental to their career. Then they'd get transferred to some remote depot or other support position. The Navy, in its infinite wisdom, rarely discarded senior officers, unless they were disabled, and fortunately, NI lacked the authority for summary executions, although I'd heard whispers of overly-loquacious officers coming to untimely ends in the sort of freak accidents that make one go...⁸²

“Hmm... I appreciate your explanation, Lieutenant. I also know that *you know* that I have been vetted six ways from Senday⁸³ even to be shown these documents with the assumption that I will accept the additional scrutiny.”

I watched for her reaction, but her face was expressionless, and so, for a moment, we just sat there in silence. I wanted her to understand that I knew how the game was played. Actually, what I wanted was for her to believe I had my own sources of authority backing me up should things go sideways. But whether or not that was true

was anyone's guess. I was a newly minted captain, and if I happened to disappear, it was doubtful I'd be missed.

I finally decided to sign — was there really any other choice? — and for a brief moment she seemed to relax, offering me a stylus.

“Please proceed with your briefing,” I said, accepting it and signing both documents.

“Thank you, Captain,” she said. “You've just made my job a lot easier, and for that, I am grateful.”

“I'm glad one of us is having an easier day,” I replied with a thin smile as I returned the stylus. For all I knew it had a microbug on it, or maybe a bomb.

Easy, Gus. You haven't had enough d'stalli for that much paranoia.

“Has Commander Nizlich told you anything about the Esalin mission?”

I shook my head.

Only two parsecs away, Esalin was sandwiched right between the Imperial and Zhodani borders. Though I'd never been there, all the holovids I'd ever seen portrayed it as a hotbed of intrigue, so the news that Naval Intelligence had something going on didn't surprise me.

“What's going on at Esalin?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing. The mission is just a cover story. Actually, there are two cover stories, but that's not important.” She took a deep breath. “We're in the midst of implementing a fairly large program, one that has been put into practice on a number of worlds considered vital to Imperial interests, Jewell among them. Obviously, I can't go into it here, in an unsecured room. You'll need to come by the Intel Pod. I can brief you there. In the meantime, I'll call Commander Nizlich back in to tell you all about the *Esalin mission*, which is partly true, partly false, but mainly old news, although it'll be new to you. Then you can drop by *my house* whenever it suits you, and I'll fill you in on the rest.”

“I understand.” I didn't, but I figured I would eventually.

Lt. Abbonette smiled momentarily. “By the way, you can call me Josefeen, if you like. I figure we might as well get comfortable with each other since we will, in a likelihood, be having an intense relationship.”

⁸² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XF2ayWcJfxo&t=80s>

⁸³ Senday is Sunday. See https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Imperial_Calendar

Something about her words left me with a fluttery feeling in the belly, and I'm sure I must have arched at least one eyebrow. The forward nature of junior officers out here would take some getting used to.

"I'm sure it won't be too long before I make that house call, Josefeen."

Sometimes the only way to get ahead was to play the game, and I was clearly a piece on many boards.

Josefeen went to the door, causing it to slide open, and then she poked her head outside.

"Oh, there you are, Commander. I half-expected to find you out here with a glass pressed to the door."

"I didn't think to bring vun. Did he sign, or is vun not allowed to ask?"

"We don't ask," Josefeen said, stepping to the side as Nizlich re-entered. "But, since you did... of course, he signed. Everyone does. Wanting to be on the inside, as opposed to the outside, is among the most basic tenets of human nature. You may brief the Captain."

"You want *me* to brief him?"

"Please," Josefeen said, motioning to the nearest seat. That she'd farm out the briefing made a certain amount of sense. After all, she apparently had to juggle two cover stories, not to mention the truth. How she managed to keep it all straight while still finding time to flirt was impressive.

"Sir, as I'm sure you're aware, Esalin has been a flashpoint of conflict between us and the Zhodani Consulate ever since the Fourth Frontier War."

Indeed, I was eleven when the Zhodani invaded. It had, coincidentally, started near Quar. The Zhos were angry about our naval base, which the admiralty insisted on reopening in 1082 — interesting how history seemed to repeat itself. Needless to say, one thing led to another, and soon we were at war, but neither side was prepared. It was a war nobody wanted, and so it quickly fizzled out, and a peace treaty was soon negotiated. Quar was temporarily abandoned, made neutral until it could be won back a quarter century later, and Esalin became a social experiment, an attempt to see who had the superior political system, us or them.

Esalin, Nizlich explained, having been in close proximity to the Consulate since its earliest days, had a fair number of Zhos who called it home. Many of these border worlds were outcast magnets, and Esalin was no exception. With so many unique personalities rubbing up against each other, politics was seldom peaceful, and so the colony had fractured into around fifteen or twenty nations, the two most important being Ecaimar and Irasus.⁸⁴

The Ecaimarans were friendly with the Imperium, but the Irasians became Zhodani puppets, and it wasn't long before they were incessantly probing Ecaimar for weaknesses. Unfortunately, in terms of gathering intelligence, Irasus had the upper hand, thanks largely due to the use of psionics among their security services. To keep up, Ecaimar relied on signal intelligence (also known as SigInt). Operatives working in telecommunications would scoop up vast quantities of data. In the past, it would be processed on Esalin, however, the Irasians kept infiltrating Ecaimar's data analysis centers, so it was decided to move the data analysis to Jewell, which IBIS thought would be more secure.

"IBIS is involved?" IBIS was the Imperial Bureau of Internal Security, basically the interstellar secret police.⁸⁵

"IBIS is always involved," Nizlich said, "even when they're not involved."

"That's my line," Josefeen protested. "IBIS is always involved, *especially* when they're not officially involved."

"Except this time they are," Nizlich clarified, "which means they're *especially, especially* involved."

And all this was just for a cover story? Then what was the real story?

"So how does this involve us?" I asked.

"Ve're waiting for a data shipment to arrive. Vunce ve get it, ve vill turn it over to IBIS."

Josefeen nodded. "Vell... well done, Commander." She blinked for a moment and smiled. "Well, it's been fun, but I've got to run, so if there are no further questions..."

⁸⁴ Yes, these are anagrams of America and Russia, and no, I didn't come up with the names. See [https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Esalin_\(world\)](https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Esalin_(world))

⁸⁵ See Dragon #35, page 7.

“Nothing further, Lieutenant. I will see about making a house call in the near future.”

“Looking forward to it,” Josefeen said with a smile. Then she was gone, the door sliding shut behind her.

“A house call?” Nizlich asked.

I glanced over to Stefani.

“Josefeen is of the opinion that there are multiple ways to the captain’s heart. I am simply playing her game to see where it leads. She is working so hard at it, it would be rude to disappoint her so early.”

Stefani’s mouth fell open as she regarded me with an incredulous stare, either that or she was dazed. Whichever the case, I figured it best to change the subject before she could muster a response.

“Esalin is off of the route I was intending to follow. We still need to make the first jump a calibration run. We need to come up with some contingency plans in case the jump drive is more out of tune than the engineers think it is. I think we make our first jump to Emerald, then to Esalin for whatever plans NI has brewing, and then to Mongo in case we need to fine tune anything. We can divert directly to Mongo from Emerald if the drive seems questionable. All of that, of course, is up for change, but a return trip to Jewell after that to shake out the crew. Then on to Quar, and then Arden to check up on the Arden Federation. We will need to budget to pay for our fuel there, make sure Arden understands the Imperium respects their neutrality. Then maybe Tremous Dex for a wilderness refueling drill? Denotam, then Frenzie. Thoughts?”

She leaned back, crossing her arms. “It’s fine to have a plan, sir, but the thing about detached patrols with a ship of this size is that new situations are constantly popping up. Vunce you declare the Jaqueline operational, letters of request will start arriving from planetary governments and their Imperial representatives⁸⁶, particularly from those star systems that feel short-changed due the navy’s *elastic defense* posture.⁸⁷ Also, if you make your plans known

publicly, the bad guys will simply avoid you. Therefore, it is best to be unpredictable, just as in vor.”

“Of course.” I nodded. “I fully expect all the glory hounds to come out to try and get a piece of us. But circulating a plan ahead of time might help us identify leaks on our end of the intelligence chain. Might also contribute to an image of me as someone in need of approval; throw off their estimations. I was interested at the number of merchants and others at the reception who were eager to meet the new captain. I thought it had to do with the name, but Karneticky’s relationship with the Countess has made me wonder if there is something more going on.”

I paused. Time to fire the salvo.

“I have already let you into the secure knowledge of the captain’s stash,” I said, “and so far, NI seems willing to let you get me up to speed on things, so I am making the first of my calculated risk decisions. Stefani, this ship has been ambushed once already. The Zhodani at the captain’s reception were not there by accident nor for reasons of protocol, and my sudden transfer out here... well, it all smells a little off. I have to trust someone, and you win. You already told me that you were most honored about the trust I placed in you, and this is where I need a direct answer from you. Are you willing to back me up? I will keep you in all my confidence, all my planning, and I will back you up as well... on my honor as an officer and a Plankwell.”

“Of course, sir,” she answered firmly. “You’re my captain, and I will back you come Hell or hard vacuum.”

I sat back, satisfied, and considered my next move.

⁸⁶ Landed Imperial nobles.

⁸⁷ Until the 4FW, the Imperial Navy had a “hard crust” deployment doctrine wherein naval assets were deployed along the borders, however during the late 1080s and early 1090s, an “elastic defense” doctrine

was adopted, wherein assets were deployed behind the border around selected “islands of resistance.” The upshot was that the borders became more attractive to pirates as well as hit-and-run operations conducted under the cover of piracy, to which the Navy responded by increasing the number of detached patrols.

Library Data: D'stalli

D'stalli is a morning beverage originating on Gagzoe (Vland 1211). Properly prepared, it is slightly gelatinous, having the consistency of hot chocolate, sort of like an okra tea.

The stalli bush is a small flowering plant that grows in a number of climates, and indeed, has found its way to many worlds. It bears a fruit that produces the drink d'stalli, whose lineage goes back to the First Imperium, when the world was first colonized. After being given to Imperial traders when Gagzoe was rediscovered after the Long Night, d'stalli fruit became a popular commodity.

The stalli bush bears small, greenish-brown, cylindrical pods, with a fleshy outer skin covering 6-8 small, hard seeds within. When ripe, they fall to the ground to regrow the bush in the next season. Traditional cultivators will harvest about half of the fruits grown, leaving the rest for the next planting.

Preparing the stalli pod for consumption involves soaking to remove certain acids, splitting open the pod and removing about half of the seeds, drying the husk and then grinding it and the seeds into a fine powder that is added to any variety of liquid mediums. The ratio of seeds to pod material is what gives the drink its flavor and consistency. The active ingredient is a mild methamphetamine, which gives rise to its popularity as an alertness aid but also to the mythology of paranoia around its overconsumption.

Breakfast d'stalli is made with either milk or other liquids diluted with water. A popular preparation for midday is adding d'stalli powder to a soup or consommé. Proper d'stalli is served in a pot and poured hot into ceramic cups, allowing it to come to a drinkable temperature through slow cooling (metal accelerates the cooldown disagreeably). The consistency thickens as the drink cools. Accelerating the cooling, by adding ice, for example, adds a bitter, astringent note to the drink, although some prefer it this way, particularly among those who like their scuf⁸⁸ unusually strong or their coffee⁸⁹ black and unsweetened.



⁸⁸ <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Scuf>

⁸⁹ <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Coffee>

Chapter 14

Credits & Call Signs

Nizlich stacked the day up with meetings, one after another after another. Following Bim Marshall and Josefeen Abbonette, we had individual sit-downs with the division and pod commanders to go over their operating budgets. Spoiler alert! Everyone wanted more money. More credits⁹⁰. More staff. More of this, more of that. More, more, and more was pretty much the order of the day. I rather felt like a mama bird with a nest of hungry mouths to feed.

And so as I listened to their reports, I bent my mind toward discerning who was arguing for the sake of keeping their budgets intact, versus those who actually needed more support. In virtually every department I'd ever worked, the modus operandi was to spend every credit in the budget, because if you didn't, somebody up the chain would cut your budget, whether it was a captain, commodore, admiral, or simply some enterprising bwap⁹¹ working in accounting. We once bought the stupidest contraption, which never worked right, but rather than return it, we stowed in some locker where it's probably still sitting today. Vanista once asked me about why, below a certain value, which was more-or-less astronomical, the military would never return anything for a refund.

"Because nobody wants to fill out the paperwork," I explained. Getting stuff required paperwork. Getting rid of stuff required paperwork. But returning stuff for a refund? That was at least double the paperwork. Maybe triple. And it risked the possibility of shrinking one's budget. Definitely not worth doing.

"What about saving for a rainy day?"

"It doesn't rain in space."

"After this sensor upgrade, sir, the Pheidippides will be capable of moving into a position alongside our fighters, yet she'd be capable of seeing nearly as well as the Jaqueline herself. I realize it's an expensive idea, Sir, but if we had this at Quar, the outcome would likely have been very different. In fact, I gave this same presentation to Captain Jenkins when he first

arrived, and I'll give it to the next Captain, if you say no."

I had to hand it to whoever was talking to me — Lt. Ganimakkur Eneri Irkirin Managudeli Damgaramar, according to the presentation materials — he knew how to play to his audience. I'd had a role in upgrading the sensor packages on a variety of older fighters, and so I understood the value of sharp eyes. But was a major sensor upgrade on one of our four Naval Couriers really necessary? Certainly not. And it was so expensive I'd have to say no to essentially everyone else. Though, I definitely had to hand it to him; even when he needed for nothing, he still found a way to ask for more than anyone else. It was certainly more entertaining than Lt. Cmdr. Furtle's, "All our requests are in the report. They're listed in the order of their priority. But if you have extra money you want to give us, I'll find useful ways to spend it."

Except for her, the only one who said less was Chief Engineer Martinsen. Of course, we talked about the jump drive. He said if it turned out there was a big problem, we could swap it out for an S4-75KA2 or the local equivalent.

"What do we have now?"

"An LSP S4-75K."

I didn't know what any of this meant, only that the A2 was somehow significant. On the way out, he swiped me a link to a thousand-plus-page report, most of which had been generated by some computer, basically showing the work done, no matter how trivial, for every crewmember and station in his division, all of which was meticulously cross-referenced, in case I wanted to know who tightened the screw on the doohickey's doodad at such-and-such a time.

Then there was Force Commander Sandy Fa'Linto who wanted to bring his armory up to spec.

"That's the responsibility of the marines," Nizlich interjected.

"The marines expect the navy to foot half the bill, and I have to get the navy's half pre-approved before I can push the other half up my chain of command."

"Vait? This is only *half* the price?"

"Yes, ma'am. Think of it like you're getting fifty percent off."

90 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Imperial_Currency

91 <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Bwap>

“I’ll need to hear everyone’s requests before I can make a decision on this,” I told them both. “In any case, we’re probably going into Vargr territory, but keep that under your hat.”

“Of course, sir.”

Nizlich eyed me as he left. I’d told Martinsen we’d be heading in the opposite direction. It was my own little intelligence op to see if we had any leaks in need of plugging, loose lips jinxing ships and all. Josefeen would probably laugh at my transparent efforts and sit me down with a threat report that would convince me to do whatever NI was in the mood for. Meanwhile, Wang wanted eleven brand new fighters, Willin wanted more doctors, Shepherd wanted a new fuel tank, and Marshall essentially wanted a whole new exploration pod, if that’s what it’d take. I still didn’t know. Surely, it must have been assessed by now.

Lunch was a plate of handmeals, squares of bread carbohydrates filled with a spicy, protein slurry and chunks of some kind of crunchy, watery vegetable. Mid-shift meals I’d left open to the discretion of the steward, instructing him to bring me whatever the crew was eating.

“Carnivorous, vegetarian, gluten, food allergies...?”

“Whatever the crew’s eating,” I reiterated.

“Very good, sir.”

A squeeze bottle of some flavored rehydration liquid washed it down. It tasted like Hava Kola⁹², but the bottle showed no branding. Personally, I preferred Zurta, which they probably had, or at least a close approximation, but I didn’t say anything. To be particular now seemed petty.

During lunch, Nizlich gave a report on naval assets patrolling the Jewell Subsector. There was, of course, the 212th fleet, formerly known as Santanocheev’s Tripwire, which consisted of three battle squadrons mostly composed of monitors and system defense boats as well as a contingent of cruisers. As far as non-jump-capable fleets went, it was the largest I’d ever seen. Then there was Task Force 10 at Mongo, consisting of a Kinunir-class cruiser, three Broadsword-class frigates, and six Gazelle-class destroyers. There was also a pair of Gionetti-class cruisers assisting in the interdiction of Grant, and

then there was the Bard Refuge, a Lightning-class cruiser, last known to be at Utoland. Like the Jaqueline, it was on detached patrol, so it had no set route. Like myself, her captain was free to rove non-aligned space, looking for trouble. In addition, there were a number of naval freighters, troop transports, repair ships, dromedaries, and so forth.

It was only toward the end of her presentation, as I was getting bored, that I remembered I’d requested this briefing. I’d been pondering which direction to go, either trailing along the coreward border or rimward, along the spinward frontier. Indeed, spinward was the most logical direction for Imperial expansion, but the problem was that the Zhodani knew it too. The whole nest of sectors, from Foreven and the Far Frontiers down through the Vanguard Reaches, the Beyond, and even the Trojan Reach were all, essentially, contested territory full of single- and multi-system polities claiming neutrality while simultaneously playing both sides.

Munching on my third handmeal while looking through the various movement orders, I realized that we needed to return to the scene of the ambush. Unlike the carrier wings I’d commanded before, a cruiser was an instrument of policy in addition to being a weapon. Detached patrols were meant to be seen by allies and feared by enemies, and we wouldn’t be appropriately respected until we earned that respect back.

Nizlich had stopped talking, possibly mid-sentence, and I looked up.

“Sir?”

I smiled. “I’m sorry. I know I asked for this briefing, and I do need it, but I think we can talk ops into doing a saturation study to identify the points with least naval coverage based on the movement orders we have at hand.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“However,” I continued, wiping my hands on my napkin, “I am coming to the realization that we need to return to Quar, both for reasons of policy and morale. I know your thoughts on being unpredictable, but I think it might be a necessity.”

“No, sir, I agree completely. Unfortunately, it is predictable, but to not return would be unforgivable, in my opinion, sir. We owe it to the crew.”

92 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Libations_of_Charted_Space

I nodded, satisfied we'd both come to the same conclusion.

"We need to be done with the reports for now and go look at the ship," I told her. "What is slated first for direct inspection?"

"Direct inspection? Hmm.... Vell, you haven't seen the pods yet."

True. There hadn't been time yesterday, what with the reception.

"Let's go."

As before, she led, but this time I instructed her to take a scenic route.

"A scenic route, sir?"

"It's important for a captain to be seen," I told her.

Nizlich nodded.

The feeling aboard a ship was quite different when it was docked for extended repairs. Depending on what needed doing, certain sections would be struggling to meet their readiness deadlines while others would have extra time for shore leave or extended light duty. I had always used unannounced walkabouts to get the crew used to me appearing out of nowhere, looking at something, asking a few questions and moving on. I sometimes got to see someone heading out in full dress uniform, as happened yesterday. It reminded me of what I loved about the Navy, so many different sophonts, each with their own lives, their own families, each from different worlds, different societies, but all of them working together in our common defense.

As to be expected, crewmembers stepped to the side, making way for us, and we nodded to everyone who stopped, Nizlich occasionally introducing someone, as if I'd be able to remember the next dozen names. A pair of ensigns, their uniforms neatly pressed, stopped and gave us both a full salute, and we returned their salute in passing. Generally, there was no requirement to salute except where official recognition was required, but junior officers, still in the Academy mindset where saluting was always required, often took a while to break the habit.

"Any particular pod you would like to see first, sir?"

"Well, as you can probably guess, I have a soft spot for my old branch. You too, I would imagine."

She nodded. We'd both come up through Flight Branch, something I'd noted while skimming her service record.

"Vhat vas your call sign?"

"Combo." I sighed at her quizzical look. "My check pilot called me Combo one day for always rotating my fighter on the long axis when rejoining a formation. He said 'that's a good way to stand out to the enemy, Combo,' and it stuck. It was just the way that we shook out instrumentation on Rhylanor, but...." I shrugged. I could have gotten something much worse. "How about you?"

"Uh... Sauerkraut⁹³," she replied.

"Wait. You are *the* Sauerkraut? You did the torpedo strafing run on the Zho cruiser trying to breach the Mongo perimeter? The Sauerkraut who got the G4 recalled? You saved a lot of pilots with that demo of the compensator failing."⁹⁴

I had never looked up the name of the pilot. We tended not to, in the Flight branch, preferring to attach exploits to callsigns. It may have had something to do with pilots often having shorter-than-average careers with often dramatic ends. Nizlich was Sauerkraut. *Wow!*

93 Timothy thought this too racially insensitive, and he's obviously right about that, but I was thinking she might have been the victim of cultural discrimination when she first entered the Navy, and that this call sign was foisted on her in response to her Sword Worlder accent, not to mention that she can be a bit sour, especially toward men who think they can take advantage of young, pretty recruits. This actually happened to the wife of a friend of mine, and he had to get involved (being military himself, he knew what to do). However, I still have reservations. First, the Imperial Navy would be so culturally diverse that they'd be unlikely to tolerate this sort of thing, even against someone who sounds like they're from an enemy nation. Also, Sword Worlders don't let their women enter the military, so the mere fact that she enlisted means she's not really from that culture, at least not as individual, as she's not settling into her expected gender role. Suffice it to say, I considered Timothy's objection quite seriously, but ultimately I let the dice decide. In any case, I like how Conrad turned this into a badge of honor.

94 Conrad came up with all this stuff about Nizlich's legendary strafing run and the G4 recall. He likes to actively contribute background material wherever he can, which, to my way of thinking, marks him as a superior player.

“The G4 was a piece of garbage,” she finally said, “and as for Mongo, I’d just lost a friend and had basically stopped thinking at that point.”

I nodded, understanding all too well, and so we walked in silence as I digested this latest revelation.

“What’s your read on our squadrons?” I asked, deciding to change the subject. “I know they took a hit in the ambush, but I think replacing the fighters is definitely something we are going to have to do. I have clearance from Fleet to get the Jackie back in action. Is this group going to make that investment worth it?”

“My read?” She squinted, her forehead wrinkling. “They need reassurance; they need encouragement. Right now morale and efficiency are about what you’d expect under the circumstances. Quar was a setback for the entire crew, which is why returning is so important. It’s time for us to bounce back even stronger. They’ll come through, sir — with the right leadership.”

Chapter 15

Fighter Pod Inspection

We reached the spinal transport tube where an empty capsule was already waiting, and soon we were zipping aftward, the programmable signs announcing the pods as we approached: first Missile and Forward Comms, then Fighter and Marine Ops. The doors opened, and we exited to port, the long corridor terminating at an iris valve, although similarly wide corridors intersected it on either side, first left and then right. The carpeting wasn’t new, but neither was it heavily worn, and the overhead lighting, though missing a strip, seemed sufficiently bright. Interestingly, various screens covered the walls: standing orders and duty rosters, although one showed a view of Jewell, as if to remind the crew where we were.

We stopped at an iris valve on our right and entered the flight bridge. A sublieutenant immediately snapped to attention. Up until this moment, I’d been worried Nizlich might have signaled in advance of our arrival, although since nobody had met us at the pod’s entrance, and now seeing what looked like genuine surprise on the sublieutenant’s face, I knew my XO had correctly anticipated my intention. The whole point of this walk, after all, was to have unrehearsed interactions with the crew.

“Lydia in?” Nizlich asked.

“No, sir, she’s planetside, inspecting the maintenance on two squadrons.”

“Who’s in charge?”

“Lieutenant Gubar. She’s teaching a class.”

Gubar? No, there had to be lots of Gubars.

“In the ready room?” Nizlich pointed at the door.

“Yes, sir.”

“This should be interesting,” she said, strolling out the door and down the corridor directly opposite.

“At ease,” I told the sublieutenant as I followed along. I liked Nizlich’s style, being the leading element, masking the real surprise. We already seemed to be working together well.

The second door on the left led into a small theater, and standing there in front of about ten crewmembers was none other than Shish Gubar.⁹⁵

“Shish Gubar? *Lieutenant* Shish Gubar? Spooky? They promoted you? What is the Navy coming to?”

It was worth the wide-eyed look of shock I got from the front of the room.

“Captain on the deck!” she yelled out, knowing it would only annoy me.

“At ease; as you were,” I hastily responded, shaking my head at Shish, who was still maintaining her salute.

“Just showing proper respect due a new commanding officer, sir!”

“You just never let up, do you Shish?”

“I don’t know how to respond to that question, sir! Perhaps if the captain asked a better question, I could deliver a more proper response, sir!”

The new recruits went all slack-jawed and saucer-eyed, and I had a stifled grin.

“Are you sure that is the trajectory you want to take here, Lieutenant?”

“Sir, I have every faith in the captain’s attention to detail and ability to conduct himself in good order, sir!”

This was what happened when you made friends with smart asses. But, to be fair, her confidence was founded on the cornerstone of competence.

Ensign Gubar, a recent transfer to INS Valkyrie on the eve of the war, was attached as a new SensorOp to my fighter squadron. I decided to take her on her checkout ride, and so we did a long range sweep in one of the two-seaters. I was paying attention to the dispersal of the rest of the squadron when she called my attention to something she had put on the Threat Board.

“What’s that?”

“Unknown intermittent contact, sir, just at the edge of detection range.”

95 Timothy quipped, “I’m sure I had some of that at a local Turkish restaurant,” which made me laugh. It’s considered a staple of Traveller that characters will often have oddball names, what with the default setting being thousands of years in the future and spread out over thousands of star systems. In this case, I pulled inspiration from the *Vilani Grammar and Glossary* (v4.4), which defines *shish* as pilot and *gubar* as friendly.

I called up the sensor panel and reviewed the log.

“Negative, Ensign. Class that as reflection error.”

“I disagree, sir.”

That was enough to give me pause. I’d been working with fighter sensor systems for a long while, and this NUB⁹⁶ was contradicting me on her first day. Granted, she had graduated from the academy with high marks, just missing the cutoff for honors, but this was the real world, not school, and although she was confident enough to call this out, I wondered if she was confident enough to play it through.

“Okay, Ensign. Recommendations for investigation?”

She took a few moments to think.

“Recommend a two-element split, like we were forming up for a shoot-ex, element one to physical intercept, element two to light up target with active EM. Use active EM as a mark for element one to go weapons hot and interrogate the target.”

She was all in on this one. I told her to issue the orders, and we led element one. Some time later, we had a hard read on a Zhodani scout as it began preparing for jump. It managed to avoid us, but we got some good reads to refine our long range scanning, and Ensign Gubar was dubbed Spooky⁹⁷ in the Officer’s Mess.

96 A newbie, also short for non-useful body.

97 I was actually contemplating something like *Swish* or *Goober*, but Conrad came up with *Spooky*, so I decided to go with it. When I first introduced her, I wrote only that Plankwell had known her on the Valkyrie, one of the ships on the Personnel Dossier/Service History he came up with when first joining the campaign (see <https://groups.google.com/g/plankwell-pbem-s1/c/s7VR82Q4--Y/m/sdh1VY5jAQAJ>). “I’d be curious to know more about Plankwell’s relationship with Gubar,” I added, “who I’d imagine was an ensign or, at most, a sublieutenant back then. So feel free to elaborate. It can be whatever you want it to have been, preferably something entertaining, but it’s your call.” Normally, the GM is the one who details an NPC’s backstory, even where it intersects with that of a PC, but allowing the player to come up with the relationship is one tactic that GMs will sometimes use to entice buy-in (See “Milking the Players” in my zine in A&E #364). Another alternative would have been to let the various observers chime in with their ideas and then combine these into something usable (see my comment to Lee Gold in A&E #397). Regardless of the method, care

We'd been a good team, and this straight-laced Ensign soon made sublieutenant and was scooped out of my squadron for a position elsewhere. I'd lost track of her, but apparently the universe had seen fit to bring us back together.

"Well, Lieutenant, either relax and shake my hand, or I will tell your class here exactly how I found you after the legendary events that followed your call sign dubbing."

She looked at me carefully, then relaxed and extended her hand.

"If you ever do that, sir, I will be forced to reveal how bad you are at shindo⁹⁸ and exactly how many credits you've lost to me over the years."

We shook hands, both of us grinning like idiots.

"Good to see you, Spooky."

"Sorry I missed your signing ceremony. Didn't find out until just this morning. Figured I'd try to find you after my shift, but it looks like you found me first."

"Which is a nice change. You finding things first means something is likely to start shooting at me."

She grinned. "Yeah, well, it's an occupational hazard."

"If you have the time, I'd appreciate you coming along on the inspection with me. You know how much I value your *insights*."

Insights. That was a private joke I'd come up with one time when we were armpit deep in the tracking lidar of our fighter. I was sure there was a misalignment in the receiving mirror that was throwing off our proximity fuse programming and spent an off-duty shift tearing down the avionics while Spooky handed me different lenses and testing rigs as we methodically worked through the unit's entire range of motion. About ten hours in, she made a crack about running out of testing inventory and had to run over to Supply to pick up more and if I could pull myself out of the resolution range of the laser array so I didn't

must always be taken to ensure such NPC backstories are consistent with the PC's backstory.

98 A popular card game of bluffing and trick scoring played by three teams of two. Originating in the Solomani rim, it is said to be based on poker, but evolved to use a specialized card deck. The Navy variant often uses tactical scenarios as framing for bluffs, making it very popular among fighter crews.

accidentally give myself a gigawatt sunburn, she'd count that as a favor, and I said something like sure, stay in the outskirts while I find an insight, that I guess in the moment seemed hilarious to me. She'd looked at me laughing my head off, no doubt marking it under odd-commanding-officer quirks, then double-checked that the power interlocks were set correctly before making her supply run. Ever since, I'd used the *insight* remark when I wanted her unvarnished opinion of things, and discounting the occasional deep sigh of forbearance, the message usually got through.

"Class, take a break. We'll reconvene in one hour." She turned back to us as the fresh young faces filed past, most of them probably straight from the academy. One of them stopped to salute, but Spooky told him to beat it, saving me from having to counter-salute. "Nobody told me anything about an inspection," she said as the door slid shut.

"Announced inspections are for admirals and visiting dignitaries," I replied. "We're gearing up to go back out into the Black, so let's get down to the real work, shall we?"

"Real work, huh? What do you want to inspect? The whole pod?"

I nodded.

"Where'd you like to start?"

"Since LtCdr. Wang is dirtside, you're the ranking pod officer, so we'll start with whatever *you* think I need to see." I stretched my arm out, gesturing for her to lead the way.

"Right." She nodded. "Okay."

She led us out of the ready room and into the hanger where a number of Ramparts and Dragonflies⁹⁹ were tightly packed. One of the Dragonflies caught my attention, mainly because it only had one wing. What remained of its body was laser scorched, the bubble dome normally protecting the cockpit completely shattered. I'd seen a picture of this fighter the previous day. It was in the pod's manifest, which I'd looked over shortly after coming aboard. But I didn't realize it was still on the ship.

"It's Jaamzon's," Spooky said.

The lieutenant in sickbay.

99 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Dragonfly_class_Light_Fighter

“Are we keeping this unit for a particular reason?” I asked. “Shouldn’t it be routed down to the base for reclamation by the Quartermaster?”

I wanted to see how sentimental or defensive this crew was. I myself had often delayed routing damaged fighters for any number of reasons. There was plenty of margin in our itinerary, so it really wasn’t an issue, but since I’d already decided to debark Jaamzon, it didn’t make sense to hang on to the wreck. Unless there was something else.

“I kept it here for the NUBs,” Spooky said, “so they’d understand the stakes... but I’ll get rid of it, sir. It’s served its purpose.”

She led us further into the bay.

According to files I’d skimmed through the previous day, the Jaqueline carried Dragonflies and Rampart FL-128s¹⁰⁰ exclusively, twenty-four of each, with a quarter of the Ramparts being the twin-seat model preferred for training. I’d, of course, flown it back at the academy, but I was more experienced with the larger FF-81, also known as the Rampart 5, although I’d also flown the FF-77¹⁰¹ as well as the RF-128¹⁰². As far as I was concerned, these were all superior to the FL-128, but like the Dragonflies, the FLs had the advantage of being cheap, which was, of course, particularly important to the Navy’s bean counters. Better to lose lots of pilots in cheap fighters than a few in expensive ones, or so went their so-called thinking. Of course, being a pilot myself, I never agreed with that philosophy, but I grudgingly accepted the economics of the situation. There were always more pilots. It was keeping the good ones alive long enough to make a difference that was the trick. On the bright side, at least we weren’t saddled with Kirchners¹⁰³ or Gnats¹⁰⁴, both of which I despised.

Spooky led us to one of the fighter lifts, and it dropped us down to the launch hanger, where two Ramparts were on ready alert launch status with

four Dragonflies on rotational alert. Naval doctrine was to always have a ready alert fighter on the launch tube rails or flying training runs, at least while in normal space. These training runs often doubled as stress tests, maintenance crews tagging systems for preventative maintenance according to flight recorder data. Crews on the rotation fighters, meanwhile, were on standby, either drinking coffee or simulating opposing forces for the ready crew. Needless to say, fighters were rotated through ready status, as it was an essential part of their maintenance cycle.

We took a peek at the launch tube, and it reminded me of why I didn’t like cruisers in general and the Element-class in particular. Because of the tube’s narrowness, the pod could only carry light fighters. There were no heavy fighters, no interceptors, nor even any medium fighters, meaning that if we got into a fight with an actual carrier, life could get very bad very quickly. Or, to put it another way, we’d only be the toughest warship in sight so long as there were no other warships in sight, but of course, that was the standard problem for all cruisers. The joke was that being multi-purpose vessels, cruisers were capable of dealing with a wide variety of challenges so long as they themselves weren’t challenged. At least the Jaqueline was a *large* cruiser, which meant she was capable of doing a lot of different things not very well.

Take it easy, Gus.

It was too easy, particularly as an ex-fighter jock, to get trapped in a bubble of cynicism and despair. Most of the time you couldn’t even see your enemies, at least not visually (of course, this was true for the big ships as well). It was all sensors and instruments, and then *bang*, out of nowhere, and you might be a coasting pile of slag. That’s why maintaining morale was so damn hard, because everyone knew the score, and right now, everyone knew the Jaqueline got knocked on her ass. Crew had died. Others were irreparably injured. But we were getting up, and soon we’d be going back, and that was something.

The maintenance crew seemed relaxed as we approached, working through their status checks, but then one of them noticed my rank insignia and said something to the others, no doubt something to the effect that the CO was

100 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Rampart_class_Light_Fighter

101 The FF-77 & FF-81 appeared in Challenge #27, pg. 23 (1986).

102 The RF-128 appeared in Classic Traveller’s Supplement 5: *Lightning Class Cruisers*, pgs. 13, 40-41 (1980).

103 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Kirchner_class_Patrol_Fighter

104 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Gnat_class_Light_Fighter

meandering in their general direction. They all stopped and looked up, and one of them stood and nodded toward me, a petty officer, 3rd class.

"Sir," he said, somewhat flustered.

"Inspection," Spooky explained.

"Oh. Maintenance crew Gimel Three Omicron ready for inspection. Petty Officer Kishen Picha reporting, sir."

"At ease. Things are looking good, P.O.?"

"Uh... yessir, I... uh... we're just keeping up with the work, sir, and this seems like as good a place as any. Status checks are mostly good. Couple of red lights we've just dealt with. This unit's good to go. Three more before shift's end, or four if they're simple fixes."

"Carry on then."

I always liked putting ambitious petty officers on the spot, and sometimes they'd even have something interesting to say, although whether it would turn out to be useful was another matter. One usually had to listen exceptionally closely, unless they knew and trusted you enough to speak their mind.

The maintenance team went back to their work, each pretending they weren't acutely conscious their captain was watching. As for the pilots, they were involved in some combat simulation, basically a glorified video game they got to play in their cockpits. I made a point of casually watching the scrimmage long enough to get a feel for the tactics they employed and smiled when Spooky raised an eyebrow at me, as in *are you doing an inspection or are you indulging yourself?*

"It's good to see you too," I said.

"Combo — am I still allowed to call you Combo? — I've got a class to teach," she said, keeping her voice low, "a class full of NUBs who need to be scared out of their wits before they'll settle in and become decent cannon fodder."¹⁰⁵

"Lieutenant!" Nizlich snapped, apparently having sharper ears than Spooky expected.

I held up my hand.

"You can call me Combo when I am in the front seat of the fighter we're flying. In the meantime, I am evaluating all aspects of this ship's operation, including the circumstances of training that led to Lt. Jaamzon being medically

¹⁰⁵ Obviously, she's trying to provoke a reaction, and she gets one.

discharged for getting shot up in an ambush." I gave her a hard stare as the rest of the bay dropped into sudden silence. "Let me be clear," I continued. "I am sure there is a lot of blame being passed around. This stops here. This is a ship of the Navy, and we will comport ourselves as such. Your crew is not now nor ever will be considered cannon fodder under my command. Is that clear?"

She nodded. "Yes sir."

"Impatience with commanding officers was always your weakness, Shish. I think I have seen everything I need to see here. Anything else?"

"Lots. Follow me."

She led us back around to a separate tube, parallel to and just forward from the launch tube. At first I wondered where she was taking us but then noticed a sign with an arrow pointing to *The Workshop*. Every ship carrying fighters usually had some place to service and repair them, depending on the extent of the damage, but that begged the question of why the maintenance crew I'd just seen was doing their work back in the hanger instead of up ahead.

We reached an intersecting passage with some sort of mechanical drawbridge that cut across the tube, and it was presently in the down position, blocking our way. Behind it were a set of large double doors adorned by copious signage, all in universal agreement that we shouldn't go a step further: *Environmental Integrity Breach*, *Vacc Suits Mandatory*, *Danger*, and *Restricted Personnel* to name a few. Nizlich moved to stand in front of the obligatory hand-sprayed addition of *Kleon Woz Here*. Aside from the one about Cleon, this was definitely not normal.

"What's this all about?" I asked Spooky.

"The UNREP system was breached during the attack." UNREP stood for Underway Replenishment, basically a way for goodies to be moved all over the ship, everything from fuel and oxygen to water and regular supplies. It could theoretically handle up to something like two hundred tons per hour. "It's been patched," she continued but then paused, presumably to let me ask the obvious 'So why haven't the signs been taken down?' but Nizlich interjected the answer.

"Some of the hull material underneath the armor plating around the site of the breach is... ah... still *slightly* radioactive, but we are in the process of curing that with a nuclear damper."

Although nuclear dampers were typically used to suppress nuclear decay, they could also excite it for purposes of radioactive decontamination. How all this worked was well above my level of comprehension, but I vaguely remembered it had something to do with the *L-Particle*.¹⁰⁶

“You patched it before decontaminating?”

“You know military contractors. They thought they got it all, but it turned out they were wrong.”

Because the longer a project takes, the more money they make. She didn’t need to explain any further.

Spooky then led us back out of the workshop’s access tube and across the hanger to the recovery deck, where one of the two platform control centers looked like it had been completely dismantled. Meanwhile, a vargr and some spidery-looking robot were apparently trying to put it back together.

“No, Charlotte, *this* one goes here and *that* one goes there.”

A lot of vargr sounded alike to humans, but this one definitely had a female voice, and as we approached, I became increasingly confident it was Lt. Shepherd.

“Something amiss, Lieutenant?” I asked.

106 As one might expect, Traveller doesn’t go into the science behind how Nuclear Dampers work, but the *L-Particle* mentioned here could be referring to the Lambda Baryon. There are actually four lambda baryons: the strange (a.k.a. lambda nought), charmed, bottom, and top lambdas. The first of these is a bit of a mystery in that it decays much more slowly than predicted (something like thirteen orders of magnitude more slowly), and the culprit seems to be the *conservation of strangeness*, which is a principle most roleplayers should be able to rally behind. There’s also the lambda neutrino and antineutrino, but I don’t want to say anything too polarizing. Finally, the *L-Particle* might be named for Loren, as in Loren Wiseman, who was the primary author of GURPS Traveller (sometimes referred to as GT or the *Lorenverse*). While most versions of Traveller allow Nuclear Dampers (or, at least, the technologies associated with them) to both enhance as well as suppress the strong nuclear force, only GURPS Traveller explicitly allows them to eliminate residual radiation from nuclear ground bursts and radioactive HAZMAT incidents (see *Ground Forces*, pg. 122’s sidebar & *Starports*, pg. 82). But since this ability of the technology in GT is never contradicted in other editions (to the best of my knowledge), we’re going with it.

She looked up, eyes still bloodshot from the night before.

“Captain?” Her gaze momentarily shifted to Nizlich. “Am I in trouble again?”

“Not unless you have a guilty conscience burdening you and are ready to confess.”

I watched the emotions cascade across her features, a mixture of surprise and amusement, and then she let loose a yelp of laughter. Vargr were not subtle. You could often see the decision making process play out whenever you asked them a question.

“I’m going to say, ‘not at this time,’ sir,” she finally replied once she regained some semblance of self-composure.

“Very well. What’s that you’re training the robot on?”

“Not training. We’re doing. And her name’s Charlotte. Charlotte, say hi to your new captain.”

Without turning, one of Charlotte’s spindly legs formed a salute while another seemed to wave.

“She was supposed to already know how to do this,” Lt. Shepherd continued, “but it turns out her software hasn’t been updated for the latest model, so we’re going to have to figure this out the hard way. Not that I’m complaining, sir.”

Charlotte seemed to shrug, as though saying *It’s not my fault my software is out of date*.

“The old vorkstation was damaged while we were recovering one of the damaged fighters,” Nizlich explained.

“*Damaged* is putting it mildly,” Spooky said. “It got creamed.”

“It was because the pod’s power plant was hit.”

“Directly upstairs,” Spooky said, pointing up at the ceiling.

“We had to redirect power, and because of the spinal damage... to the electrical conduits, in particular... there were problems.”

“The power kept going out.”

“And they were in the middle of recovering a fighter. They were supposed to catch it.”

“Everything just went dead, and...”

They effectively kamikazed themselves.

I winced at what was effectively one of the worst deaths a fighter pilot could suffer. Trap failures on recovery were marginally less bad than a failed launch, but everyone still ended up dead. Plus the relief of surviving hostile action

just to end up smeared across the bay along with whatever was unlucky enough to be in your path seemed like a cruel joke perpetrated by a malevolent universe.

“Carry on, Lieutenant. Charlotte.”

I turned to Spooky.

“Anything else?”

As she led us back to the lift, Spooky pointed out a hoist. “This one's slowly dying. Operating at eighty percent now... or thereabouts.”

There was a “hmmm” from Nizlich. Presumably this was a lower figure than the last report she'd read.

The lift returned us to the upper hanger, and we exited through the same iris valve we came in, Spooky pointing at the first door on the left, ideograms for both male and female inscribed side-by-side.

“Badge reader stopped working,” she explained.

Badge readers, contrary to their name, were used to read RFIDs, both those on badges as well as those inside crew members, medically implanted, as it were.¹⁰⁷ Not every door had one, and because they were usually tucked away, it was hard to know when one was present, but every time one picked up an RFID, it would log it, giving the command team a bird's-eye view of crew movements as well as a heads-up when somebody was late or whatever. However, that they'd want a log of who was using the fresher seemed a bit odd.

“The message I am getting, Lieutenant Gubar, is that there are a number of minor systems in need of repair, that perhaps the fighter pod feels hard done by, and perhaps not as high on the attention list as their due given their recent sacrifices. If this is the extent of your issue after a combat action, I find myself pleased with Ops and Repair and somewhat dismayed with Fighter Ops. Really, Spooky, showing the Captain and XO a broken pisser lock? Even taking our past into account, that was remarkably petty. XO, I've seen enough here. Let's move on. Lieutenant, dismissed.”

Spooky wrinkled her nose, just as she used to years ago whenever I had to bring her back in

¹⁰⁷ There's virtually nothing on this in the Traveller literature, and the TML was divided. See <https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/20374930/>

line, but to her credit, she saluted and left without another word.

“We can transfer her back to BUPERS¹⁰⁸, if you like,” Nizlich said. “Perhaps even slip in a demerit for insubordination, although, to be honest, I rather like her spunk.”

“Oh, I'm not transferring her. I was making sure she knew the stuff we used to pull on the Valkyrie command was not going to fly with me. Giving her the public dress down after she took us around to all the piddling stuff was just to give her the hard-man-to-convince-act to pull with her crew. All the NUBs will be watching that feed record and seeing how they will be valued.¹⁰⁹ I guarantee any requisitions from the pod going forward will be strictly mission critical. Do follow up with the de-rad in the UNREP and make sure the hoist is on the repair list, though. I know vacc suit work is hard, but we are going to add some zero atmosphere, zero gravity drills to the mix. Let's start with one in eight and ramp up to one in five. Those will be ship-wide drills too. Don't want anyone thinking I am going too hard on Fighter Ops to allay suspicion of favoritism. Speaking of favoritism, let's move on to the spinal mount.”

¹⁰⁸ Bureau of Personnel. See <https://getpocket.com/explore/item/nukes-nubs-and-coners-the-unique-social-hierarchy-aboard-a-nuclear-submarine>.

¹⁰⁹ Most common areas of the ship have an internal surveillance record, accessible to ranking officers in their operational area to make sure everything is going smoothly. Spooky should be able to pull the internal feed to show the interaction with Plankwell, if she wants to show the NUBs that, having come up through the Flight Branch, he's not the sort to misuse them.

Chapter 16

Missiles & Missives

"In a way, we were lucky," LtCdr. Furtle said. "A few more meters, and they'd have hit the big guy."

"The 2700," Mr. Caskey clarified.

Caskey was a warrant officer, a Particle Accelerator specialist to be more specific. He and Furtle were sitting back to back, facing separate consoles, when we'd entered their little Gunnery Command Center on Deck 1. Her end of the narrow chamber was for target selection and kill authorization, and she did this for every gun on the ship, from the PA cannon and fusion barbettes to the beam lasers, and, of course, the missile launchers. His end was for monitoring the one gun that truly mattered, the Instellarms PA2700BG Spinal-Mounted Particle Accelerator Cannon, also known as the Big Guy.

And for good reason. It ran almost the full length of the ship, massing fifty-six hundred tons, more than twice the mass of a standard pod. The PA cannon was the one weapon we had that made us truly formidable, and the zhos, realizing this, had waited for the Jaqueline to turn sideways before hitting her with theirs.

"Ve vere turning in order to decelerate," Nizlich explained. "Vunce ve vere hit, ve turned

to face them, but by the time ve vere able to get a lock...."

"They were gone," Caskey said.

Interesting. The Zhos had some advance knowledge on the Jaqueline, at the very least her performance characteristics, if they could time a shot during a decel-turn. The tactical problems started turning over in my head as Caskey went on about the specifications, and then the credit dropped.

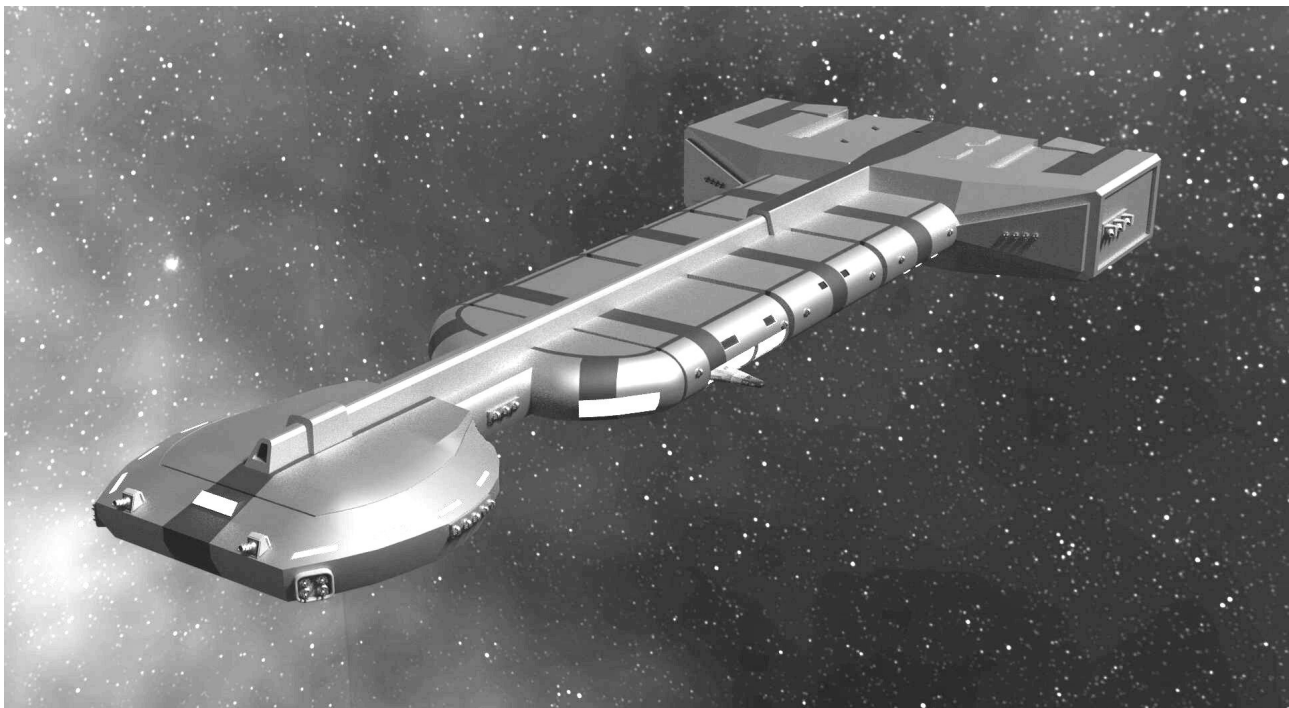
Instellarms, one of the largest weapon suppliers to the Navy, had begun immortalizing some of its most successful designers by naming design teams after them. I'd read a study describing their internal competitive structure, and although I wasn't sold on the concept, a *Team Caskey* was mentioned among others.

"Mr. Caskey, any relation to the namesake of a certain Instellarms design team? Or just a happy coincidence?"

His eyes widened momentarily, but then he grinned and nodded. "My great-grandma, sir. She was... well... a bit of legend in my family, actually."

"Believe me, I know the feeling."

He got the joke, and a wry smile touched his lips as I continued to scan the compartment. Everything seemed in order. Time to move on.



“As you were. XO, let’s move on to the missile pod and then head to the bridge.”

“Aye aye, Captain.”

I figured Furtle would let the missile pod know I was coming. That was fine. I was done testing initial reactions with no notice. Now I wanted to see what happened when they knew the Old Man¹¹⁰ was coming down for a look-see.

We took a ladder back to the upper deck and for the first time had to wait for a capsule. Nizlich looked at her slate and then at me, her face tightening ever so slightly, though whether in embarrassment or annoyance, I couldn’t say. Obviously, she’d been calling the capsules in advance of our arrival so one would always be waiting, but this time the trick hadn’t worked. When the doors finally opened, they revealed a capsule packed to the gills. One fellow wore some sort of colorful party hat and had his legs crossed like he needed to pee. Another carried two six-packs, one in each hand, the bottles clinking as his eyes bugged out, no doubt recognizing either me or my rank insignia.

It actually gave me a warm, fuzzy feeling. *Ah, the joy of wandering around the ship unannounced.* It was a reminder that each crew member was a human being, each living their own life.

“I hope everyone is having a good time,” I said. “We’ll wait for the next one. Carry on.”

The doors closed, my XO’s lips now betraying a thin sliver of a smile. “A bunch of shore-leavers must have gotten back all at vunce,” she posited.

I nodded. Being that we were in orbit and reliant on shuttles for surface-access, it wasn’t surprising.

“I’m glad to see the crew so relaxed off-duty,” I told her. “It’s a good habit, really, to be comfortable enough to let loose in the same place you face death. I hope it lasts through the first drill cycle.”

We were discussing various drill-related minutiae when the doors reopened, but this time there was no capsule. Instead, a spidery-looking robot came crawling out of the transport tube.

Charlotte?

110 “Old Man” is U.S. Navy slang for commanding officer, and we figured it might still be in use. See https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Appendix:Glossary_of_U.S._Navy_slang.

“Shelob,” Nizlich said. “Vhat are you doing here?”

The robot extended one of its arms toward a manual hatch on the tube’s ceiling.¹¹¹

“Ah. You vent up to the pipe box¹¹²? Carry on. It’s a crawlway that runs underneath the spinal mount,” she explained as the robot moved past us. “You vant to see?”

“Mmm... maybe later when the crew has had time to try and hide some interesting contraband. I *have* served on cruisers before, Stefani,” I said as the doors closed. “An inspection tour on the second day of jump will find all kinds of stuff in there. I remember when I was a lieutenant, finding three wooden casks of Reginan distillates in a tagged out service box. When we tracked it back to the petty officer responsible, she told us that she was just shipping it for some small reseller out of Yori. Claimed that aging it in the PA tube gave it a unique flavor. Navy Grog, she called it.”

“Vas she disciplined?”

“For having three casks of rum? No. But for irradiating them while planning to resell? Most certainly. That, after all, is alcohol abuse.”

“Not to mention civilian abuse. Did you try any?”

“Any of the rum?” I grimaced, now wondering why I brought this up. “Like I said, this was back when I was a lieutenant.”

“Aha!” she smiled. “An admission of guilt.”

“In my defense, I took the proper precautions, anti-rad meds to be specific.”

“How vas this, ah... *radioactive rum*?”

“Diarrhea-inducing,” I replied. (To be fair, I couldn’t be sure if my gastrointestinal reaction was caused by the rum or the meds.) “And it was

111 It’s probably the case that I’m portraying these robots as being too intelligent. Robots in Traveller tend to be quite a bit dumber than those in Star Wars, and it was always with a bit of pride that Traveller players would claim that Traveller was more scientifically accurate. Ironically, with the recent advancements in AI, it now appears that Star Wars had it right all along (or, at least, was closer to being right). In any case, my decision-making on how to portray these robots is no doubt influenced by news related to this rapidly advancing field, but, alas, there’s only so far I can go and still call it Traveller.

112 See *Element Cruisers*, pg 34.

only *slightly* radioactive,” I hastily added. “I’m not insane.” Stupid, maybe, but not insane.

Nizlich wrinkled her nose and shook her head slightly at what was no doubt too much information for her to handle. Meanwhile, the doors reopened, revealing another capsule, this one somewhat crowded but not as packed as the last. LtCdr. Bonventure was there, standing against one wall, his eyes seemingly glued to his data slate. It was only after everyone stopped talking — a commanding officer’s presence tends to silence idle chit-chat — that he looked up, smiling in recognition as soon as he noticed me.

“For vhat it’s vorth,” Nizlich said, “Shelob checks up there now and then for just the sort of thing you described.”

“What are we talking about?” Bonventure interjected.

“Contraband,” Nizlich said. “Not that this crew would dare bring any aboard.” She glanced around the lift at all the innocent-looking faces avoiding eye-contact.

“Oh, the pipe box?” Bonventure guessed. “Yeah, Shelob’s the problem... I mean the solution. Speaking of solutions, Captain, did you get that link I sent? The one with the letters?”

“Ah, the thank you notes for the reception?”

“And the dinner invitations.”

“Right,” I nodded. I’d been so busy, I hadn’t even thought to check my messages.

The capsule came to an abrupt halt, and Nizlich and I once again took the port side egress. A short transverse alleyway led to one at right angles, which, due to its length, I guessed stretched the entire length of the pod, allowing access to each missile bay. Nizlich led me forward to find a ladder down to the lower deck and the pod’s command center. In general, the targeting of these weapons would be coordinated from the Gunnery Command Center, but local control was exercised from here. A lieutenant was waiting for us, and Nizlich made the introductions.

“Lt. Marni Fettshavn. Pod commander. They can show you vwhatever you vant to see. Fettshavn, Captain Plankvell.”

I got a crisp salute and a “Sir!” as I looked the man over. Or was it a woman? It was impossible

to tell. *Ah*. ‘*They can show*,’ as in the singular *they*.¹¹³

Fettshavn, no doubt, witnessed me processing all this, and perhaps to mercifully alleviate the momentary awkwardness, *they* began talking.

“At your command sir. Five-thousand seven-hundred and sixty missiles. Five dozen triple-beam lasers. Five officers including myself, forty-eight gunners and three engineers raring to go.” Fettshavn glanced at Nizlich, who gave a curt nod.

“Very good, Lieutenant. Can you pull up the launch plans that were used in the most recent engagement?”

“Aye aye, sir,” Fettshavn said, poking at one of the holographic consoles. My request must have been anticipated, because a report immediately sprang into view, overflowing the display. “You can see the raw data if you want, but this might be more useful to start with.” A swipe turned the numbers into colored graphics, showing exactly what I needed to know in a rather more user-friendly fashion. There were touch-sensitive select points, denoting each volley in chronological order as well as by munition type, strike rate, countermeasure success and so on. I could, of course, select for missiles or lasers, add in the main ship batteries, or even mix in fighter data from the pod next door if required. In this way, I could get a sense of not only how the battle unfolded but also how each post, all the way from the captain down to each individual gunnery station, had responded at any point in time.

I skimmed through the mix of munitions that had been fired at the Azhanti-class cruiser the Jaqueline encountered at Quar, as well as the spread of countermissile and counterEMS munitions that were at the ready. Captain Jenkins had turned in such a way as to keep the missile pod facing the target, and only a few seconds

¹¹³ Timothy was GMing this section of the chapter, and as he tells it, he was rolling for Fettshavn’s gender (1-3 female, 4-6 male) but accidentally rolled two dice instead of one, resulting in a one and a four, and so he figured it was about time for an androgynous NPC. Although surprised, I was pleased with this decision, especially considering it was Conrad who first brought up Plankwell having an androgynous ancestor back in Chapter 12. Whenever the GM detects that there’s a subject matter that the player is interested in exploring, it’s generally good GMing to steer in that direction.

after the Jaqueline had been hit, she fired back, but, of course, by the time the missiles reached their target, the enemy was long gone.

The Missile Pod had been extraordinarily lucky not to have been hit, as both of the other port pods had been, the Exploration Pod the most severely. Likewise, some of the fusion barbettes on the ship's main fuselage were damaged, although, fortunately, their control center had been spared. That, of course, was not of this pod's concern, but still the information was here, all integrated.

Lt. Fettshavn stood back from the controls, allowing me free reign, but said, "I have summaries of all of this in formal reports as well as the raw data, although I believe they have already been turned over to you."

"Outstanding, Lieutenant."

Fettshavn seemed to grow an inch taller, and from the corner of my eye I could see Nizlich nod approvingly. Satisfied, I nodded and stepped away from the controls. No worries here, except for maybe defining what I needed from them in the future. The sheer wealth of data was too intoxicating, I realized, deciding I'd need to keep a high-level overview.

"XO, shall we finally get to the bridge and see it all from up there?"

"Certainly." With a nod she dismissed the lieutenant, and once more we headed back to the transport tube.

Nizlich let me continue to digest the data I'd just seen, but as we stepped back into a capsule, which was once again waiting for us, empty, she did make one comment.

"You must tell me if LtCdr. Furtle, or any of the section leaders, is producing *too* much data in their reports. I can reign it in if you wish."

"I'll be sure to let you know when it's too much."

We zipped forward and negotiated the labyrinth back to the main bridge. I reckoned, perhaps mistakenly, I could probably do it alone now but let Nizlich lead the way just in case I'd embarrassingly make a wrong turn.

"Captain on the bridge!" a female voice yelled, the sublieutenant doing the shouting quickly removing herself from my chair.

The duty shift had changed, so it was all new faces, but at some signal from Nizlich the crew

quickly stood down and went back to their duties. My XO didn't seem about to introduce me to everyone on this occasion. She stepped over to my chair and stood by it, ready to be of assistance should I need any.

"XO, I'm going to work from here for a while. Consider yourself dismissed, and thank you for the excellent on-boarding. I am very pleased by the crew so far."

"Aye aye, sir," Nizlich said, then turned and left the bridge, leaving me to my thoughts, my reports and my chair, as the portrait of Empress Jaqueline peered at me from the bulkhead.

"Officer of the Watch, status report."

"LSP's¹¹⁴ on our dorsal aft installing X-Battery's new mounts," the sublieutenant answered. She pointed to one of the holographic displays, where a video feed showed a big construction craft mounted on the back of the ship.

Since I had no idea what X-Battery was, I simply nodded, settling into my command chair and taking a moment to savor the sensation. Becoming the captain of a Navy cruiser was the dream of many and the achievement of few. The ergonomics of the chair slowly adjusted to cradle me according to my profile. It also doubled as an emergency acceleration crash couch. Of course, if we lost our inertial compensators at the wrong angles, I might *only* end up with a broken back rather than getting smeared across the helm controls.

Gus, Gus, Gus. Lose the morbidity.

There hadn't been an IC failure on an Imperial cruiser in... well, since the war, which was only a few years ago. Still, it was unlikely.

After hovering for a moment, the sublieutenant stepped over to what looked like a navigation console and sat down. Meanwhile, I studied the various buttons on the arms of my command chair. Behind the tilt controller, here was the battlestations alert, as well as the shipwide PA, but there was also a holographic interface button, as well as one for activating a skullcomp interface, should the individual sitting here have a computer implanted directly onto his or her brain. Skullcomps were growing increasingly commonplace, although I'd personally never had

¹¹⁴ Ling-Standard Products, one of the "big boys" even among megacorporations.

one installed.¹¹⁵ Next to it, however, was a small compartment about the size of an ashtray. I opened it, revealing a pair of wireless earbuds. I then activated the holographic interface, watching as several application windows appeared: the current duty roster, an operational readiness model showing a highly miniaturized set of deckplans colored green, red, and blue, and what looked like a “To Do” list of sorts. It was essentially a mirror of what I’d been looking at last night before bed, except with the addition of the “To Do” list.

I closed the duty roster and shrank the readiness model, moving it just above and to the right of my eyeline. Then I brought the “To Do” queue to the left side of my field of vision. It was already populated by various suggestions from the ship’s computer, and as I reprioritized them by the various times I figured I’d need to complete each action item, the computer adjusted to my stare and blink commands, in conjunction with some movements from my right thumb, to move items up and down the lists and to bring them into the main work field in the center of my vision.

I began with the little things, acknowledging the receipt of reports by the various division heads and pod commanders, mostly pertaining to repairs, refurbishments, replenishment of stores and ammunition, refueling, reassignments, transfers, and so forth. Many required me to sign off, and alongside several of these items were recommendations or additional background either Nizlich or someone else had inserted.

115 Conrad suggested Plankwell might have a skullcomm (a surgically implanted communicator), but because it had never been mentioned in the write-up, it seemed like too much of a retcon. Nonetheless, I don’t doubt such technology, including skullcomps (surgically implanted computers), will eventually become ubiquitous. His suggestion forced me to ask myself what version of Traveller this campaign is using (see footnote #44 on page 48), and if the technology is reasonably commonplace, why doesn’t Plankwell, who is from a TL15 world, not already have it? See https://groups.google.com/g/plankwell-pbem-s1/c/toLd_UglkBM/m/5QrAyOBWEAAJ, https://groups.google.com/g/plankwell-pbem-s1/c/toLd_UglkBM/m/3AL-v7OfEAAJ, and the discussion starting at <https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/20636288/>.

There was a report from SMC Kaashukapiak regarding the mushroom dispenser incident.¹¹⁶ Both crew members involved had their shore leave revoked, were being reassigned to different shifts, and would face extra disciplinary duty. Nizlich had already signed off. All this required was my acknowledgment. I tapped my thumb and moved on.

Next were the transfer orders for Lt. Jaamzon, the fighter pilot in sickbay. Included was a letter to her family back on Olympia, talking about her bravery and how the Navy would attempt to keep her alive until she was returned into their custody. There was also a letter from Lt. Briggs, talking about how many of the other pilots looked up to her and how she benefited everyone by the example she set, one of grace, determination, and limitless courage, although, toward the end, he inevitably drifted into religion.

“Blessed are they who mourn, for the universe heeds the heart that is broken, and beyond the black veil, all is made whole, and all shall be reborn.”

“She attended services regularly,” Nizlich noted in the file, adding that Briggs believed her parents to have raised her in a tradition accepting of this language. It was clear that Stefani was very much on top of the logistics of running the cruiser, including such small details as this.

I signed off with a tap of my thumb.

Next was a communique from Commander Shumurdim, Quartermaster of Plankwell Naval Base on Jewell. “Please see me in person to discuss your recent request.”

What recent request? Oh. The psi-scanner.¹¹⁷

Captain Miishur’s words leapt to mind: *“If you want to retain your commission, I strongly suggest you stow any thoughts you have of requisitioning psions or anything psionic. Is that clear, Mr. Plankwell?”¹¹⁸*

Sending off that requisition for the psi-scanner probably wasn’t the smartest move I’d ever made. I looked at tomorrow’s schedule and initiated a request for a meeting with Commander Shumurdim at his facility. Since we were transferring Jaamzon off, there was no longer any need to bring a psi-scanner on board. Which

116 See Chapter 4.

117 See Chapter 2.

118 See Chapter 3.

reminded me to investigate the *secret stash* ¹¹⁹ further, when I had a free hour or so.

If I was down the well¹²⁰, I could take some time and shop for my personal supplies while putting in a meeting there, and also check in with the Yard Commander to compliment the repairs so far. A captain that made everyone come to him was not well liked. I pulled up a downport directory, and indeed, there was a branch of the Imperial Starwinds Chandlery.¹²¹ That was excellent. I needed a fair amount of stuff, not having had an opportunity to replace a lot of the luxuries I'd had to leave behind on Efate.

There were also a number of *thank yous*, one from Admiral Karneticky saying, "Good work yesterday," as well as a large pile of what amounted to formal pleasantries, mostly from people I didn't know. One of them, however, included a pair of videos. It was from Squiress Syeda Durami, Lady Alise's Minder.

"You were fabulous, Captain," she said in the first of the attached videos, smiling, "...the way you controlled the situation — *salvaged*, I suppose, would be a better word — what I'm trying to say is... thank you." She then paused to blow her nose. "I hope to be over in the next few days. If you still happen to be in the neighborhood, so to speak, do let me treat you to... well, to whatever sort of meal you happen to have time for. I can only imagine how busy you must be."

The second video she'd attached was a news segment. The thumbnail image showed that blonde reporter with Olav and Lady Alise in the background.

Reporter: "Faye Mekizush reporting from Heron Orbital Starport. I'm here in the Stellar Excelsior awaiting the appearance of Lady Alise. Rumor has it she will soon receive an apology from the artificial simulation purporting to be none other than Olav hault-Plankwell."

119 See Chapter 3.

120 He means down the gravity well, as on the planet's surface.

121 Conrad wrote up the Library Data entry for the ISC following this chapter.

The video cut to Alise and Olav having their little pissing contest.

Alise: "If you do not bow at once, I shall have you switched off."

Olav: "You'll be doing me a favor."

Alise: "Very well, then."

Karneticky: "Captain Plankwell just recently had a lengthy discussion with Olav, and he's determined that *it* and Lady Alise got off on the wrong foot due to a misunderstanding caused by the simulation's programming, but that has now been fixed. Right, Captain?"

Me: "As the Admiral says, the simulation is quite advanced and is truly a marvel. The creator, Zeenye, is to be commended for the strides he is making in neuromorphic engineering."

The volume was low enough that I doubted the other bridge officers could hear any of this, but I paused it anyway, and donned one of the earbuds.

"For the record," the reporter said as soon as I resumed the video, "Captain Plankwell is a direct descendant of Olav hault-Plankwell, and thus he was chosen to interface with the simulation of his ancestor in order to determine its authenticity. I asked him what he could tell us about it."

Me: "While it might resemble my ancestor very closely and respond as we all imagine the Fleet Admiral responding, that is one of the strongest arguments for why it is not actually Olav hault-Plankwell. It responds the way we imagine Fleet Admiral hault-Plankwell responding because that is the sum result of the information that has been fed into its data matrix. I suppose it could be used, at the very least, as a training aid or historical research assistant. It seems very adept at synthesizing historical records. More than that will have to await a technology review and verification."

The video then cut to Admiral Karneticky escorting Lady Alise, myself directly behind the two of them acting as a sort of honor guard.

"Note the forms," the reporter said, "*en majeste* and *en entende*, as well as *en gallance*." She didn't elaborate on what any of it meant.

Then it cut to an image of Olav and then back to me.

Me: "You are... a program running on some very advanced computer technology, subject to our choices. What we have here is a tool."

The video cut back to Olav blinking, looking somewhat befuddled. If memory served, this was from when he was first adjusting to the crowd, which meant the video was out of sequence.

Me: "Lady Alise, and honored guests. Earlier this evening, it was made apparent that the simulation incurred offense to you specifically, and to the nobility of Jewell in general. As the guest whose event was the forum for this offense, I do beg forgiveness. On behalf of the House of Plankwell, in whose image the offense was given, I do beg forgiveness. And by the Navy that I serve and protect all members of the Imperium, I do beg forgiveness."

Alise: "I have taken no offense from you, Captain, nor from the Navy, nor even from your ancestor, who we all owe a great debt of gratitude. This simulation of him is just that and nothing more, but it is right that we honor his memory by treating it with respect."

Reporter: "Lady Alise went on to honor the memory of Olav hault-Plankwell, praising him as the savior of Jewell and the defender of the Spinward Marches and when asked to speak, the simulation had this to say."

Olav: "I would look down upon our Imperium and watch our glorious future unfold."

Me: "To the Imperium, these stars are ours!"

Audience: "To the Imperium."

Reporter: "The simulation, we are told, is still somewhat buggy, but the local office of the Imperial Ministry of Technology will be evaluating it, and we will keep you informed as to what they determine."

I audibly humphed, pleased at the job the reporter did. The sublieutenant, her brow wrinkled, immediately turned toward me, but I waved her off, copying the reporter's name, Faye Mekizush, into my personal contacts and clearing her for direct contact, allowing her to cut through all the layers of insulation that Navy PR usually had in place. A new message immediately popped

up from Ms. Mekizush, a simple thanks for the interview and a link to the same segment.

Finally, I came across the dinner invitations and thank you notes that Bonaventure had sent along. I pulled them to the front of the queue and opened the packet. There were a large number of standard *thank yous*, a smaller number of more elaborate *thank yous*, and finally a black and violet tinged one to the Zhodani ambassador. Although there was nothing in it that was even remotely sensitive, it still required standard diplomatic cryptography, which in turn required me to initiate a level two security authorization. My left fingers tapped out the alphanumeric string on the virtual console that activated a retinal scanner, again built into the chair.

There were third and fourth level authorizations but I hoped never to be in a position to use those. Third level security authorizations were to release the use of nuclear weapons against inhabited worlds. The fourth level required an Imperial Warrant, and its uses were, needless to say, highly classified. The Navy had learned the terrible lessons of the Civil War. Any new march on Capital would be met with annihilation.

Well, I won't be doing that today. I wasn't even sure what I was doing thinking it.

I authorized the delivery of all the *thank yous*, then turned next to the two dinner invitations. They were for Mazarin Scarlett, the Starport Director, and Canon Forklinbrass, my new drinking buddy, but I decided to issue a third to Kaz Remshaw, the lady Karneticky introduced me to from the local Chamber of Commerce. I looked over the proposed menus, just to make sure nothing was out of place.

Hmm...

A wide assortment of seafood was on the menu for the dinner with Maz. To be fair, I did mention to Bonventure that Maz liked fish, but I'd forgotten to specify that he preferred them alive. Luckily, I'd caught this little *faux pas*. Always read the fine print.

I returned the invitation for Maz to Bonventure, writing "No Fish" and underlining it twice. As for the other two, I tapped my thumb twice, sending them off into the electronic ether.

Library Data:

Imperial Starwinds Chandlery

Originally formed on Kasear (Vland 1822) over five centuries ago as a partner of Tukura Lines, the Imperial Starwinds Chandlery (ISC) has grown steadily to become a reliable name for supplying starfarers with luxuries and comforts. Typically found at Class A starports as well as in star systems with mineral rich asteroid belts, the ISC has chosen to expand their services rather than their reach.

The Chandlery has a variety of different levels of membership, each with its own set of perks. The personal preferences of all members, however, including their measurements and other details, are recorded to ensure a pleasant shopping experience. The ISC has been licensed by various armed services to tailor uniforms, custom-fit vacc suits, and supply all manner of starfaring equipment. Their medical clinics, which grew out of their in-system rescue service, are capable of diagnosing and dispensing treatment for a variety of conditions. Many outlets also incorporate a spa and short term guest accommodations, usually in partnership with local hotels of repute. The ISC is also capable of outfitting small starships as well as supplying yachts and crews for chartered excursions, and they partner with local artists, chefs, and other creatives to produce one-of-a-kind experiences for the discerning traveler. Furthermore, ISC staff are very knowledgeable about local conditions and can be relied upon to offer recommendations on anything not found in their inventory.

Filling a niche similar to the Travellers' Aid Society (TAS) with respect to the exclusivity of its clientele, the ISC focuses mainly on the procurement and distribution of quality material goods, particularly those involved in space travel, rather than on luxury passage and hotel accommodations, although in the latter category, they are in competition with TAS. As with TAS, ISC memberships can be bought, but prices range depending on the membership level. Also like TAS, the ISC is a private venture, not supported by public taxes. Unlike TAS, however, some of the ISC memberships are inheritable and even transferable. TAS is not overly bothered by ISC,

and in some cases the two organizations have been known to partner, particularly when dealing with clients who hold memberships in both institutions.



Chapter 17

Awakening

I could feel a penetrating gaze upon me, as though I were being studied under a microscope, but as I turned to look, I found only the eyes of the former empress, Jaqueline, staring at me from the bulkhead. She looked displeased, which, of course, was understandable considering who killed her.

Why hadn't I asked Olav about that day that stood as the centerpiece of his greatest ambitions? He'd dispatched her personally, and with his bare hands no less, perhaps so there would be no claim that the fight was unfair. Or perhaps because he wanted to.

As a 74-year-old man, he'd literally strangled to death a 45-year-old woman, and we called him a hero and named naval bases after him, not to mention a class of dreadnaught. And why did the Emperor and his advisors allow the navy to do that? Because honoring Olav had been Imperial policy since the reign of Arbella, and if nothing else, it cemented one idea most concretely in the informed mind, which was that the powers that be, they who are actually in control, can create any reality and make people believe it. That, after all, is the key to maintaining any sort of social order: belief control.

The news segment the Squires Durami had been so pleased as to forward to me was a case in point. At its heart, it was a work of fiction; with a few strategic omissions, it portrayed essentially the opposite of what actually occurred. Granted, Olav was effectively caged, but as for being chastised and befuddled, I knew if he ever got outside Zeenye's freezer, he/it would rage, and as for responding to his misportrayal at the hands of crack reporter, Faye Mekizush, I could only imagine he'd do to her pretty much what he'd done to Jaqueline.

My earbud beeped with the arrival of an electronic reply from Bonventure. It was a revised menu for the dinner with Maz, the SPA director, no fish this time. Included was a little note. "Sorry. I somehow thought you said he liked fish. Must have got it backwards. Won't happen again."

I keyed open the text composer and appended a reply. "My apologies for not being clearer. He likes live fish, and I decided to err on the side of caution by removing fish from the menu."

I then hit "Send" and watched as my "To Do" list re-emerged from underneath the textual composer. With the social and sundry items out of the way, the budget requests were back on top. I began doing some comparative modeling with an eye toward equally offending everyone. That way none of the division heads or pod commanders would have any particular excuse to feel short-changed. Morale was hanging by a thread as it was.

Although, after having met with Furtle and Fettshavn, I was inclined to throw more money toward the missile pod. It was a nice addition to the ship's strength, giving us the ability to shoot at multiple targets simultaneously while using the beam lasers for point defense. The only downside was that once it was exhausted, we'd have to fall back on our other weapons. Nonetheless, it made good sense to have this option on the table, and it gave us an advantage in firepower over most likely adversaries.

Likewise, I had no choice but to accede to all requests earmarked for the Big Guy, our trusty PA Canon, as well as our nuclear arsenal.

The nukes were the weapon I never wanted to use. Indeed, they were banned by Imperial decree. Even the vargr didn't go there. They and the zhos were full of all sorts of dirty tricks, but even they could see the futility of letting a hot war get out of hand. That was the difference between us and all those nuclear cinders the canon had talked about yesterday at the reception. Our ancestors managed to restrain themselves, even in the most consequential of all human endeavors. It was this adherence to rules — rules of war, in particular — that was the essential pillar of any long-lasting civilization, and, fortunately, our two primary adversaries were of the same mind. Otherwise, Jewell would have been incinerated many times over.

The budget was too big to adequately comprehend at one sitting, so I took a break and prepared myself for a recitation of ongoing yard work, states of replenishment, department and system readiness levels, local and long range scan reports, as well as any new orders from Fleet Ops.

I was listening for anything that was odd or caused the officer reporting to change their tone. I pulled up the status reports as they were read off, confirming that the officer was getting the right data. Trust but verify.

Then the earphone pinged again, some sort of alert. A new message? No. It was just signaling the end of the watch.

I stretched my neck, swiped the holodisplay off, and put the earbud interface back in its compartment. I had used the Navy standard issue earbuds on and off for most of my career, but I was ready to spend some credits on an upscale version. I looked around the bridge and saw that the crew had changed out again while I'd been engrossed in getting up to speed. I'd been introduced to all of them the previous day, but I couldn't for the life of me remember any of their names, and I didn't feel like squinting to read them off their uniforms.

I reactivated the display, called up the bridge duty roster, read the name of the officer of the watch, and then swiped it off again.

"SubLt. Marshalsea, you have the conn."

"Yes sir. I have the conn," the young man said, quickly standing and smiling, no doubt thinking that his captain must have a steel-trap mind to have remembered his name. As he approached, I used the chair's tilt controller to tilt myself almost completely upright, which was the laziest way I could have possibly stood up, but I figured those buttons existed for a reason, and I wanted to test their limits. A built-in back massager would have also been nice, but alas, this was an Imperial Cruiser, not some noble's personal yacht.¹²²

I passed Jaqueline on the way out, her eyes intently watching my every step, and as I exited the bridge, I was either so tired or disconcerted from her relentless stare that instead of going straight, back the way I'd come, I instead turned right, retracing my steps from the previous day, until I reached the assembly point where the crew had ambushed me for the signing ceremony. Needless to say, everyone snapped to as soon as I entered the compartment, and so I nodded and smiled like I was doing some low-resolution inspection. The truth was, I was too embarrassed

¹²² Conrad wanted the captain's chair to have a built-in back massager and even wrote one in, but, alas, some dreams should remain just that.

to ask which way to my quarters. So I wound my way around this self-imposed detour, hoping it wouldn't terminate in some dead end, and then I happened across some grunting noises and immediately found the gym.

Poking my head in for a quick peak, I could see it was pretty standard equipment, a mixture of gravitic weights and resistance machines. Nizlich was there with about ten others, and I didn't know if she was trying to set an example or just had a lot of stress to work off, but she was pumping her thighs in and out like a maniac while at least one crewman in the corner of the room seemed to be surreptitiously checking her out, appraising her technique, as it were.

Most of the rest of them, particularly those on the machines, wore VR-headsets. These tended to make working out a lot less monotonous. I ducked back out, deciding I needed some gym time of my own, but first I needed to eat. After I found my quarters, I pulled up the gymnasium schedule and checked if there was a hand-to-hand combat trainer available. It'd been a while since my last workout. Interestingly, the marine pod had a Snuka Model 518 grappling drone. I debated the politics of letting them see their captain getting stomped by a robot. Not that this would *always* happen, but I liked to dial up the difficulty level to the very edge of my abilities, and so receiving some humiliation would certainly be inevitable. On the other hand, marines tended to better respect officers who, like them, trained hard, and it was easier to find sparring partners outside one's chain of command.

I put in a reservation for the simulator and then got down to finishing the unpacking of the gear I'd brought along, making a mental list of what I wanted to pick up from the ISC while I was down the well tomorrow. I then checked the dining hall's menu for the evening and placed a cabin order for the crew stew and a couple bottles of crew brew.

I changed out of my shipsuit for workout clothes, then laid down in the gravbed and told Jackie to let me know when the food arrived. The gravity suspension felt good, and the field was long enough to hold me at full stretch. I disliked the feeling I got in the extremities when I stretched out across competing fields. It wasn't

dangerous, but it could be rather uncomfortable. This bed, however, seemed just right. Indeed, it was the only thing about this assignment that felt just right.

This wasn't like taking command of the Maverick Fours or the 2437th Sensors. It wasn't even like taking over when Kantriv punched his ticket over Sting. This was the first time I had a fully independent command, and I knew the book on cruisers. My tour on the Vorhees might have been cut short by a misjump, but I knew my stuff. I kept getting the feeling I was either doing too much or not enough. Sure, the on-boarding yesterday had been rushed. But it was the sudden appearance of the Olav construct that threw me for a loop.

The local media was doing its job. Yes, its job was to manipulate belief, but that was part and parcel of leadership. I was engaged in it myself, instilling the belief that we would somehow exact revenge for our wounds, when in all likelihood that was a mere pipe dream. I idly wondered what my father would make of me now, circling back to the "seditious argument" against Plankwell, all the while protecting his image, and that of our family, by shutting him up. Would he be proud or disappointed? I had no idea.

Perhaps the more important question was what did I think?

"Your dinner has arrived, Captain."

I got up, switching off the bed. My meal tray was already on the table, so either someone or something had delivered it, the valet-bot, most probably.

Crew stew was traditionally a mash-up of leftovers, mostly odds and ends that never made it onto an actual tray, although I'd heard stories about food sometimes being *refurbished*, particularly during times of dwindling stores. Depending on the skill of the cooks and what ingredients they'd managed to scrape together, crew stew could be a pleasant surprise or, more often, a culinary abomination of the first order. I took a bite, swirling it around in my mouth. It had that strange taste of foods never meant to go together.

If the crew was eating this slop on a regular basis, no wonder morale was poor. The meal's only saving grace was a plate of crisps and what

looked like a nice, ripe piece of fruit. It was fresh and sweet, easily the best thing on the tray.

As for the crew brew, it provided the comfort of no surprises. It was a nutritional liquid ubiquitous to all Navy ships and varied only by command authority. Captains would sometimes order it mixed with alcohol, especially around important holidays, and there was a variant called Battle Brew that was laced with a cocktail of alertness and attention boosters. This, however, was just the standard version, at least as far as I could tell.

"Jackie," I said, "set my quarters to *Do Not Disturb* until further notice."

"*Do Not Disturb* setting activated."

"Now open up the captain's secret stash."

A section of the living room's ceiling slowly descended to the floor, once again stopping just short of the kava table. Inside the open-faced drawer, roughly two meters on a side, was the same collection of curiosities I'd seen the day before: the ten helmets with their transparent visors, obviously psi-shields, as well as the gray hoodie, still nicely folded. Then there was the metal box and the small black pouch.

I contemplated what to investigate first as I sipped my crew brew. The cold, slightly bitter, lightly carbonated drink was refreshing, but it did nothing to calm my nerves. I picked up one of the psi-shields and inspected it.

According to the label next to its power button, it was a Naasirka WHK2 Thought Protector, not that the model number meant anything to me. I put it on and hit the button. Nothing happened. I sighed, switched it off, and put it back, then turned to the hoodie. Sure enough, it had a battery hidden within one of the pockets and a mesh of wires running throughout the hood itself. No tags, but it was loose fitting, although, I would wager, not machine washable.

As for the metal box, opening it revealed what looked like a polymer hypo-gun and twenty ampule cartridges, eleven of which were spent. Each item was separately cushioned in foam, and the nine unspent ampules contained some sort of reddish-brown liquid, like rusty water tinged with blood. The hypo-gun had some strange writing that looked suspiciously Darrian. As for the ampules themselves, they were unmarked.

Then there was the little black pouch, like the sort that might come with a small bottle of high quality whiskey. I opened it and peered inside. There was something there, something round. I reached inside with two fingers, and brought out a small, clear ball, about the size of an egg. From the way it looked and felt to the touch, I would have thought it made of glass, except that it weighed next to nothing, and as I studied it further, its surface shimmering in the cabin light, it reminded me of a soap bubble. It was as lightweight as one too, even moreso, perhaps, as it began floating off the surface of my fingers as soon as it was out of the bag. I could hold it, but it was slippery, more slippery than soap, and yet it left no residue on the fingers. It was inexplicable.

I cupped the small object in my hands to keep it from floating away, and as I did so, I couldn't help but feel that I'd been here before, not in this specific place and time but rather with just such an object as this held by my own hands. I couldn't remember where or how, but there was an unmistakable familiarity.

"Jackie, do you have an inventory of the items in the stash?"

The computer located inventory records. A few pointed questions and a level two security authorization revealed that those helmets were, indeed, Naasirka WHK2 Thought Protectors, and the reddish-brown stuff was some high-end psi-enhancer manufactured by the Darrians. (I'd heard somewhere they tended to offload a lot of their more questionable merchandise directly to the Imperial black market.) The hoodie, I guessed, was for going out and blending in, but its record said only "Miscellaneous article of clothing with electronic enhancement," and there was no chain of custody, no explanation of where it came from and how it got here. And, finally, as for the *inexplicable* thing in my hand, there was no record, not merely no chain of custody but no record whatsoever. It was like it didn't exist.

I stared at it, trying to remember whence I'd had such an object as this in my own hands. I had. I knew I had.

"No, Augie! No!"

It was the first time, the first and only time, Aunt Arguaski ever yelled at me. I cried and cried, not understanding why, and then she tried explaining, but I was two years old. I didn't know

my ass from an asteroid. But still, I was shocked an adult would try reasoning with me. Mom and Dad never explained why they yelled. Just *Stop that!* and *No!* and *Don't touch that!* and *We don't yell in this house!* But she was trying to explain, and she finally parked me in front of the holoconsole and started playing some old movie. There was a young guy with a bright sword and an old one who was like a ghost.

"Who do you want to be when you grow up? The warrior or the wizard?"

It was a dumb question to ask a two-year-old, but I pointed as best I could. My choice was the warrior.

"It's much nicer being the wizard," she said. "Wizards actually have more power than warriors, and they're smarter. Don't you want to be smart?"

I pointed at the warrior. I was two, and I'd made up my mind.

A sudden vertigo hit me like a jolt of electricity, the shock of the unlocked memory leaving me tingling all over. My hands instinctively withdrew from the *thing* like it was some poisonous animal that bit me. Even my heartbeat was elevated. I felt like I'd been punched in the gut.

I looked at my wristcom, but the display was a mess, letters and numbers I obviously knew but somehow couldn't assemble into anything intelligible. Meanwhile, somewhere in the indeterminate distance, I could hear two people talking. They looked like ghosts, almost perfectly transparent, as though they'd always been there in the center of my mind, yet I'd somehow never noticed.

"What is it? A no show? Who?"

"The Captain."

"The Captain? Plankwell wants to fight the Snuka?"

"That's what the schedule says, but he ain't here."

"Huh. Captain No-Show, huh?"

For a fleeting moment, I could vaguely feel a Snuka Model 518 grappling drone pinning me to a mat. I knew the damn thing was non-sentient, but even so it seemed to be enjoying itself.

"He's probably sleeping," Nizlich said, taking the call in the shower.

I was in the shower with my XO! I recoiled in alarm, but she took no notice of me, and my point of view barely trembled. Nizlich was oblivious to my presence.

Obviously, they'd decided to contact someone assigned to the ship proper, and the request to check on the Captain ended up in her lap, so to speak. I watched as she pulled her waterproof slate into the shower to check the ship's logs.

Nizlich looked different from the ghostlike images I'd seen earlier. She was much more in focus, colorful, textured, glistening. I tried pulling my eyes, my sight, away from the very appealing image of my naked, wet, second in command, but instead of moving my point of view away, the impulse moved me around for a better view of her breathtaking buttocks.¹²³ I remembered her workout routine from earlier, and it was doing all the right things. I tried closing my eyes, but it was like a dream. Turning off my vision wasn't an option, so I tried moving closer to limit my field of view and ended up watching the muscles along her jaw flex as she skimmed the ship's logs.

She was checking the time I'd scheduled with the Snuka versus the time I told Jackie to set my quarters to *Do Not Disturb*. The interval was under an hour. "He's probably sleeping," she repeated, albeit this time to herself.

"Computer," she said. "What's the Captain's status. Is he okay?"

"Invalid parameter."

"Is he awake?"

"Clarification required. Are you asking if the Captain is awake?"

"Yes."

"The captain appears to be asleep."

She nodded. "Thank you, Computer."

"You're *velcome*, Commander."

My wristcom finally came back into focus, but I still couldn't read it or at least lacked the patience to try, for a vague shape was taking form in the room's corner. It stood by the door facing me, its face blurry, but I suddenly recognized the uniform. It was of a flight officer, an Imperial fighter pilot.

"Sir, requesting permission to return to duty."
A woman's voice.

"Lt. Jaamzon?" I tried to say.

¹²³ I can't speak for the others, but I personally can't wait for this PBEM to get made into a movie.

Then she was gone, and I found myself on the floor, soaked in sweat and utterly exhausted. I looked at my wristcom. Roughly five hours had passed.

Auugghhhh!

I pulled myself up from the floor, the left side of my neck suddenly hurting as I turned my head to look around.

"Ow!"

What happened?

The secret stash was still sitting out for anyone to see. Meanwhile, my temples throbbed, my entire brain pulsating like it wanted to bust out through my eye sockets, and I was thirsty. I was so very thirsty.

"Captain, you have several messages pending."

"Hold all messages," I croaked, "and remain in *Do Not Disturb*."

It felt like the time I drank that irradiated rum, except even worse. I staggered to the fresher, splashed some water on my face, and checked the cabinet for painkillers. There were some first aid bandages and an analgesic patch. I ripped the patch out of its sleeve and slapped it to the left side of my neck and then, cupping my hands under the water flow, began drinking handful after handful. Inevitably, however, one of my frenzied gulps went down the wrong pipe, sending me into a fit of coughs and drool.

Breathe, Gus. Breathe.

Bloodshot eyes stared back at me from the mirror, my face wet and pallid, and a little vein over my left eye throbbed in time with my pulse. I touched the mirror, watching as the tip of my finger met its reflection, and simply breathed, trying to calm myself. Then, unbidden, the memory of Nizlich naked in the shower popped into my head.

I squeezed my eyes shut. "No, no, no, no! We are *not* doing that now."

Of course, that did nothing to banish the vision from my head. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I tried to put together some facts. That was the first step.

Fact: I had touched the inexplicable thing in the stash.

Fact: An old memory from my childhood had resurfaced.

Fact: Nizlich had a great ass.

I pinched my nose harder. *Stick to the relevant facts!*

Fact: I felt like I'd been physically exerting myself.

Fact: I heard Marines talking about *Captain No-Show*.

I paused. Was that a fact? It was an exterior phenomenon that I *maybe* could verify, but for now, I was leaving the territory of facts and just recounting my experience.

Was I a reliable witness? Every Imperial court would take the word of a Navy Captain, but I wasn't sure I trusted myself right at this moment.

Sweat had soaked through my training clothes, but there was no time for a shower. I needed to figure out what was what.

"Jackie, retrieve and display interior video feed, captain's cabin, triple speed."

"Error: requested data unavailable."

I looked around. Normally, there were small camera domes and mics all over the place aboard Navy ships, including officer cabins, the former in the corners of rooms and the latter positioned centrally, but there didn't seem to be any in *this* cabin.

"Is there an audio record of the captain's cabin?" Nothing. "Jackie, is there an audio record of the captain's cabin?"

"No."

So somebody had them removed. My predecessor? What about the marine pod?

According to my vision, someone there had called me *Captain No-Show*. Audio corroboration would prove this a true vision and not merely a dream. Whichever case, I needed to know.

"Jackie, does the marine pod have audio and video feeds?"

"Yes."

Excellent.

"Jackie, retrieve all interior video *and* audio records from the marine module."

"This requires a level one security authorization to override Interservice Protocol 215."

Oh, cragshabullen!¹²⁴ What was I doing?

¹²⁴ Cragshabullen is a Rhylanori swear word Conrad invented for this campaign. Although Plankwell doesn't know from where it originates, he's been using it since he was a teenager as an expression of extreme frustration.

"Jackie, cancel request!"

The marines were a separate branch of the military. If I pulled the interior logs from their module, the Force Commander would be notified, and I'd have an offended, albeit polite, mass of muscle in my face asking what the problem was. It was already bad enough I'd no-showed on a gym reservation.

I took several deep breaths, forcing myself to calm down, and soon enough, I'd dropped into the rhythm I'd often used before combat launches. Flailing around was not going to get me answers. It would only create more problems.

Steeling myself, I looked around the cabin for that bubble, but it was nowhere to be seen. Last I remembered, it had been floating out of my hand. I needed it stashed and secured before I could do anything else.

Still feeling a little shaky, I grabbed its bag and began searching high and low, finally finding it underneath the kava table. The weird thing, however, was that it was *immediately* underneath, not resting on the floor beneath the table but rather resting on the table's underside as though it could create its own antigravity. And, what's more, as soon as I found it, which had necessitated me getting on my hands and knees, it began floating toward me, as though *it* recognized it had been found.

I opened up its little bag, the one it had been in when I'd first found it, and delicately, taking care not to touch it again with my bare skin, I slid the bag over the bubble and tightened the drawstring. Then I put it back.

"Jackie, secure the secret stash."

The tray rose back into the ceiling.

"Jackie, display messages pending and cancel *Do Not Disturb* on captain's quarters."

I scanned the messages. There was a reminder about the gym reservation and another regarding the imminent missed appointment. A third one from the gym reservation system issued me ten demerits for missing a scheduled resource session.

Demerits?

So many weird little things to figure out about this ship. I acknowledged all the gym messages. Then there was one from the Marine officer on deck following up on the automated system and checking in on me and then one from Nizlich.

I gritted my jaw. I was going to have to throw the mess crew in the launch tube on this one.

I commed Nizlich.

“Captain, are you okay?”

I had left my sweat-stained clothes on, but as soon as I saw her face on the screen, my vision of her in the nude came roaring back. I blinked several times and could feel a heated blush growing around my ears.

“Ah, sorry Commander. Something I had for dinner didn’t agree with me. I guess I should stick to my usual rather than doing any more exploratory eating. The crew stew was... eventful.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” she replied, grimacing. “Let me come over. I have some pills...”

“Oh, uh...” I wasn’t sure I was ready for Stefani to be in the same room with me just yet. “Thanks for the offer, but... uh... I am just going to hit the shower and sleep it off.”

“Let me at least send over a nurse to make sure you haven’t been poisoned by those vorthless galley idiots. I promise you, sir, I will get to the bottom of this!”

“Really, I appreciate the concern, but it’s not necessary.” I forced a smile in the hope of conveying that I didn’t consider it that serious, but I could see her face was flushed in either embarrassment or anger, probably both. “I will report myself to sickbay if I seem to be suffering any further symptoms,” I said, averting my eyes from the screen, “but I just really want to get some sleep.” That last part I meant.

“Aye, sir. If there is anything you need, please do not hesitate to call me.”

Closing the comm, I lay back in my gravity bed and tried to process everything. Images of my aunt were still lurking at the edges of my consciousness along with that faceless pilot — *Jaamzon?* — whereas occupying center stage were still those wet breasts and a certain shapely...

No. No. No!

I needed to get a grip, but my mind was still racing a hundred light-years a minute.

“*You lucky devil,*” Admiral Karneticky’s words flashed through my synapses along with his creepy smile.

Lucky?! How about the opposite?

I could *not* afford to be smitten by my second in command. Not only would it be highly distracting, but I’d surely end up making a fool of myself, probably jeopardizing my entire career.

But my idiot brain wouldn’t stop.

I took a deep breath and focused on my aunt, in particular that hole in my memory from when my parents left me there alone with her when I was two.

Why hadn’t that memory about the wizard and the warrior revealed itself until now? And was the memory even real?

Yes. I was absolutely certain it was.

But why had it been locked away for so long? And why had touching that... that *thing*... unlocked it?

And how did so much time pass so suddenly? Five hours came and went in what seemed like only minutes.

This was useless. I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t even slow down my brain. Annoyed at myself, I got up, and yet I was so tired, my right eye refused to open, so I walked around, essentially one-eyed, groping in the darkness for the door.

It slid open, and suddenly a flight suit was standing in front of me. This time I could vaguely see her face in the dim light, and she saluted.

“Requesting permission to return to duty.” Her words, though softly spoken, echoed off the walls.

“Jaamzon?” Was I dreaming again? Was I interacting? “Permission granted,” I finally said, not knowing how else to respond. Then something came to me, something from the past. “Safe skies, pilot. May you find your way home.”

I was suddenly standing at attention for the funeral of a pilot killed in a training accident, not my squadron, but he had been well liked and the accident had been a freak occurrence.

“May you find your way home,” the wing commander said, speaking to the spirit that was supposedly lurking among us. Of course, I didn’t believe in spirits. When you died, you died. Everything else was make-believe. But I remained at attention, respectfully, as the guns fired in a final salute.

<Beep> <Beep> <Beep>

Food Preparation Aboard the INS Jaqueline

In Chapter 14 as well as this latest one, Captain Plankwell decided to sample what the crew was eating. At the time, I didn't worry too much about it, but then I remembered there's no central galley on the Jaqueline. There's no cafeteria where everyone gathers. Instead, there are separate dining areas scattered throughout the ship. Each department quarters together (for the most part) and presumably eats together, and looking carefully at the deckplans, not all of these dining areas appear to have food preparation facilities, unless, of course, they're well hidden. Furthermore, the kitchens that do exist seem rather small, certainly not big enough to feed the entire crew.

I asked about this on the Mongoose forum, and someone posited that each kitchen has an *autochef*, a highly automated system, sometimes existing within a robot, that basically just needs to be refilled with ingredients at regular intervals.¹²⁵

Autochef (a slot cost option) is described on page 49 of Mongoose's *Robot Handbook*. This book also has a number of steward droids (pgs 63, 77, and 171) as well as a steward shipboard robot (page 170). But, of course, the autochef could also simply be an appliance, sort of like a bread machine, but with vastly greater versatility.

What all this indicates, however, is that each department has its own menu (probably a short one). The gunners might be eating vilani argu, while the scouts are devouring roscap fungus.¹²⁶ And this, of course, drew my attention to another question. What if some of the scouts don't want to eat fungus? What if the argu sounds more appetizing? Can they waltz over to the gunner's mess hall and say, "Hi! Were

here for the carbohydrates!" Or, barring that, can they at least order a tray while supplies last?

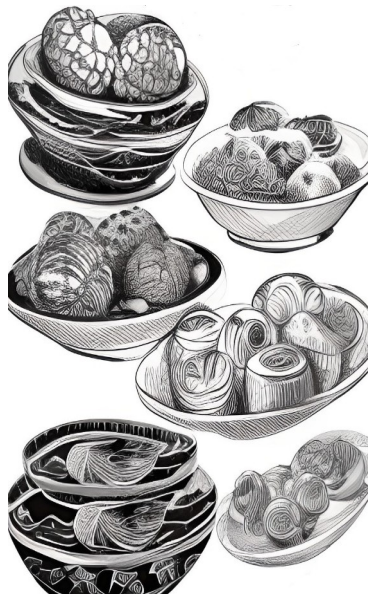
Ever indecisive, I decided to let a d6 answer this question.

1-2: Everyone is assigned to their own department's mess area and has to eat whatever their own department is serving.

3-4: Crew members can order food from other departments (if they do so early enough and supplies last) and have their meals delivered, but they have to eat in their own department's mess areas or their quarters (except, perhaps, on special occasions, when a particular department is hosting an open dinner).

5-6: Crew members can eat wherever they want. The various departments produce their own chow, but everyone is welcome, and once the popular food runs out, people just have to go somewhere else.

Result: I rolled a 3. So the ship is currently being run with the middle option. Captain Plankwell can, of course, change things.



In any case, this provided a good explanation for why crew stew is such a bizarre mishmash of whatever is left over. I could easily see it being a bit stomach-churning. Of course, the next question is which department's galley produces the crew stew?

Hmm. What's the most evil and crazy department on the ship? Intel?

Conrad suggested the pursers and accounting department since they're always finding ways to hit the bottom line. And, actually, that makes perfect sense. Crew stew is, after all, clearly an idea first proposed by either an efficiency expert or a culinary sadist.

I'm so glad I'm not in the Imperial Navy.

¹²⁵ <https://forum.mongoosepublishing.com/threads/element-class-cruisers-food-preparation-where-does-it-happen.123692/>

¹²⁶ <https://wiki.travellerpg.com/Goods/Foods>

Chapter 18

The Checkup

<Beep> <Beep> <Beep>

“23:45” slowly came into focus. I reached up, pressing a button which shut the damn thing off, and then I closed my eyes again, remembering that I was captain. Who was going to yell at me if I didn’t get up? Not only was I captain, but my ship was in port. Half the crew were out gallivanting or hung-over. And I’d told Nizlich I was suffering from food poisoning. Not exactly true, but the crew stew had been pretty awful. If nothing else, my culinary sensibilities had been vigorously assaulted, so if ever there were a time to recuperate, it was certainly now.

<Beep> <Beep> <Beep>

“23:50” glared down at me. *Cragshabullen!* Did I hit the snooze by mistake? I hit it again, and the beeping stopped.

I’d get up in just a minute. Then I’d drink some water. I was thirsty, had a headache, and the urge to pee nagged as I drifted along the ragged edge of sleep.

<Beep> <Beep> <Beep>

The gravbed’s chronometer read 23:55. I switched it off, making sure to actually turn it off completely this time. Then, slowly, I switched off the gravity suppression and dragged myself out of bed, going to the fresher and emptying my bladder. Then I got a cup from the main room and returned, rather than scooping water with my hands like before. It took longer, obviously, but I was too tired to wash my hands (not that I’d bothered the first time). By the time my thirst was quenched, I was more or less awake, although I still had a headache and my neck still hurt a bit somewhere beneath the analgesic patch. I also had that undeniable sense of incurable exhaustion that accompanies a hangover.

I could very easily go back to sleep and let my body wake up whenever it might decide I was ready. I had the excuse of being sick, after all, and I was the captain, so nobody was going to rake me over the coals.

I stared in the mirror. What was I doing?

I studied my image like I was inspecting a raw trooper trying to save face after an ill-advised bender. If I were that guy’s CO, I’d check him

from flying, write him up, and send him off to sickbay to make sure he hadn’t done any permanent damage to himself and, more importantly, to the investment the Navy had made in him.

I thought about it some more. That seemed like an incredibly sensible idea, much more so than huddling in my cabin, woeful over my current situation or powering through whatever this was, trying to salvage some semblance of the indomitable Captain Imperium of the Space Navy.

Do for yourself what you have done for any number of plebes and junior officers over the years.

The Squires Durami came to mind. Might I have contracted whatever she had? Did I want to spend the next few days confined to a vacc suit quarantine while I got the ship ready for departure? No, I did not. Nonetheless, I needed to get myself checked out.

“Jackie, message sickbay to expect the captain for an examination, and copy message to Commander Nizlich with request to reschedule meetings.”

I was going to have to remember all these officers’ names, and sooner rather than later.

Another thought struck me. *Jaamzon.*

I wondered if there had been any change in her condition. This would give me an opportunity to check without seeming unduly interested after deciding to off-ship her for recovery.

I pulled myself together, got into uniform, walked out of my cabin, and then swore.

“Jackie, send tactile directions for sickbay to my wristcom.”

I took a deep breath and put on my *Serious Captain* face. Time to start getting some answers.

The walk to sickbay was uneventful as I navigated the alleyways via the tactile prompts. It was a skill I’d learned fairly young, unlike many of my peers, who had upgraded ears, allowing them to “hear” directions given directly to their auditory nerves. They could take calls and interface sub-vocally with computers, basically whispering commands under their breath and “hearing” responses that nobody else could hear, even someone sitting right next to them in class or at assembly or even on the tubular express.

I couldn't have such implants because, first, it was a security risk due to my plans to go into the Navy. They, it was presumed, would outfit me to whatever specifications they deemed necessary, so getting some megacorp's hardware in my head wouldn't be wise. Hence, I waited patiently, fully-expecting to be outfitted with all the latest mil-tech, and then a cranial surgeon told me I was neuroatypical.

"There's a peculiar asymmetry in your brain," she said, an older woman with a dataport behind one ear. "I assume you've heard of synesthesia."

"No."

"Well, it has to do with various wires getting crossed. Your medical records mention no history of hallucinations." *Hallucinations*. "Have you had any? Any at all?" she'd asked, and I shook my head.

That was nearly twenty-five years ago, and now I finally had a hallucination, and boy, was it a doozy.

What the hell did that *thing* do to me? And should I even mention it to Dr. Willin given where I'd found it?

She wore an ashen face, her expression distant and empty as I walked in.

"I'm here for.... Are you all right, Doctor?"

"Ah, Captain, please... take a seat," she said, turning slowly while clutching her data slate as if it were a shield. "I should be asking you that question. First things first. What can I do for you?"¹²⁷

"Well," I said, sitting, "something happened to me last night that I am not sure how to explain." She busied herself with her slate, but kept giving me sidelong glances as I continued. "I fell asleep waiting for my slot at the gym to start and woke up very, er, *off*.... I thought it had to do with the food I ordered for dinner or maybe the business

of the last two days catching up with me, but I had some extraordinary... uh, dreams, I guess you could call them."

"Dreams?"

She held out her hand as if she wanted me to spit in it, but then I realized she wanted to take my pulse. I lifted my wrist, letting her wrap gentle fingers around it. It had been a long while since I'd voluntarily gone in for a medical check. Sure I'd been put through the wringer after the misjump, but that was standard protocol. When was the last time I'd gone for a check without being ordered?

"It seemed to affect my sense of time," I said, "and I thought I should check to make sure all the parts are still working right. I was cleared for duty after the misjump, and nobody said anything to me about delayed effects, but... well, one worries sometimes."

Dr. Willin nodded professionally and, after noting my pulse, went back to fiddling with her handcomp, making notes or ticking boxes; I couldn't quite see.

"What did you eat for dinner?"

"Crew stew."

She tilted her head to one side, raising an eyebrow, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I could hear Nizlich's voice: "*I need you to examine this for pathogens, poisons, toxins, or anything out of the ordinary.*"

"Why?" Willin's voice.

"Just do it."

"Commander Nizlich had me run a full suite of tests on last night's crew stew, but I didn't find anything out of the ordinary. Did it... taste funny?"

Did I just read her mind?

A flush of adrenaline tingled through my brain, and I coughed into my fist as a cover for my surprise. The sensation of voices that were clearly not actually there reminded me of those two



¹²⁷ Timothy played Dr. Willin throughout this scene.

marines in my dream vision, or whatever it was, only this time I was awake, and so I could feel the contours of this strange perception in a whole new way. Rather than actually hearing anything, they were more like a vivid memory replaying itself in my head, except it was no memory. It was imaginary, and yet she just confirmed its reality.

“Captain?”

Focus, Gus. Did it taste funny?

“It was pretty awful,” I answered truthfully, watching her as she bit her lip. “I generally try to sample the diet for crew offerings at any new posting... to learn a little about what the culture is like.”

She nodded. “A good principle. In principle. In practice of course, the culture between large sealed environments can be quite different. Both socially and the, well, culture of organisms that have made their home aboard a ship or station. Despite the comings and goings of personnel and mixing of atmosphere, water and, um, other biological processes, each crew inhabits a fairly individual and unique biome. The sudden switch between them for a newcomer can play havoc with one’s... personal ecosystem. It’s a much neglected field of study, and I’ve thought of writing a paper or two on the subject. At the very least, I think the Navy could work up a set of protocols that ameliorate the worst of the effects.”

Back in basic training, we spent a week on biome adjustment, although it was better known as Puke Week.

“I wasn’t offered any probiotic boosters when I boarded. I assumed it would all be in the chow.”

“It is,” she said, making some more notes, “but everyone’s gut is unique. Perhaps you just need a few more of the friendly bacteria.” She fetched from a low cabinet a half-liter bottle of a pale blue liquid that looked anything but inviting. “Two fingers of this in a glass before every meal until it’s finished.”

I accepted it, figuring at this point I didn’t really have a choice.

“Can you tell me about your dreams?” she asked the question I’d been dreading.

“Yes, well, it was all very surreal,” I replied, taking a deep breath as she put down her data slate and gave me her full attention. “I seemed to be floating and seeing people in outlines, not

actual people, just the outlines, but I seemed to know they were people. They were saying things which I think I thought were about me, but couldn’t say for sure. Then it transitioned to a female’s shower, uh, this one was very... uh... vivid. The last one happened after I had woken up from the first bout but fell back asleep, I think. It was a fighter pilot asking me to return to duty.”

She picked up a cylindrical instrument.

“I’m going to check your eyes. Please look at the skull.”

A screen on the bulkhead displayed a high resolution image of a skeleton, and I dutifully looked at its skull, which stared back at me unblinking. She then shined a light into my eyes from the side; first the left, then the right.

“Look at its feet,” she then said.

Judging from its height, I decided it had once been a woman, assuming it was a scan of a real person and the projection was showing her actual size. Willin clicked the light off.

“Let’s check your blood pressure.” She waved a different instrument in the vague direction of my neck. I fully expected a sucking of teeth and a rueful shake of the head, but instead she nodded. “Within range. Given the lack of specifics and anything obviously abnormal, I might usually have advised a checkup in twenty-four hours with you monitoring any further anomalies. Then perhaps run some blood tests if anything still seemed off. However, since you’ve got a lot on your plate just at present and wouldn’t have come to me unless you felt it was more than a *little off*, I think we’ll run the blood exam now. We’ll save a deeper scan, head, body, both for follow-up if we think it’s needed. Can you roll up your sleeve for me, please?”

I pressed the cuff release on my left arm to temporarily relax the compression fibers in my shipsuit and then rolled up the sleeve as directed. Shipsuits were every spacer’s dream, but exposing the forearm in one did take a few extra steps. The myoelectric compression fibers had three stages of grip: relaxed, snug, and full compression, the last of which was mainly for use in a vacuum. I expected her to take a series of specimens, but thankfully just one seemed to be necessary: a small phial filled with my blood. I hadn’t even noticed the needle go in.

“Okay. As you’re not reporting anything musculo-skeletal, I won’t put you through a workout, but if you think otherwise or have any changes regarding that, we can revisit. Otherwise, track what you eat and drink for the next twenty-four hours, note any further disturbed dreams or thoughts, and we’ll do this again tomorrow. If there are any other changes or anomalies, I’d like to see you immediately.”

She put away her handcomp and instruments and looked ready to dismiss me, but then the drawn look was suddenly back on top of her professionalism.

“Now, as for the other matter, I’m afraid I have bad news.” Her eyes darted momentarily to the door of the intensive care ward. “There’s no easy way to put this. Lt. Jaamzon died while in transit to the base. I realize she was no longer under your command nor my care, but I thought you should know.” She picked up her handcomp again. “I have details if you need them.”

“You can send them to my review queue,” I replied, feeling momentarily numb. Then I closed my eyes for a moment as a shudder passed through me.

Had it truly been Jaamzon’s spirit with whom I’d conversed? Was it I who released her?

Dr. Willin gazed at me with such intensity, she looked like she was trying to hear me think.

“I always find it troubling when another pilot dies,” I finally said. “There but I... by the realms of possibility.”

She nodded, and both of us shared a moment of respectful silence.

“It might not be a bad idea to arrange an appointment for you with Dr. Pugh. If only to set a baseline.”

“A baseline?”

“Psychological baseline. Pugh’s our resident neuropsychiatrist.”

Ah, of course. She was referring me to the skull doc. A deep, visceral feeling rose in my gut. *I should not be doing this. Stay quiet. Don’t say anything.* As I fought to control my outward demeanor, Aunt Arguaski flashed to mind along with that choice she once gave me between the warrior and the wizard.

“Insert an appointment into my queue,” I said, “and I’ll do my best to show up. Is that all, Doctor?”

“Aye aye, sir.”

I nodded respectfully and quickly made my exit.

No, I didn’t want to see a shrink, but dismissing medical advice when I had gone in search of it would raise more questions than I was comfortable with. In the aftermath of the war, the Navy had become more forthcoming in dealing with mental health issues. Paranoia associated with fighting a war against Zhodani psions tended to do that, but it was also long known that combat trauma was a condition that required attention. And, to put a positive spin on the situation, talking to Pugh might yield some more information about the crew’s morale. My only worry was what the good doctor might discover about me.

Chapter 19

Down the Well

I kept getting little glimpses into people's minds, sometimes voices, memories of something that may or may not have happened, but mostly intuitions, not words, per se, just a gut feeling about what someone was thinking. Commander Nizlich, for instance, wondered what was wrong with me and why I suddenly seemed awkward. Of course, she ascribed it to my recent bout of space-sickness, its origin still indeterminate but likely either a result of stress or, more likely, gastro-microbial adjustment. At least, that would have been *my* best guess if I were her, but it fit with the vibe she was emitting, something I had generally ignored throughout my life as being an inconsequential and sometimes misleading part of interpersonal communication, but which now seemed somehow more intuitive.

Fortunately, she had no idea what *I* was thinking, which was generally centered around my memories (imagined or otherwise) of what she looked like naked. My brain seemed to have a mind of its own, and so I kept looking elsewhere in embarrassment. To be fair, it was either that or explain my highly-detailed vision of the previous sleep-shift, but that, of course, would have been problematic, so, instead, my eyes, caught lingering, sub-voluntarily slipped to the side; not incredibly smooth.

I realized my mistake immediately, of course, but there was no denying that I was fighting something within myself. I respected her, and I liked her, and I had definitely been turned on by her, physically, but those were thoughts I couldn't tolerate. For reasons unnecessary to enumerate, I couldn't allow myself such luxuries. So, pinching the bridge of my nose, I snuffed the thought and looked back up, all business.

After the daily briefing, wherein she went into some detail on the replacement of some fusion barbettes, we inspected the Forward Communications Pod. Of course, by now all the pod commanders knew I would soon be paying them a visit, so I more-or-less expected each to prepare a little song and dance, and Forward Comms did not disappoint. LtCmdr. Ganimakkur Eneri Irkirin Managudeli Damgaramar, the same

guy who wanted me to refit one of our four couriers as a mobile sensor platform, took us to meet two of the lieutenants serving under him, and all together, they led me on a tour of the INS Pheidippides and the INS Francis Laframboise, two Iskimkilukhuir-class Naval Couriers, which were essentially identical except for a few noteworthy idiosyncrasies. The former had a temperamental thruster plate that would occasionally overheat, triggering an automatic shut down of the maneuver drive, and the latter had a fungal infestation in its air ducts.

"Ve don't vant this bug... whatever you caught... creeping onto the Jacqueline," Nizlich said, eyeing the plastic barrier affixed over one of the ducts.

"It won't," Gani replied, his hazel eyes smiling, "But I'd like to get a hazardous bio-materials team up here to clean us out. Whatever's in there has proven it can survive hard vacuum."

The two other couriers, the INS Laura Second and INS Azor Nickerson, were gone, the former for maintenance on the surface of Jewell and the latter due to a sealed-orders mission. Josefeen talking about Esalin flashed to mind, and I exchanged a knowing glance with Nizlich. Did Gani know as well? From his spiel, it was apparent he wasn't supposed to, but courier crews working out of the same pod no doubt talked to each other, so if he didn't know now, he probably would after they returned.

"When is the Azor due back?" I asked.

"Any day now," he said, glancing at Nizlich, "at least, according to what I've been told."

The four couriers were obviously a great asset. Captain Jenkins had often sent one or two ahead of the Jaqueline in order to get a general lay of the land prior to the main ship entering a star system. That way the Jaqueline would have access to sensor data and radio intercepts, already fully analyzed, as soon as it arrived. Likewise, the couriers could be used to check out the situation in nearby star systems, reporting back whatever they found so long as they knew the Jackie's itinerary. In short, if used effectively, they'd allow us to peek in on far more star systems than would otherwise be possible, effectively expanding our presence.

Gani, of course, couldn't help but reiterate his idea of removing the Pheidippides' mail distribution array and installing active sensors in its place. This would turn it into an extra set of eyes for the Jaqueline, not as sharp as our own sensors, of course, but far better than a fighter's. The thrust of his argument was that in the recent "battle" at Quar, things might have unfolded very differently if the ship had a high-end sensor platform that it could dangle out in front of it like bait. (He didn't say *bait* out loud, but it was inferable.)

We did, of course, already have *bait*. We had fighters. Jensen had used them as a screen. But fighters were near-sighted, and up against an Azhanti-class Cruiser, they were little more than flying coffins.

"No offense," he said. "I realize you were both fighter pilots. But you can see from the battle report just how ineffective they were. The damage to the ship had been light, but it could have been far worse. And this way, if you were to take my advice, the forward element would at least have a fighting chance at escape."

He was right, of course. The whole point of putting someone out there was to better our ability to see, not to fight, and the better they could see, the better they'd be able to determine the true nature of the threat. In other words, instead of a squadron or two of fighters, next time it could be just one enhanced courier, but unlike fighters, its enhancement would allow it to discern the true nature of its target far sooner and at much greater distance, and if it got wounded, it wouldn't necessarily need to come back to the ship, and, even more importantly, the ship wouldn't need to wait for its return, because the Pheidippides, like all the other couriers, had a jump drive. If withdrawal orders were initiated, it could heat up its grid and jump to a prearranged rendezvous. That was something fighters couldn't do. But, realistically, at least in the encounter presently under discussion, a courier was big enough, unlike ten-ton fighters, that it would have been easy prey for the Azhanti's spinal mount, and once hit, I doubted it would be able to jump anywhere.

"You make a compelling case," I admitted, despite my misgivings. "This strategy of distributed sensor ops on fighters was a big part

of my earlier career. I've looked over your numbers and the other needs of the ship, and I am considering extending our sensor envelope. It would benefit us on multiple axes of engagement. It could provide better missile engagement parameters as well. I need to review some funds. but I think we can requisition a WideEye sensor suite for the Pheidippides, if you think your crew is up for doing the swap out. I am leaning toward increasing our missile capability with an additional pod, and the extra eyes and control channels we can get with a courier fitted out as a forward observer might give us a surprise edge."

Gani grinned. "Whatever it takes from us, we'll do it, and if we need help from technical services or even engineering, I'll twist a few arms, but we'll get it done."

I liked the attitude that Gani brought to the job and was impressed by his can-do speech. The WideEye was not the top-of-the-line sensor package, but it was reliable, and what it lacked in extreme range, it made up for in medium range resolution. I felt a brief burst of surprise from Nizlich, but she covered it well, making a notation on her slate.

We ended the tour, and I made my farewells and requested a spot on the next shuttle to the surface of Jewell. All the crews were on shore leave rotation, so to request a flight for myself would be seen as wasteful of resources. Being as the ranking officer was the first to board, I claimed a window seat in the back row and watched the crew slated for shore leave begin to fill the compartment.

Most of them glanced toward me before sitting down. It was normal that they'd want to catch a glimpse of their new captain. I had done them the favor of dressing in uniform with the casual cap they had presented me when I first boarded. More than a few smiled when seeing it, and when I nodded at them, they fell into the excited hubbub of spacers on leave that I knew so well.

Multiple conversations soon became a cacophony, some discussing sports, others talking about restaurants they wanted to try. I pulled out my slate and messaged Kaz to see if she could meet me after I finished my business at the base and chandlery. I explained that I had a bit of time on my hands and would appreciate some dinner recommendations to discuss the disposal of our

scout pod and any insights that might be had in the relations between the Navy and business interests on Jewell. But I left her the option to have dinner aboard the Jaqueline, if that was her preference. I'd just have to make sure she didn't order the crew stew.

Someone finally sat next to me, a Vargr petty officer.

"Suenoe," he said.

"Suenoe," I replied.

It was a common greeting one made to fellow pack members, and crewmates were considered pack members regardless of rank. Everything in Vargr society revolved around the pack. How you greeted people and how you said goodbye might differ in some human societies based on social rank, but in Vargr society, all that really mattered was whether you were of the same group. At least, that was the rule in Gvegh, the language most common to them in this region of space.

As for social status, of course that was obviously important, but among Vargr, status was more fluid than among humans. We tended to give our highest allegiance to institutions, not individuals. In Vargr society, however, it was the other way around. Highly competent individuals could show off, as it were, in order to be congratulated with status by the group, and if they rose high enough, they could attempt to take leadership, an act known as Dhuellngae. Needless to say, it led to a lot of in-fighting, one the key reasons that the Imperium didn't have as much trouble with the Vargr as we did with the zhodani. The Vargr, to put it simply, were always fighting themselves.

Through this process, some of them became refugees, and it was generally from these groups that the Imperium's armed services recruited.

"Manda says you know Gvegh," he said in Gvegh.

Lt. Shepherd. I'd last seen her with that robot, Charlotte.

"A little," I replied.

"I am Faeng," he said. His name meant teeth.

"I'm Plankwell, but you can call me Captain." I curled my upper lip, showing just a bit of my teeth, not enough to indicate aggression, but enough that a Vargr should recognize that I was trying to be funny. It was how they did it, anyway, and though interspecies humor was often

difficult, I had benefited from some degree of immersion. He looked at me for a moment but then gave a little huffing grunt that told me I'd gotten it right.

"Faeng, you Thodzou!" someone yelled from across the shuttle. It was a burly guy, a human, and he'd just called Faeng a loner, which wasn't a compliment. He then proceeded, in very broken Gvegh, to announce himself as the "Trevera" of the shuttle and that all should bow in recognition of his awesomeness, or something to that effect. The only problem was that Trevera was the wrong word. It meant something like rat milk and, as far as insults went, was even worse than Thodzou. A lot worse.

I turned my head a little to cover the guffaw that was breaking though. Many naval ratings were natural comedians, albeit unintentionally.

"Shut-up, you Sozoukhin," Faeng yelled back. "Look who I'm sitting next to."

The crewman looked at me, his eyes going as wide as saucers.

"Good thing he doesn't know Gvegh," he finally said in Gvegh.

"You don't know it very well either, Trevera," I replied in Gvegh, feeling the rolling growl at the back of my throat. Then I continued in Standard. "Sit down spacer, before you leak out all over the deck."

Faeng and four other Vargr in the compartment let out high-pitched yelps, their equivalent of laughter, and the burly crewman looked confused, but he quickly sat, pulling out a slate.¹²⁸

Verbal repartee was a large component of establishing one's standing in Vargr society. To some extent, this was also true among humans, particularly the young, where jockeying for status would include banter, gossip and even bullying. For the Vargr, however, at least those in the Extents, these threats didn't decrease quite so markedly at the onset of adulthood. For them, life was sort of like high school, where anyone could start yelling at you about anything in a bid to promote their own status. That's why being so boisterous up front was such a part of their nature. It was a sort of self-defense. The louder you were, the less likely you'd be picked out as a soft target.

¹²⁸ To look up *Trevera*, no doubt.

In any case, this wasn't the Extents; it was the Imperium, and this crewman was a human trying to emulate Vargr norms, not an actual Vargr. He wasn't challenging my position in the pack. He was trying to fit in with a subgroup. But through their laughter, the Vargr on this shuttle staked their positions with me, something that he no doubt felt quite keenly as he studied his slate.

The shuttle's audio and visual cues for preparation to launch came on, and the petty officer assigned to crew control appeared at the cockpit door and began barking at people to fasten their belts. I made sure my restraints were secured, because I was positive I did not want to be singled out by the PO for failure to apply them in the prescribed fashion.

Then there was a slight jolt as we broke free of the Jaqueline, and as the shuttle turned, Jewell moved out of my field of view, leaving me with only the stars to look at. Well, the stars and the shuttle interior.

The Navy was big on uniformity, and the color scheme of shuttle interiors was the most garish shade of greenish-blue imaginable. It was supposed to be calming, but I had my doubts. As for the decking, it was standard hardfoam, easily repairable, and it masked the naked metal of the deck to reduce injuries in the event of unanticipated maneuvers or an inertial control failure. This particular shuttle had freshers to the fore and aft. It was a short flight to the surface, so I'd doubted anyone would be seeking bladder relief, but given the effects of alcohol, the return flight might be a different story.

Jewell's sun, Brilliant, had long since vanished around the side of the planet, so as we descended below the clouds, thousands of tiny lights came into view. I could see Heron City as well as Plankwell Naval Base on its outskirts. Jewell did a full rotation once every thirty-eight and a quarter hours, so the locals tended to work a split shift, a day shift and a night shift. Despite it being night, things were still active down there. Businesses were open. Bars were open. Streets and subways were no doubt packed. Nobody cared that the sky was dark. The city lights more than made up for it.

Faeng stared past me, out my window. Although Vargr tended toward expressiveness, he seemed rather buttoned up, but I could somehow

sense a complex mix of emotions, worry about something as well as anticipation. There were no specifics, so I couldn't be sure I was reading him correctly. After all, aside from me being rather new at this, he was a whole different species. Perhaps Vargr and human baselines were different.

As I looked at him, into his eyes, more specifically, only the words "Doggy Style" came to mind. Dog, of course, was a slur denoting a Vargr, or one could generically use the names Fido and Lassie for an individual of the male or female persuasions. As with any species, especially any major race, there were an abundance of insults in more-or-less common use. But he didn't look offended. He was anticipating/worrying about something, and that made a certain amount of sense, given that *Doggy* and *Style*, put together, meant something rather specific.

As I stared at him for a long moment, trying to perceive more deeply, he noticed and, embarrassed, sat back in his chair.

"Sorry, Captain," he said. "First time on Jewell. I assume you've been here before?"

Sorry? This guy was definitely raised Imperial.

"Uh, yes, a few times," I said. "Sorry for staring, but you seemed worried. Heading into a situation planetside?"

He froze up for a moment, seeming to squirm in his own fur.

"Ah... no. I'm just curious what's down there."

"Whole lot of humans, a naval base named after my ancestor, and more Navy personnel than not. Keep your casual uniform on, and you should be okay mixing in."

Keep your casual uniform on. No idea if he'd get it.

Faeng looked at me, his gaze clouding slightly, but then he focused again out the window. I turned to look. A giant hologram of Olav hault-Plankwell, at least his face, slowly turned in mid-air over the city.

A deep pit of exasperation and chagrin opened in my stomach. I was never going to be free of these reminders. This was like walking under the portrait of Olav at graduation, or when Admiral Chantev called on me to award an MCUF to my

squadmate in the name of Plankwell. Every time I thought it was over, something like this happened.

The hologram looked like it was propped up by about thirty or forty sticks, each emanating from below the brown, industrial fog that enshrouded Jewell. It provided a nice medium to obscure and disperse laser light, which meant these must have been powerful lasers indeed, for he was still bright enough that I could see he was saying something. *It was saying something.* At least, its lips were moving while its eyes seemed to track me as we flew past.

“Boo-yah!” Faeng grinned, full-toothed, which could be taken as a dare to the disagreeable. “Now there’s a real Ghuzoukhin¹²⁹,” he said. “You’re so lucky to have his blood running in your veins.”

I stifled a scowl and nodded, pulling out my dataslate.

Given that he was Vargr, Faeng had paid me quite a compliment, as many of his species were known to have a racial superiority thing going on, what with their excellent hearing and sense of smell. Some even regarded themselves as the Ancients’ finest creation, so to compliment a human on his ancestry was rather out of the ordinary. Then again, Faeng was clearly an Imperial Vargr. I’d met many of them, and most, I would say, had more in common with Humaniti¹³⁰ than with their own brethren in the Extents¹³¹. Still, no Vargr had ever said I was lucky to have Olav’s blood running in my veins, although this was possibly due to the vast number of Vargr he’d killed during his illustrious career.

I needed to figure out what new Plankwell event I was apparently flying into, so I opened an interface to the planetary network and ran a search. The first thing to pop up was a video of the hologram. I tapped it, eliciting a brief message from Olav that was in sync with his lips: “I would look down upon our Imperium and watch our glorious future unfold.”

He’d said it during the reception, *my reception*.¹³² I’d effectively elicited it, but it was highly out of context. Somebody in the government had obviously taken this small

snippet, cutting out the part about the Dakhaseri and his painful realization that he was nothing more than an historical reenactment.

I could only imagine that somewhere in the Navy’s bureaucracy, someone of importance would notice this, and it would trigger another look-see at my record. Just being in proximity of an outbreak of Plankwell-fever was sure to trigger something.

Below the video of the hologram, there were other items of interest: that news segment from Faye Mekizush, which I’d already seen, along with various commentaries; then another article with the headline *Plankwell AI: Too Glitchy To Salvage*; then *Reconciliation at the Reception*, then *Plankwell Fixes Plankwell*, and so on and so forth. *Resurrecting Plankwell. All’s Well That Planks Well.*

Oh, please.

I kept scrolling until one item caught my eye: *Conspiracy Theorist & Grifter; Dimitri Jor; Smears Both Plankwells.*

Both Plankwells?

Bright light streamed through the cabin windows. We were landing in a shuttle terminal, effectively a big hanger with an enclosed ramp.

“It says here that Jewell’s gravity is 81% of standard,” Faeng said, looking at his own slate. “I guess that means I’ve lost weight.”

“Think how much more you can now eat and drink!” I replied in what I hoped was intelligible Gvegh, marking the article for later reading.

“I want to see how high I can jump!”

I gave him the slight lip-raise that passed for an acknowledgment of humor (or, at least, the attempt). “Have a good time down the well, spacer!”

“Aye aye, sir.”

129 <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Dictionary:Ghuzoukhin>

130 <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Humaniti>

131 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Vargr_Extents

132 See page 61.

Chapter 20

Close Call

As the doors opened and people began filing out, I pulled up a contact report and attached links to the video of the hologram¹³³ and the Mekizush segment¹³⁴, jotting down a brief summary: “Follow-up on incidence of Plankwell name and imagery being used for social excitation, important due to duplication of segments of Olav construct public statements. Suggest elevated monitoring.” Maybe calling it to Fleet’s attention would mitigate whatever damage it might cause. I hit *send* and, as an afterthought, forwarded a copy to Lt. Abbonette, the Intel Liaison. Yesterday morning she’d invited me to come to the Intel Pod for a high-level briefing.¹³⁵ Maybe sending her this contact report would allay any concern she might have that I might be avoiding her.

Was I avoiding her?

No. There were only so many hours in the day. I’d been busy. Still, after filing the contact report, I pulled up tomorrow’s schedule and promoted Intel Pod to the start of my day. Abbonette probably already knew about Olav’s hologram as well as the entire media circus surrounding him.

*Both Plankwells.*¹³⁶

The only other Plankwell around here, as far as I knew, was me. Hence, I couldn’t resist taking a quick peek at that article.

The festering boil of jealousy and rage that is Dimitri Jor released yet another video attempting to cast shade on people far better than himself, in this case, Olav hault-Plankwell and his living descendant, Captain Augustine Plankwell of the Imperial Navy.

“Sir?”

I looked up. The shuttle’s petty officer looked at me from the aisle. Aside from the two of us, the compartment was empty.

¹³³ See Chapter 19.

¹³⁴ See Chapter 16.

¹³⁵ See Chapter 13.

¹³⁶ This refers to an opinion piece he just found. See Chapter 19.

“Thank you,” I said, checking the name badge, “Venasis, sorry for the delay.”

“No problem, sir.”

I unfastened my safety restraint and got up, pulling down the small case I’d brought along for sundries, then nodded to the flight crew as I exited the shuttle. The boarding ramp descended into a subterranean transit tube, a walkway on one side and a gravway on the other. Gravpods of various shapes and sizes whooshed past, and as I didn’t know which way to go, I welcomed the wayfinding system’s message via my wristcom.

“You have an appointment at the quartermaster’s office with Commander Shumurdim.¹³⁷ Do you need directions?”

“Yes.”

“Please board Pod #33, Captain.”

I looked. Not far from where I stood, a row of transport pods, their numbers electronically displayed, rested along the edge of the walkway. People were getting into them as well as coming out as new ones arrived, and Faeng was there as well along with Mr. Rat Milk and many others from the shuttle. Pod #33 was there too, a one-seater.

I climbed in and settled down, waving my wristcom through the activation reader, which prompted the safety harness to drop over my shoulders and midsection as the door closed. Then it began moving, Faeng saluting me before he disappeared from view.

I’d said no salutes, but the point was to save my arm from falling off due to otherwise having to counter-salute a couple hundred times per day. So he’d waited until I was speeding away, no chance he’d see a counter-salute even were I inclined to give him one. It was interesting, as

¹³⁷ Captain Plankwell requisitioned a psi-scanner (see page 11), and Shumurdim got back to him, saying he wanted to meet with Plankwell in person to discuss this request (see Chapter 16). It was at this point Captain Plankwell realized requisitioning such a piece of equipment was probably a political faux pas. Imperial paranoia surrounding psionics stems from the Psionic Suppressions of the late 8th and early 9th century (https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Psionics_Suppressions). In short, because the hierarchy of Zhodani society is based on psionic prowess, and because they’ve become so effective at exploiting their powers for population control, the Imperium has made psionics taboo, ostensibly to protect itself against enemy infiltration. This was discussed to some extent in Chapter 3.

Vargr were known for having an aversion to giving respect to people just because they wore a certain rank. Faeng would be one to watch. He was comfortable around authority, at least around me, and quick.

"Would you like something to drink, Captain?" a computer-generated voice asked.

"Water, chilled."

The quartermaster's office would be alerted I was en route. Some people chafed at the level of passive surveillance in the Navy, but I thought it made the observance of protocol much easier. As a metal arm extended a cup of cold water toward me, the liquid's surface quite still thanks to the pod's inertial suppression, I pulled out my slate and slid the Dimitri Jor article to the side to look up Faeng's service record.

He was a deckhand, petty officer 2nd class, with a specialty in mechanics, and glancing at his evaluation summary, I could see he was well-regarded in his section. It stood to reason. His home world, Menorb, was known for its affluent Vargr population. Although a minority, they'd done quite well, so much so that they were basically running the planet. It was where the smartest and most capable Vargr came to make their mark. If he'd experienced any sort of speciesism, it's doubtful it would have happened there, and in the Navy such behavior was punished as a matter of course, all of which explained why he was so well-assimilated.

The pod entered a large atrium, a good two-thirds of its ceiling composed of what looked like transpex, and highly weather-worn at that. *Scoured* might have been a better word. Particulates and time generally added up to a maintenance nightmare. For the most part, the gravway had been pretty drab, but this area was brightly-colored and well-lit, with an assortment of plants and a man-made waterfall. The pod's door opened, and I stepped out.

"Please enter Elevator #1, Captain," the wayfinder said through my wristcom.

I looked around. There was a bank of three elevators, each enumerated in both Anglic and Vilani script. I entered #1, the inertial compensation so finely tuned that I didn't know if it was taking me up or down. When the doors reopened, a young petty officer 3rd Class was standing there, apparently expecting me.

"Captain Plankwell," he said, "Commander Shumurdim is expecting you, but he's in a meeting. Can I get you something to drink while you're waiting?"

"Zardocha would be excellent."

"Ice-blended with an ounce shot of Frangelico, sir?" He apparently already knew my preferences.

"Thank you," I nodded.

It was a good sign. I wanted as much nonchalance around this meeting as I could get, and being offered a drink sent the message that this was not a serious matter but something that could be worked out without issue. I hoped so, in any case, as he led me into a large lobby that looked like a room in some military museum. Mounted on the walls were an assortment of antique weapons, one of them an old laser rifle that hadn't been in production for the better part of a millennium. Likewise, there were video picture frames, their surfaces polished to perfection. No doubt, they'd recount past glories to anyone who might have the misfortune of stepping too close.

I sat down and resumed skimming Faeng's service record, but curiosity got the better of me, and I switched back to the article about the guy who purportedly smeared *both* Plankwells.

Citing a video of questionable provenance currently circulating on Subnet as well as a self-described lip-reader from a non-aligned world only two parsecs from the Zhodani Consulate, Jor claimed that the two Plankwells "hate each other," as though what a malfunctioning machine "thinks" about a sophont (or anything else) is of any consequence.

The so-called hullabaloo occurred on Forday, 117, at a reception for Captain Plankwell, recently appointed Commanding Officer of the INS Jaqueline, which had previously been ambushed, probably by Zhodani-aligned pirates, at Quar. Attending this reception was an experimental AI wearing the guise of none other than Olav-hault Plankwell (Captain Plankwell is a direct descendant). However, due to the well-known unreliability of such machines, Captain Plankwell was put in the unenviable position of having to apologize

for his ancestor, an icon and a legend who needs no apology and who could never be emulated by any technology, no matter how advanced.

According to all eyewitnesses, Captain Plankwell behaved honorably. But Dimitri Jor, using an unauthorized video from Subnet and a "lip-reader" who could well be a Zhodani agent, all in a cynical attempt to draw attention to himself, has violated the rules of common decency and shown himself, once again, to be nothing more than a deceitful scoundrel who should be evicted from Jewell for spreading socially-corrosive disinformation, which is all he does everywhere he goes.

So where was this video? The article provided no link. I did a quick search on the public database: *Dimitri Jor Plankwell lip-reader*. A link popped up, so I tapped it. "Video purged due to content policy violation."

One of several doors opened, and I could hear Admiral Karneticky's voice saying "to keep a close eye on it," as a lieutenant stepped out.

The admiral's office was here right alongside the quartermaster's?

"Captain Plankwell?"

A young spacehand — she looked like she was just out of the academy — approached with a glass of ice-blended zardocha complete with a thick layer of white. "I hope you don't mind the whipped cream, sir. If so, we can make another."

My wristcom beeped. A priority message.

"Plankwell, here."

"Sir, this is the Jaqueline. I'm putting through a priority call from Admiral Karneticky."

"Uh..."

"Plankwell, are you there?" the admiral's voice came through loud and clear.

"Sir, I..."

"I want you to come down here. There's a matter I need to discuss with you, and the sooner the better."

It looked like the zardocha was soon to be more medicinal than social.

"Yes, sir. Shall I show myself in?"

"The sooner the better," he reiterated.

I used battle deck hand signals to indicate to the spacehand that she should convey me to the

admiral. It may have been my rustiness, but I was pretty sure I used the signal sequence for me-trigger-direct-obsolete-warhead. Smothering a smile, albeit poorly, she showed me in.

"I don't care if you're busy," the admiral said, leaning back so far in his chair that he was essentially facing the ceiling. "Whatever you're doing, drop it and get..." His voice trailed off as he noticed me standing directly in front of his desk. "How in the bloody...? Did someone invent teleporters, and I'm the last to know?"

"I was already down the well for an appointment with Commander Shumurdim," I explained. "Afterwards, I was going to head over to the Dockmaster's office to follow up in-person with some refit details and to convey my gratitude for the expediency of the work on the Jaqueline and then get some shopping in at the Starwinds. Just a matter of good timing, really."

I toasted him with my ice-blended zardocha and looked for a place to set it down. It would be pushing the bounds of propriety to set it on his desk. Luckily, one of the visitor chairs had a side table. I put down my drink and stiffened into a formal stance, saluting.

"Captain Plankwell reporting as requested."

Requested, not ordered. I was carefully reminding him I was *not* in his chain of command and that he would do well to remember that I was doing him a courtesy. Granted, I could make things difficult by standing on my rights, but things had been going well, and I was curious about what he wanted.

He gave me a lazy counter-salute, and I lowered myself into the visitor chair, taking off my cap, and pulling my data slate out of my pocket.

"First and foremost, I want to talk to you about this medical transferee who died today," he said, his gaze momentarily pivoting to his computer monitor. "Lt. Jaamzon was his name."

"Her name," I corrected.

"Yes, well... in any case, it's all very tragic, to be sure." *And since one must never let a good tragedy go to waste...* "So I was thinking that, given the measure of her sacrifice, a military service, open to the public, would be fitting, and as the commanding officer of the vessel she died defending... well, it would be appropriate for you to be there to say a few words."

The part about never letting tragedies go to waste wasn't stated, but it was there in his mind. I could almost hear the words as if he'd spoken them, but I kept my expression carefully neutral. To be discovered as a telepath, albeit a highly inexperienced one, would be worse than career-ending. It could get me *disappeared*.

"I..."

I froze momentarily. Putting aside the fear of being discovered, I didn't want to make any more speeches. Too often, I'd been wrapped up in protocol and trotted out by the Navy to make publicity off my name. They'd never let the Plankwell legend die. But Jaamzon was a fighter pilot, one of mine, however briefly, and something in me had given her permission to let go. I didn't know if I would ever understand it. I didn't know if I even wanted to. But pilots owed each other. Regardless of what others would make of it. Heavy was the duty that we laid upon ourselves.

"Very well. Let me know the details, and I will be ready."

"Captain Masa, our Public Relations Coordinator, will be in contact. Oh, before you go, there's one other thing we need to discuss: *Olav*. I expect you noticed his hologram on your way down."

"It was rather hard to miss."

"Masa's idea. Ever since the armistice, the bean-counters have been shrinking our budget. Hence the need for *Olav's* little public service announcement, to remind everyone that the Imperium is an ongoing project and that complacency is our enemy. We're trying it out here first, but if all goes well, it'll be played throughout the sector." I felt a wave of nausea as he continued. "In any case, Countess Helena is apparently intrigued and wants me to shuttle Zeenye and his neuromorph over to her palace at Silver City for a private audience. Obviously, someone from the Navy has to be there, and since you did such a splendid job at the reception in terms of controlling the old coot, well... I can't think of anyone better suited to the task."

No!

"Sir, while I appreciate the confidence you place in me, I have no real wish to engage with the neuromorph anymore. I don't wish to be insensitive to the needs of the Navy, but I am on a

schedule for departure. The Navy needs me doing what I am doing *now*, not indulging my name with experimental technology that has already caused a social incident and generated unfavorable press. I will certainly make time in my schedule for the funeral service," I said, standing, "but someone else needs to be dealing with the neuromorph."

Frowning, Admiral Karneticky steepled his hands.

"I viewed the recording of your private conversation with *Olav*, so I can understand your feelings. He isn't who any of us thought he'd be, but, bear in mind, as he is a neuromorph and *not* an actual person, certain possibilities are open to us."

"It's not so much what *it* is," I said, my blood pressure rising, "as it is the constant association of my name and the honor of the Navy, as I clearly established in my oh-so-public apology, being linked to this unpredictable technology that uncannily resembles *my ancestor*, such that it takes airs and assumptions that cannot be predicted."

"Yes, well, as I was saying, there are certain possibilities..."

"There are always possibilities," I protested, "but tactical sense indicates that using unpredictable tools in high-risk situations leads to unexpected outcomes, and while they may sometimes be favorable, it has been my experience with the neuromorph, so far, that it seeks favor for itself."

"Yes. Well, it's a long way to be demoted... from emperor all the way down to a brain in a freezer box." The admiral cracked a smile. "I wouldn't be happy either, but the truth is, he's invaluable to us as a symbol, so long as we can control him."

"I understand that, and I understand that there is always a need to maintain the Navy's image in the eyes of the public. I will even admit that any invocation of Plankwell, especially out here on the frontier, will activate patriotic fervor and make people more amenable to whatever sacrifices have to be made for the greater good. However, my recommendations are to limit the use of the neuromorph in uncontrolled settings or with people of influence. It is too convincing and too unpredictable. Even my mild success in

negotiating with it required treating it in a way that I fear it will not readily forgive. I very much doubt it will cooperate further.”

“There are many ways to skin an Aslan¹³⁸.” Karneticky said. “The problem with Olav as he’s presently constituted is that he’s too much like a real person, too self-interested — favor-seeking, as you put it — and yes... too unpredictable. Pursuant to your earlier recommendation, I called the local office of the Ministry of Technology and talked to a chap by the name of Agidda. He has an idea for taming the beast.” Karneticky paused for a moment, tilting his chin down. “This is all classified, of course, but I’ll share it with you if you’re interested and think you might be of any use. But if you’re certain you want no part of Olav, no matter what we make of him, so be it. You are not under my command. You may suit yourself. I was simply trying to give you an opportunity to meet the Countess and make a favorable impression and perhaps have a hand in our designs. But if you look upon it as an imposition, well... perhaps the less said the better.”

If I truly wanted out, this was my opportunity. But I’d lose access. They’d make of Olav whatever they wished, and I’d have no say nor even knowledge of it until whatever excrement they were concocting would hit the fan, my family name attached. Although, with the Ministry of Technology involved, there was less to worry about. And if the admiral was acting on my recommendations, and it seemed he was, then there was hope.

“Ah,” I said, my curiosity piqued. “I begin to see. My apologies, Admiral, of course you have taken steps. I apologize for my outburst and beg your pardon. I have been recovering from some adjustment issues to the shipboard regime. Nothing serious, I assure you. Perhaps I’m just overeager to make a good impression on the crew.”

“Sometimes, Captain, the best impression one can make on a new crew is a bad one.”

I didn’t quite know how to reply to that. I still had an uneasy feeling in the pit my stomach, but this was a fleet admiral in front of me, the highest ranking naval officer in the entire subsector, and I

was but a mere captain, several steps lower on the proverbial totem pole¹³⁹, so I settled into the career officer attending manner that I hoped would convey the right amount of deference.

“Thank you for considering me for this task, sir. I will, of course, do my best. My impression of Commander Nizlich is that she has the refit well in hand, and barring some minor oversight duties, I am at your service.”

“You’d best mean that. If I learn later you’re just pumping me for... *Commander Shumurdim*,” he said, looking past my left shoulder. “Practicing eavesdropping again, are we?”

“Oh, no sir; just loitering, I’m afraid,” a man said from the doorway. Tall and lean, Shumurdim looked about my age, but his hair was already greying at the temples. Working so close to Karneticky, he was probably under a fair amount of stress. “Actually, I’ve a meeting scheduled with Captain Plankwell and came looking for him. Melissa said he was in here with you. I do hope I’m not interrupting.”

“What’s that doohickey you’ve got?”

“Oh, this?” Shumurdim glanced down at the device in his hand. It resembled a data slate but had a bank of five antennae sticking out the top, the middle one, easily the largest, capped by a tiny, white corona ball. “It’s a psi-detector. The Captain requisitioned it.” Stepping closer, Shumurdim pressed a button, and the antenna’s tip began to emit a dark green hue.

I wanted to run, but there was nowhere to go. Admiral Karneticky sat behind his desk, while the Base Quartermaster stood between me and the only exit, his psi-detector glowing green as he approached.

Think fast.

“What are you doing man!” I barked at the Commander. “Shut that down immediately!”

Shumurdim stopped in his tracks, his face blanching as his mouth fell open. He complied, however. At least, the thing stopped glowing.

“My apologies, Captain,” he said, stepping closer. “I was simply trying to demonstrate its operation.”

The shakiness in my limbs began to settle when I noticed his wrinkled brow and stooped

¹³⁸ <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Aslan>

¹³⁹ <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/low+man+on+the+totem+pole> for non-American readers.

posture. Meanwhile, the damnable internal twinge at the back of my head relayed the actual shock and worry now radiating from this man I'd only just met. In any case, my impromptu gambit worked!

"No, my apologies, Commander, Admiral," I said, breathing a sigh of relief. "An old reflex from growing up on Rhylanor. There was a period of psi-hunting in the lead-up to the last war, a resurgence of the lawless time when psi-detectors were not nearly as reliable."

That was more or less true. Ever since the Suppressions¹⁴⁰, anti-psi sentiment had periodically bubbled up, sometimes leading to accusations, lawlessness and extrajudicial killing. I had spent a nervous night in prep school when a mob from the nearby town had run riot and decided the school was harboring psions. The Constabulary had moved in with anti-riot squads, and the masters of the school had brought us up to watch the necessary remedies to restore order.

Out here on the frontier, it was looser, the Zhodani threat closer, and there was a documented history of infiltration attempts. Psi-detection was much more pragmatic, and whilst not without some stigma, use of the devices was much more routine.

Nonetheless, I was still within my rights to demand it be turned off. According to Navy regulations, psi-detectors were to be operated only by qualified personnel with an Intelligence warrant. Well, there were loopholes around the warrant, but not around the qualification.

"Ah." Shumurdim nodded. "False positives have always been a thorny issue. Unfortunately, these devices are still quite finicky, which is why I thought it best to talk to you in person about the potential problems."

"I appreciate the extra steps you took in bringing this to me. If I may?"

"Oh, of course, but first, I'm afraid I'm required to ask what you need it for. Is there some problem of which we need to be made aware?"

"Not immediately," I replied. "My primary concern was the fighter pilot, Jaamzon, who had been injured in our last engagement."

"The one who died?" Karneticky interjected.

I nodded. "Before she died, she exhibited some odd behaviors that the medical team brought to my attention. I was going to use the device on her to see if there was any psionic activity in her vicinity. It's my understanding that the device scans and detects psionic activity, like a bio-scanner detects bio-activity."

"Yes. Well... that and the residue of such activity." Quartermaster Shumurdim looked down at the detector still firmly in his hands.

"Residue?" Karneticky asked with a curled lip.

"Psionic auras leave an imprint," Shumurdim explained, "a detectable signature. It decays over time, sometimes quickly but other times quite slowly, depending on the depth of the energy impression."

"Extraordinary," the admiral said.

"In any case," I continued, "I'd like to have this device on hand if any of the other fighter pilots begin exhibiting similar symptoms."

"What sort of symptoms?" Karneticky asked.

I paused, considering my next words.

"There have been unofficial reports of waking dreams... visions."

"Visions?"

To embroider the answer with my own experiences was risky, but I wanted to be sure there was something truthful there, and I didn't dare mention Jaamzon's ghost. No one believed in ghosts.

"My medical department is treating it as Post-Combat Stress Response, but I have had some experiences dealing with psi-phenomena during the war, including one particular incident that... uh... was kept out of the official logs."

"By who?"

"Intel."

"Of course." Karneticky nodded, his expression grave.

I felt a slight twinge of worry. It was something I swore I'd never mention. But this was a fleet admiral I was talking to, and given his rank, Karneticky must have seen his own share of psionics during engagements with the Zhodani.

A culture of fear surrounded this subject matter, in part stemming back to the Suppressions. The Imperial Navy once included psions within its ranks, many rising to prominence, but security priorities had forced it to clean house. Centuries later, it was a sensitive

140 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Psionics_Suppressions

subject to broach no matter one's clearance or rank, something the Frontier Wars had repeatedly thrown into sharper focus.

"In any case," I continued, "some clandestine scanning at some of the locations mentioned in the unofficial reports will rule out psionic interference, and we will proceed in treating the PCSR in the normal fashion. I will, of course, loop our Intelligence division into what we are doing."

"Yes, that would be wise," Karneticky agreed. "Whenever coming across anything *or anyone* psi-related, my general rule has been to shoot first and then call Intel to clean it up. They've always obliged. I would be very careful with that thing if I were you."

"Don't break it," Shumurdim echoed, handing it over, "and remember, this is a loan, not a gift. If you don't have anyone who can operate it safely, we can certainly find someone qualified."

"I'll have it back to you before we jump out-system," I promised, accepting the detector and then, after a curt nod, turning toward the man behind the big desk. "Will that be all, Admiral?"

"For now," Karneticky replied. "I'm sure the two of you will have plenty to discuss. Commander, make sure the Captain's material requests are expedited."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Thank you, sir," I said. "I will make arrangements to attend the memorial service, and I am, of course, at the Countess's disposal and will adjust to fit her schedule."

"See that you do, Captain. See that you do."

Chapter 21 **Mop & Broom**

The psi-detector didn't quite fit into my valise, what with its long antennae, particularly the middle one, which was as long as the control panel. Holding it in my hand, I couldn't help but recall how, when Commander Shumurdim had momentarily switched it on, the tiny globe at the thing's tip had begun glowing a sickly shade of green. What did green mean? Speaking of switching it on, I didn't see any obvious controls, and the antennae, much to my chagrin, refused to fold down.

Meanwhile, my zardocha beckoned from the side table. Tragically, I only had two hands, yet there were three items technically in my possession: the psi-detector, the valise, and my drink. Tucking either of the first two under one arm seemed a bit precarious, never mind the third, and as for leaving one's drink in an admiral's office, a fleet admiral's, no less, that could be a risky move, career-wise.

"Pardon me Commander, is there a travel case for this thing?"

"A null box¹⁴¹, a bit unwieldy, but we can have Fabrication create something, or if you'd prefer, I can parcel it up to your ship."

"Parceling it up would be ideal," I said, handing it back to him. "Thank you, Commander."

"I'll send it by courier, just to be safe."

Which meant it would probably end up in the ship's vault. There'd be scuttlebutt as well as a paper trail.

"Make sure you address it directly to the Captain's quarters," I said. "Wouldn't want it getting lost in the replenishment loading. I have a secure facility to store it in. If you will excuse me, Commander, Admiral."

"You're both dismissed," Karneticky flapped one hand as though shooing us away.

I picked up my drink and valise and exited the Admiral's office, Commander Shumurdim

¹⁴¹ A null box is a box or crate outfitted with an inertial damper, providing a nice layer of protection over packing material so long as it remains turned on. This adds significant weight to the box, but this is often ameliorated with gravitic suppression as well.

following as I deposited my drink on a low table in the waiting room.

“So you’re going to see Countess Helena?” he asked.

“Yes. I have only seen her a few times,” I lied — it was once, and what I actually saw was her hologram, “but she and the Admiral seem to be on good terms.”

Were they? That’s more or less what I wanted to find out as I studied the Commander’s reaction, which wasn’t easy, as he stared at me for just a brief moment before breaking eye contact. During that moment, however, I caught something, a single word: *Amika*.

“Yes, they are, aren’t they,” he said, now smiling. There was definitely more there.

“Are you headed to the vicinity of the Dockmaster’s office, Commander? Do you mind if we talk a little if you are headed my way?”

“I’ve got another meeting, I’m afraid, but there is something I need to talk to you about if you have a minute. It has to do with your exploration pod. What are your plans? Full refurbish and restaff, or... the Admiral mentioned you’re considering replacement.”

“Ah yes, the pod.” I knew from all the discussions with the command staff that someone was going to be out of joint no matter what I decided, but I needed to get the process moving. “With the continuing need to show the starburst, I would prefer to have a functioning exploration pod. If there is one available, I would like to switch it out and have the yard commence repairs on the damaged one. Of course, if repairs are not feasible, I am sure the Navy will make the right decision regarding the ultimate disposition of the damaged unit. I have my scout liaison preparing crew requirements, so if there are any issues with that, I am sure Scout Marshall will be able to iron them out.”

“Scout Marshall? I didn’t know the scouts had marshals.”

“His name’s Bim Marshall. He’s a member of my crew.”

“Oh, I see.” He winced, grinning. “Well, in that case, I’ll interface with Scout Marshall, and we’ll get this project underway. I’ll be sending you a statement of authorization. Make sure to sign it at your earliest convenience, and we’ll handle the rest.”

“Thank you for your assistance, Commander. I won’t keep you any longer.”

I turned and left, using my wristcom to request directions to the Dockmaster’s office, which was where I expected I’d find the Yard Commander, who was typically the head of maintenance on most naval bases. Of course, I wasn’t intimately familiar with how things were done here on Jewell, and despite this base bearing my surname, I had no idea where things were. That was partly due to the Wayfinding system being so bleeping helpful, but it was also because Plankwell Naval Base was so bleeping big. Granted, most of it was in orbit, but what was dirtside was the size of a respectable city. Hence the need for the gravpods that shuttled people around from one place to the next, all very clean and high-tech compared to what lay outside.

While in transit, I pulled out my slate and sent the Dockmaster’s office a message that I was en route. Skimming through my inbox, I noticed a voicemail from Kaz Remshaw, the lady Admiral Karneticky had introduced me to at the reception.

“Hi. I got your message. How would you feel about some local seafood? There’s a place, the Squid Hunter. I’ll send you a link. Say at around two-ninety? Let me know what works.”

Two-ninety? I consulted my dataslate. Jewellers, or Jewellians as they were also known, used *deplars*¹⁴² as units of time, defining zero as sunrise. So she was basically saying 290-o’clock, local time, which my slate said was a little over an hour from now. But getting to that restaurant on the subway could take nearly that long. Another option was air-taxi, quite a bit more expensive, but it would shave considerable time off the trip. But then I’d be flying above the city rather than moving within it, seeing its people and feeling their vibe.

“I’ll be there,” I replied by text, then asked the Wayfinder to guide me to the nearest transit tube to Heron City, only now wondering where I’d be spending the night.

As the gravpod came to a full stop and then started moving in the opposite direction, I sent the Dockmaster’s office a followup message that my visit would be delayed, and would it be possible to meet with the Yard Commander tomorrow? I

¹⁴² Deplar stands for degrees of planetary rotation, basically 1/360th of a local day.

needed time to pay proper respect and give them the opportunity to talk to me about whatever might come up. Engineers always had an opinion, and the best course was to give them time to express it. I then messaged Starwinds asking them to arrange planetside accommodation and that I would visit later in the evening. Finally, I sent an apology to Lt. Abbonette, telling her I'd need to reschedule the visit to the Intel Pod due to *admiral override*, which, whilst not exactly true, wasn't exactly false either.

The gravpod dropped me off at a monorail platform at the very edge of the naval base, and a train pulled up as I began passing through a security checkpoint, getting my hand, eye, and military ID scanned by a trio of customs officers as a stern voice on the PA demanded I declare any weapons, alien lifeforms, foreign media, hazardous substances, seeds, spores, eggs, pollen, or other reproductive agents, medicines, pharmaceuticals, chemicals other than dihydrogen-oxide... etc... etc... on or within my person.

Within?

In other words, I was supposed to declare if I was a drug mule? Or perhaps had a ceramic pistol lodged up my colon?

I ticked off the boxes for *Imperial Navy Officer* and *Nothing to Declare*. The presence of bases sometimes grated on local populations, but Jewell was considered a friendly harbor. It was rare for military personnel to get hassled. Nonetheless, they had a job to do, and so they ran my valise through a scanner. Good thing that psi-detector didn't fit. That might have been hard to explain.

Next they directed me to walk through a full body scanner, the glassy-eyed operator seeming ready to nod off at any moment. I stared at the side of his head, wondering if there was anything inside that might present itself. Since he was looking inside me, it was only fair I return the favor. But I got nothing. Either my sixth sense wasn't in the mood, or there was nothing in his brain worthy of mention.

Or maybe it was all in my imagination.

"How long will you be staying?" a customs clerk finally asked. Then his eyes lit up as he looked at his screen. "Oh, Captain Plankwell?

Welcome to Jewell, Captain. How much time would you like me to put on your visa?"

Recognition sometimes came with perks.

"Five days, please, and with re-entry authorizations. I will be going back and forth quite a bit."

He typed a few keystrokes into his workstation, and it spat out a small, plastic card.

"Welcome to Jewell," he said, handing it to me. "Keep this with you at all times, and enjoy your stay."

Of course, it was at this precise moment the train disembarked.

"How long until the next one?" I asked him.

"They run every five deplars," he said.

Five deplars. And how long was a Jewellian deplar, exactly?

I found a seat, still warm from the rear end of its previous occupant, a digital clock helpfully counting down until the arrival of the next train. Unfortunately, it had a long way to go.

Deplars, according to my slate, were a little over six minutes and twenty-two seconds, meaning I'd be waiting here over half an hour. There was no way I could reach the restaurant on time.

I pulled out my dataslate and examined my options. I could call an air taxi, but how long would it take to show up? Sighing, I messaged Kaz, telling her I was running a little late but was on my way. The reason for my tardiness: *Delay by Admiral*. It was either that or blame customs.

I took a moment to look at the plastic card they'd given me. Two pictures were on the left, one of my face and the other a full body shot in miniature, my height and weight helpfully noted off to the side. They must have taken my picture and gathered physical data while I was walking through their scanner. A small silver chip was embedded in the top right corner, and beneath, inscribed in both Anglic and Vilani, were the words *Visitor Authorization* and then *Capt. Augustine Olav Plankwell, INS Jaqueline, 213th Fleet, Imperial Navy*.

It felt surreal, seeing those four all-important letters in front of my name. Becoming an Imperial Navy captain had been my dream ever since I was a kid, and now I'd finally gotten here, and yet I felt no different. I was still the same schlep making excuses for missing trains.

To be fair, excuse-making and CYA were major aspects of navy life. The reason was that everything was so well-documented, particularly on the more advanced ships. So when things went wrong, as they inevitably did, knowing how to dodge blame was essential. Excuse-making had thus been elevated into a performance art, sort of like stand-up comedy, although laughter, in this art form, usually indicated failure. Indeed, the closer one worked with one's supervising officer, the lower the probability of success, which was perhaps why detached patrols were so coveted. And here I was, in the role I'd always wanted and in the assignment every captain desired, the best of all worlds, yet still something was missing.

Maybe it was the intense couple of days I'd just had, but I felt I was not quite the same man I'd been when I arrived to take command.¹⁴³ Granted, this was definitely a high water mark, and unexpected after the misjump fiasco. And I obviously had a good relationship with Admiral Vasilyev. I got tapped for this post, after all, and for all my struggles due to my surname, it did sometimes open doors.

I was sure that if I wanted it, I could find a nice public relations billet, and tour the frontier bases, doing morale and political duties. That was the type of duty Vanista had implored me to seek. The connections were there, and the name Plankwell was an easy marketing tool. It was tempting. I could envision it being very relaxing.

The only problem was that I'd never been the sort of man to relax, at least not for very long. I was a pilot, a fighter pilot, no less, and I believed in the Navy for all that I railed against the political appointments, the feudal politics, and the never-ending justifications for ridiculous expenses. And the reason was quite simple. When things got hot, when threats appeared, sometimes out of nowhere, the Navy was there to deal with them. For all its faults, and there were many, it was ultimately the Navy that held the Imperium

¹⁴³ It's an inside joke. Conrad is referring to the fact that Plankwell was played by Phil when the campaign first began. However, the statement is also true in the sense that Plankwell is now suddenly telepathic. This would be weird enough all by itself, but considering the fear and abhorrence toward psionics in Imperial society, it's well beyond mere weirdness. It's essentially an unthinkable catastrophe, albeit one with a silver lining, so long as he doesn't get caught.

together. It was the one indispensable institution that kept the trade lanes open and kept the empire from disintegrating into thousands of squabbling polities, each of them ripe targets for enemies and pirates alike.

I snorted to myself, thinking about officers who'd proven less than spectacular at their moment of truth, but then there were the Plankwells, the Khatamis, the Sloans, and so forth, the ones who found themselves in the crucible and whose choices changed everything. Was that why I stayed in, staying on the front lines, hoping for glory? Was it because I simply wanted my moment of truth?

Of course, I wanted to prove myself worthy of the uniform, to give to the Navy what countless others had given before me, service and duty. How many had sacrificed their lives for the Imperium, the greatest of Humanity's civilizations? The number was uncountable.

Many of the shows I'd watched as a child were essentially about this. The defining characteristics of the heroes were loyalty and courage, and the bad guys, of course, were all cowardly and self-serving. When the war finally came, I figured I'd get the chance to prove my mettle, and I did to an extent. I carried out my orders. I did what had to be done, but not so much by sacrificing myself as by sacrificing others.

After Kantriv's death at Sting, I was pulled out of the sensor squadron, becoming head of Carrier Flight Ops, so it was my job to send wave after wave of pilots into what, statistically speaking, amounted to a slow meat grinder. Instead of strafing Zhodani cruisers, as Nizlich had done, I was telling other pilots what to do from the relative safety of the Valkyrie. Then I'd watch the little color-coded blips on the tactical displays close in on one another, occasionally disappearing as their physical counterparts disintegrated into expanding clouds of shrapnel.

And now, as a Captain, I'd be even further removed from the actual combat. That was assuming I didn't first get discovered as a psion. If that happened, I'd be removed from the Navy and possibly even from among the living. Perhaps that's what Jaamzon's ghost had been hinting. She wanted to return to duty as well, but she was already dead. She just didn't know it.

I checked my AI-prioritized queue of reminders from the Jaqueline's main computer as well as incoming messages, again prioritized. Items requiring a response were marked with a pen icon, and Commander Shumurdim's *Statement of Authorization* was among these. I wasn't sure why he needed this. Bim Marshall was already a member of my extended crew. Nonetheless, he wanted me to assert that Bim was acting as my representative "with all the capacities of the commanding officer of the INS Jaqueline, 213th Fleet, Imperial Navy."

I tapped my approval and forwarded a copy to Bim Marshall with the addendum, "Use it judiciously."

There was also a message from Josephine regarding my apology for having to reschedule. "Admiral override? Sounds like work. Take your time and don't worry about Intel. I'll be here whenever you're ready. And remember to get some R&R while you're down the well. I hear it's good for the soul."

My soul specifically or souls in general?

I scrolled through the rest of the queue, again thinking back to Jaazmon's ghost, or spirit, or psychic manifestation, or maybe it was just a dream, something conjured by my subconscious. Just because I had the sensation of reading minds didn't really prove anything, and just because I'd thought I'd seen a ghost didn't mean they existed, or souls for that matter.

Regardless, maybe Josephine was right. Maybe I need to indulge in some recreation, if only to get my brain to stop going in circles. Speaking of brains going in circles, there was an appointment notification for tomorrow morning with Dr. Pugh, the ship's neuropsychiatrist. I marked it for postponement. Something had to give, and I would risk the flagging that might come with this action. Life was risk, after all, but going to see a skull doc in my current state of mind seemed like the greater risk.

There was also a forwarded message from Nizlich, originally from the Assistant Logistics Officer, which discussed what it would cost to procure a WideEye sensor suite for the Pheidippides. Without looking at it too closely, I could see we just didn't have the necessary funds in our budget, not unless we wanted to cut things we really shouldn't be cutting. "The easiest path

might be to put in a special request with 213HQ." In other words, write Admiral Vasilyev and explain why we needed the money.

I responded to Nizlich to put in the request.

"Filter masks," a woman said, pulling a small cart. "Filter masks, one hundred credits."

By now there were several other people seated around me, almost all of them naval personnel, and one, a petty officer, asked for a closer look at her merchandise. I shut down my slate and craned my neck a little to see what was on offer.

They looked like gas masks, except the goggles were separate and the sort one might wear for swimming. There was also a separate filter cartridge that went in front of the nose.

"How long does the cartridge last?" the petty officer asked her.

"It's rated for a hundred deplars," she replied.

"What's that in hours?"

"Imperial hours?" She shrugged. "A little over ten."

He looked at one of them, squinting. "Where's the expiration date? How do I know it hasn't already been used?"

"They're legit. Look, here's my vendor's license." She pulled out a card and showed it to him. He glanced at it but didn't appear impressed.

"Do you have any of those cloaks I see people wearing?"

"Cloaks?"

"The ones with the clear plastic helmets."

"Oh, the poncho-bubbles. Those cost way, way more," she said, shaking her head. "If you live here, you get yourself one of those, but if you're just visiting, you get yourself one of these."

"Where do I get one of *those*?"

"You're not listening," she said. "They're like five hundred to a thousand."

"Is there anywhere I can rent one?"

She turned and walked away, but the words *mop* and *broom* came to mind. Thanks to the Naval Academy, I knew what both were. The instructors made us clean our own quarters rather than letting us rely on robots, something about old ways of doing things instilling proper values. So I'd mopped and swept for a few years, swearing I'd never again touch either one after graduation. But what did poncho-bubbles have to do with mops and brooms?

I got up and followed the vendor as she wandered toward another group of people.

"I'd like one of your masks, please," I said as I approached.

The transaction was handled neatly, and I was soon the owner of a new filter mask, in Navy gray, and an extra cartridge specifically calibrated to Jewell's atmosphere, or rather what had become of it. During all this, an old memory of a class in foreign relations surfaced, a lecture about taking the opportunity to be seen interacting with planetary natives in a positive manner. It was all about keeping up a pleasant facade, regardless of what happened. As I returned to my seat, I found, now ensconced there, an elderly woman in a neat business suit, her fingers busily tapping on a chunky dataslate. I smiled, somewhat ruefully, and found a place to stand to wait for the train.

Mops and brooms.

I'd thought about asking the vendor what it meant, but who knows where that might have gone? I wasn't even sure it was the vendor who was thinking it. Maybe it was just a brain-burp.

There wasn't anything I'd thought that my subconscious couldn't have come up with on its own. All I had was this intuition that a new window inside my mind had been opened, and if I concentrated just right, I could peer through it. But how did I really know any of this was real?

I looked at someone, a random person, a young Spacehand Apprentice, and cautiously felt for this new place in my mind, to see if I could sense anything. It was a weird feeling, a feeling like I might need to pee. And then he did. He literally got up and headed to the nearest restroom.

I took a deep breath and started a conversation with myself, all in my head.

You know this has all the signs of a psionic activation.

Yes, I am aware of that.

You know you should have reported it immediately.

I did. Sort of. I went to medbay. They have the same training.

It's not the same, and you know it.

It's a lot to process. It might be a temporary effect induced by whatever the hell that thing is in my cabin.

Sure, maybe. And maybe it was induced by the harsh glare of the Zhodani ambassador. This is not a speculative fiction¹⁴⁴ story Gus; this is you. Does it feel alien?

Not really.

I didn't know what I meant by that. Of course, it felt alien in that it was all new, but it also felt... normal, like it was part of me, part of who I had always been or was, at least, meant to be. Aunt Arguaski came to mind as well as that question she'd asked about what I wanted to be when I grew up, a warrior or a wizard. She must have realized I had the potential.¹⁴⁵ And then there was that cranial surgeon who told me I was neuroatypical, that I had my wires crossed and wanted to know if I suffered from hallucinations.¹⁴⁶ I thought about Nizlich in the shower.¹⁴⁷ I wasn't exactly suffering.

A sharp chime sounded, and I checked my surroundings. People were moving toward the boarding areas, and as the digital clock finally closed in on zero, everyone began glancing up at it, watching the seconds or whatever they were tick down, and then a large door slid open and the train arrived, right on time.

I found a seat next to a window, the transpex, or perhaps it was glass, smudged with somebody's handprint. *One Seat Per Sophont*, a flashing sign declared, the words rotating from Anglic to Vilani to Gvegh to Zdetl and back again. Then it switched to *No Music Without Earphones or Implants* and went through the same drill. The doors shut and we started moving, the sign continuing to dispense commonsense. Unlike with the base's gravway, there was no inertial compensation. I could feel every twist and turn as the clatter and creaks and squeaks of metal brushing against metal permeated the walls and floor and the stale air I was breathing.

I put the mask on and twisted its filter into the engaged position. It wasn't a big improvement, so I took it off. It probably would have been better to go find one of those poncho-bubbles the petty officer had been asking about, but I was already late.

¹⁴⁴ Actually, it is a speculative fiction story. Sorry if this breaks the fifth wall.

¹⁴⁵ See Chapter 13.

¹⁴⁶ See Chapter 18.

¹⁴⁷ See Chapter 17.

Some portion of Heron emerged from the thick, industrial smog outside the window, the city lights fading quickly into the distance, obscured by the particulates in the air. Then we descended into a tunnel, and all I could see were gray walls lit by phosphorescent lamps. There was an electronic map of the subway line on the wall, a blinking dot marking our location, and soon we came into a station, and more people got on, an eclectic mix: teenagers with dyed hair, smartly dressed professionals, a woman clutching her handbag while pushing a stroller. Many wore bright colors, and several had little backpacks, some carrying them over a single shoulder.

We began moving again, and soon we were back on the surface, and I could see that giant hologram of Olav etched in laser light, speaking his decontextualized wisdom unto the masses. A few people looked up at it, but most kept their eyes fixed on the wall or some portable electronic device.

Two stations later, a woman sat next to me. She was talking to someone on her wristcom, and I could tell she was some sort of lawyer. The discussion had something to do with jurisdiction. Two different committees were apparently involved in something, and they had different points of view, so it all boiled down to which committee had the right to decide. The next station was a big one, and the car filled up with people, several resorting to holding on to vertical handrails or plastic handloops dangling from the ceiling. All the while she kept talking. By now lots of people were talking. The car had started quiet, but now people were talking over one another, everyone raising their voices in a positive feedback loop.

I finally got off at one of the central hubs. I needed to switch trains and found myself in some sort of indoor plaza. People were walking around with little robot shopping carts trailing behind. There was no wayfinder here, but there was a big map near what looked like a giant courtyard. As I approached, however, I realized this courtyard was deep. It easily went down more than twenty floors as well as up another two. I was near the top of some sort of big underground shopping mall.

There were bridges spanning the central shaft as well as elevators running up and down its

perimeter, and people were sitting in what looked like little cafes perched right along the edge. Two levels up, ringed by a circle of lights, was a big transpex ceiling, and there were people walking right on top of it. They were wearing bubble helmets or face masks, and I could see a few aircars flying over their heads.

I needed to find the subway line to the north coast, so I consulted the map, and skimming through the words and symbols I came across *Mop & Broom*. It was a store.

With a fluttery feeling in my belly, I pressed the assistant button on my wristcom. "Call Mop and Broom, closest location."

Click.

"Mop and Broom, the best choice for all your cleaning, decluttering, and filtering needs. Eneri speaking."

"Do you carry poncho-bubbles?"

"We sure do. Are you interested in purchasing or renting?"

The fluttery feeling went into overdrive.

"Sir?"

"Neither," I finally replied. "I already have a filter mask." I swallowed hard. "Thanks. Bye."

I disconnected. It took me a moment or two to focus on the map again. The terminal for the line running to the north coast was on the next floor up.

This is real.

I walked toward the elevator, my heart now pounding.

I'm a psion.

Chapter 22

Tasty Morsels

Being a psion was obviously a very, very big problem. If this didn't somehow miraculously dissolve into thin air, I would eventually be caught, possibly by a psi-scanner, such as the one I most recently procured, or, just as likely, by my own ineptitude in concealing what it was I now possessed.

Ooh, a captain! a rather good looking woman thought as our eyes met on the subway. She was staring at me from behind her poncho-bubble's hood, but quickly looked away, embarrassed, and then there was anger. Some military guy who hurt her. She liked guys in uniform, I surmised, but mistook one for her white knight. Across from her was a young man just starting off into space. I was pretty sure he was on something. *I loved her, and she threw me away*, passed from his mind into mine.

I'd heard, somewhere, that telepaths, which was obviously what I was, could sometimes be detected because they'd stare at people, unblinking, relentlessly digging into their minds and slowly being driven insane by all the unhappiness and self-delusion. I made sure to blink and look away. I didn't want to know the details anyway.

There were different types of psions, each with their various mental maladies and potential tells, but I didn't know much about it. Only that telepaths tended to stare at people, telekinetics at objects, clairvoyants off into the distance, like this guy was doing, and that sometimes they'd be able to sense each other, telepaths in particular.

I glanced briefly around the passenger car, once more catching the eye of the angry woman, but before either one of us could muster the courage to smile, somebody applied the brakes, and the whole train slowed down.

We'd finally arrived at my stop. I got off, looked around, and a few minutes later found myself walking the streets of Heron's north coast.

Jewell used to be a nice place, a long, long time ago. What it had since become was due to the fact that we needed an industrial hub on the edge of the frontier. Every Imperial-aligned world of the Spinward Marches needed it, as production

capacity was a heck of a lot more useful, strategically and economically speaking, than preserving the planet's biosphere.

Of course, if the planet had been safely tucked within the Imperial core, its air would probably be breathable, but out here, at the very doorstep of the Zhodani threat, there was really no choice. It was either fortify or surrender. Every world from here to Deneb was similarly threatened, but Jewell especially, and the locals, despite not being able to breathe the air unaided, at least not for very long, were nonetheless highly patriotic.

In part, no doubt, this was due to some measure of propaganda, as Olav's giant hologram, now some distance to the south, reminded me. His lines, crisp and unambiguous when up close, composed as they were of laser light, were mostly obscured and tinted brown by the intervening particulates. From such a distance, it was easy to misconstrue his facial features. On the way down from the ship, when we'd flown right by him, his countenance appeared somber and resolute, but from so far away, as he was now, he appeared to be glaring at me, as he did back at the reception, particularly when I'd cut his voice.

Like it or not, actions had consequences. *Frag around and find out*, was perhaps a better way of putting it.

"Thank you for your service," a young man said as we passed one another. My head bow in response to that phrase was, by this point, essentially hardwired.

"Acknowledge the civilian when they offer thanks," an academy instructor once said, "as it is not to you thanks are being offered, but to your office and the will of the Emperor in continuing the protection of the realm. Woe be the officer who is negligent in accepting thanks due the Emperor."

Olav, meanwhile watched, glaring.

Although the low gravity made each step a little lighter, the pollution pressed down all around me, and, of course, it was impossible to avoid its stink. It was a pungent conglomeration of petrochemicals, mining byproducts, and the sewage of billions of people, mostly dwelling underground or in well-sealed habitats. Indeed, domes and skyscrapers dominated the landscape. Within these, the Jewellers huddled, their

common cesspool having long since grown to encompass the entire planet.

I pulled my filter mask tighter over my mouth and nose, grateful I didn't have to breathe this poison, as I walked down a wide boulevard that had been separated into sections for people and motorists. Yes, there were motorists, with actual motorized vehicles that burned fuel, and not uranium or plutonium but petrochemicals. They made an awful noise, especially the two-wheelers, which gathered in packs at the intersections, waiting for their turn to go. Hailing from Rhyllanor, the very idea of chemical motors seemed rather stone age, but certainly there were good reasons.¹⁴⁸

I finally got to the building that housed the restaurant. It was at the top of one of the skyscrapers overlooking the ocean. I could have taken a tram here from the subway terminal, but the wait was sufficient that I'd decided it'd be faster to walk, so instead of staying indoors, where I could have been breathing freely, I was now covered in a thin layer of gritty, brown dust that clung to everything it touched. A battery of air blowers and vacuum nozzles went to work on me as soon as I walked into the building's airlock, showing my Visitor Authorization Card to a robot at the outer hatch and a human at the inner one. Then it was up in the elevator, all the way to the top floor.

The restaurant, according to its reviews, was shaped like a giant squid, its eight arms stretched out to give each person seated within them maximal views of the city or ocean below. However, there were apparently also two long tentacles that stuck out from the building. These were used primarily for large parties, which had

148 For those who are interested, I'm drawing on Roger Malmstein's *Jewell System Survey* (2nd edition) (see <https://the-eye.eu/public/Books/rpg.rem.uz/Traveller/02%20-%20MegaTraveller/MegaTraveller%20-%20System%20Survey%20-%20Jewell%20%282nd%20edition%29.pdf>), where Jewell's transportation sector is described as being low-tech compared to the other technology sectors for reasons having mostly to do with government regulations. I'm not a big fan of this idea, but I'm trying to stay true to what source material I can find. It's worth nothing that *Traveller* has lots of worlds that use old technology, and this is something that has never made sense to me. See <https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/22099364/> for a recent discussion on this topic.

to be booked well in advance through the Office of Hospitality and Caloric Conveyance.

The hostess escorted me down one of the arms, essentially a long, wavy corridor, its walls and ceiling fashioned almost entirely out of blue-tinted transpex. The tint changed the city lights into millions of little blue dots; blue must have been considered preferable to the color of smog, I supposed. Meanwhile, the tables themselves, also translucent, provide their own illumination along with scented candles.

These candles were apparently a big thing on Jewell, judging from the reviews I'd read. Restaurants were given separate scores for their food and their ambiance, with people frequently commenting on both. As an offworlder, I didn't find the fragrance altogether unpleasant, particularly after having been outside for awhile, but my guess was it was there to mask whatever stench slipped through the building's filtration system.

Kaz was seated alone, seemingly focused on Olav's hologram, which, though distant and now tinted blue, still conveyed a considerable presence.

"Hello! Sorry for the wait."

She turned her head, wide-eyed, tiny horizontal rows of light spanning her pupils.

"Oh, that's perfectly okay. It gave me a chance to read for a bit... while admiring the view of what I presume is your... ah... famous ancestor."

I was pretty sure she'd almost said *favorite*.

It was a little much, seeing Olav glaring down at me every time I turned around. Now I was supposed to eat dinner with him staring at me?

I sat down across from her, my back to the hologram. The lines on her pupils had disappeared, and I could sense her trying to read my expression. She'd been there at the reception and had seen firsthand the lengths I'd gone to in order to keep Olav under control.

"It's like I'm back home with my father," I said, my neck feeling unusually stiff. "There were all these award ceremonies and events he insisted I attend. He'd trot me out whenever there was an opportunity for the Plankwell name to be recognized for its service to the Imperium."

I was a little surprised by the bitterness in my voice, and Kaz, no doubt noticing it, arched an eyebrow but said nothing.

“My apologies. It has been a very busy few days, and the reappearance of Olav has awakened some old memories. This is a very interesting place you’ve brought me to. And the trip from the Base was very educational as well.”

“Oh?”

“It’s always interesting seeing how people deal with their living situations,” I explained. “Most of my accommodations have been artificial and moderated for maximum comfort at minimum price, which is to say, Navy standard. It’s good enough but nothing to write home about. Unless, of course, home was much, much worse.”

“Was it?” she gently asked, leaning in.

“Not like this, of course,” I said, gesturing out the window. “Yes, your atmosphere is a little rough, but I’ve seen worse. At least filter masks work well, and the views are nice. There is something about an actual, real life view that a holographic display, regardless of its size or resolution, can’t convey.”

“I come here for the views,” she replied, although I sensed there was something she wasn’t saying. “By the end of dinner, we should be facing the ocean. The whole restaurant turns completely once every twenty-four depts.”

Deplars, she almost certainly meant. So this was a rotating restaurant, spinning full circle once every two-and-a-half hours or so, which meant by the end of dinner, I’d likely be facing Olav’s hologram. I settled back in my chair, trying to relax when a young waitress approached. She introduced herself and asked if we’d like to start off with any appetizers or drinks. Kaz ordered us a plate of sauteed lamprey a la lyon noir with mushrooms and a cup of calabaa¹⁴⁹ for herself.

“And you, sir?”

“I’ll have calabaa as well. And are these ouran crisps good?” I’d spied a plate of them on the walk to the table.

“They’re quite popular.”

“I’ll try those as well.”

After she left, Kaz showed me how to access the menu. It was built into the table, and one could change the language at the push of a button. They had Jewellian lobster served with a spiced ricernay¹⁵⁰ dip, grilled Sargassoan sauri with tal and berry chutney, steamed diver clams with

149 <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Calabaa>

150 <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Ricernay>

soubise sauce, a flank of macro-prawn served with herbed butter, breeze glider desiree, baked claret squash souffle, as well as a selection of cultivated seaweeds and... black ocean fungus?¹⁵¹ There were pictures of each dish as well as a set of curated reviews, all of them dripping with praise. I couldn’t help but wonder if they’d been written by management or perhaps some literary sweatshop.

“Thank you so much for inviting me here,” I said. “This looks amazing. The macro-prawn is calling out to me, I think. The black ocean fungus looks interesting too.”

We keyed in our orders from the table’s interface, specifying the doneness and spicing of our dishes. I opted to go with the chef’s recommendation for mine, but Kaz went hot and ordered a bowl of wasabi dipping sauce, which she warned was a bit of an acquired taste as I checked the recommended beverage pairing and added a glass of a local vintage that was on the low end of the price range.

“So what other observations do you have about us Jewellers?”

“Well, first of all, is it Jewellers or Jewellians, because I’ve heard both.”

“It’s both,” she said.¹⁵² “There’s a long, boring explanation, which I’m sure you don’t want to hear.”

“I totally understand, with me it’s Rhylanori, Rhylanoreans, Rhylanites, and Rhylanellas, and referring to the wrong one in some establishments will prompt some harsh physical language. Thousands of years of civilization, and we still get hung up on the proper reference for ourselves on our territory.”

“Identity is important.” She smiled. “So has everyone been friendly so far?”

151 This menu was derived, in part, by one created by Robert Kondrk for a Traveller PBEM he ran over twenty years ago. We were on a diplomatic mission, and we spent a fair amount of time in restaurants. I remember one scene where my character went giddy over dessert. In any case, when it came time for Captain Plankwell to go into a nice restaurant, I immediately thought of Bob, and he was happy to send me an old menu along with a bunch of other files from that campaign.

152 The TravellerWiki refers to them as Jewellers, but according to Roger Malmstein’s *Jewell System Survey*, the locals are known as Jewellians.

"Very," I replied. "Someone even thanked me for my service on the way over. Olav means something to the people here, and that person thanking me had no idea who I was, just that I served in his Navy and by that was worthy of recognition. It's nice to be appreciated for something other than the name."

"Well, if not for the Imperium, we'd all be wearing turbans and speaking Zdetl. And I'd probably be ordered into psychic counseling for all my anti-social thoughts," she added with a smirk. "Not that I have anything against turbans."

My eyebrows rose a little at that.

"Anti-social thoughts? My, my. Surely someone in your position needs to have good relations with others."

"Oh, that's why they're just thoughts and not actions," she replied with a playful grin. "Cleon knows, some days, what I could do with a laser rifle."

I couldn't help but grin. This was on the verge of becoming a pissing contest.

"So what about you?" she asked. "Don't you ever have to hide your true feelings?"

"Well, now that I'm a Captain..." — Admiral Karneticky flashed to mind — "...okay, yes, on occasion." I'd already mentioned *delay by Admiral*, so that didn't need explanation. "My general excuse for antisocial behavior is that I am the captain, and so I can order everyone about. Well, for a while anyways."

I smiled to show I was just being sarcastic, but she scrunched her eyebrows together, giving me a quizzical look.

"Really, though, from what I know about the Zhodani," I continued, "they tend to have a pretty open society, and their citizens seem to welcome intervention when antisocial feelings flare up. They are pretty big on being truthful and what we would consider brutally honest in their opinions. Perhaps that's why our cultures don't get along. Oh, and the border friction of course. That certainly doesn't help."

"You admire them."

"I respect them." I nodded. "I'd be a fool not to. As a fully-formed interstellar civilization in the same league as the Imperium, they're worthy adversaries. Even now, in the aftermath of another Frontier War, we have their diplomats here on Jewell. We don't see eye to eye on many

things, but we do recognize each other as sophonts, and thus there is always the possibility of finding common ground."

The drinks and appetizers arrived, giving me time to organize my thoughts.

"You sound like a diplomat," Kaz ventured, dipping a mushroom into her wasabi.

"Every captain has to be. The conflict between us and the Zhodani is creating a zone where populations move back and forth between ruling polities. Sometimes we lose a station, sometimes they lose a settlement, and then we have time to learn more about each other. We salvage each other's ships and investigate each other's technology. Right now, we are learning through the lens of conflict where it's easier to make mistakes and project assumptions. There are things to admire about them though. But I expect it will be harder to do that sentiment justice when I'm chasing down a strike cruiser."

"It must be nice being in the military. In civilian life, and in business in particular, there's a fair degree of subterfuge, more than the casual observer might expect. Over time it can make one rather cynical about human nature."

"Oh dear, it's not any better in the military. There are still people getting promoted beyond their ability, and there are senior officers to placate, and the never-ending training and education of the young practitioners. I guess the only real advantage is that every now and again we are reminded of our common purpose and can set aside the petty squabbling to fight the enemy."

I took a sip of the drink. It was decent. Meanwhile, her face had turned bright red.

"How's your sauce?" I asked.

"Try it," she offered or perhaps dared.

I dunked a mushroom and popped it in my mouth.

"No wait, that's..."

My brain was suddenly boiling. Or perhaps it was immersed in acid. I guzzled my wine and wiped away a tear. Meanwhile, she began laughing.

"That might have been too much at once," she said.

We made more small talk until the food came, and then we began eating.

"I imagine you must be incredibly busy since taking command of the Jaqueline, especially considering the shape she's in."

"Surprisingly busy, yes, given the battle damage refit and the draws on my time from the local Admiralty to deal with issues of technology." I glanced back towards Olav's great big head to make my point but turned the wrong way, as the restaurant was slowly spinning, and Olav was slowly inching around from the other side. I finally found him. He was hard to miss.

"I meant to ask you about that," Kaz said. "Back at the reception... I mean, you said it was compelling... realistic... but then you didn't seem to want to let it speak."

"Are you familiar with Plankwell fever?"

She shook her head.

"Radical patriotism using the image of Olav hault-Plankwell to call for political change?"

Another shake.

"It's a more common phenomenon on planets where the media types are... ah... shall we say less hindered in their endless pursuit of ever more eyeballs. The Navy tries to downplay it, because it is a symptom of dissatisfaction, and a potent rallying symbol. All respect due to my illustrious ancestor, but he was the one who took the spinward fleets up against a sitting Empress and kicked off the Civil War. Now they can't actually restrict Plankwells from serving, but the combination of me and his simulation on the same stage might have been too potent for local radicals to resist, especially if the simulation started spouting what Olav actually believed back when he marched on Capital. Suffice it to say, the simulation was too good, too true to Olav himself, and it might have incited some people to action. I couldn't let that happen."

She nodded.

"The Imperial Navy expects much of its captains," I continued, "and in return, we are given a certain degree of leeway in deciding what is important."

"So what's important to you? Right now, I mean."

"Right now, I am engaged in community relations that may produce dividends that are supportive of the ongoing Navy mission. Namely, a pod for my cruiser. Sadly, I think I have resolved that particular issue but am always

interested in seeing what results from further negotiations."

"You don't need an exploration pod anymore?"

I smiled.

"I mean to say that if yours is the only exploration pod on hand, we will shortly be taking it off your hands. But that wasn't the only reason I wanted to see you. I am looking for some background information on the Countess and the Admiral. I seem to have landed in the middle of things and while I managed, I feel like I have a lot of blanks when it comes to the local situation. You struck me as pretty well connected, and interested enough to attend what should have been a pretty routine Navy function. So, can you help a spacer out and give him the five credit backgrounder on this port of call?"

"Have you heard some rumor you're just trying to confirm?"

There was something on the tip of her tongue, the same word I'd sensed from Commander Shumurdim: *Amika*.

"Not so much a rumor as a reference I am not quite getting. It's a word I heard from several sources and haven't quite had the right time to bring it up with the Admiral. Does *Amika* mean anything to you?"

Her eyebrows rose for a moment, and then, slowly, she nodded.

"Who told you about her?"

Her?

"People," I replied. "Sophonts." It was technically true, if one considered telepathy a form of conversation.

"Unnamed sources?" Kaz asked, not realizing she was one of them.

"All my sources are unnamed, including you."

She chewed on that for a moment.

"Well, it's not a secret. *Amika* was Admiral Karneticky's fiancée."

Interesting.

"And?"

"She had a... an unfortunate encounter with a... I think it's called an aargvark."

"What's that?"

"Basically a giant sabertooth aardvark."

"Aardvark or aargvark?"

"The one comes from the other," she said. "It's a burrowing beastie and will attack whenever it's

in a foul mood. In any case, she and the admiral were on safari with Countess Helena and other members of the Stavelot clan. She and the Countess are distant cousins, more like friends than family." She smiled but then frowned. "Amika... well... suffice it to say, she was injured rather severely. The wedding was postponed and then eventually canceled."

I sat back. None of this had come up in my briefing documents. Then again, I was a mere captain and didn't have access to the personnel files of admirals.

"How long ago was this?"

"The aargvark incident? Early last winter."

I didn't even know what season it was, but despite the local day being long, the local year was short, which meant this was all relatively recent.

"Is Amika still in the picture? I take it from your phrasing that it wasn't a fatal incident?"

"No, she's..." Kaz paused for a moment, then leaned in a bit closer. "Would you like to meet her?"

"I don't think that's necessary. It came up because the Admiral has me going out of my way to humor the Countess. It seems she's interested in the tech behind the big head over there, not the projection, but the software I interacted with. I think meeting Amika is a little outside the bounds of decorum as it were. I was just curious."

I was pretty sure the Admiral would not appreciate me snooping around in his business.

"Well, if you change your mind, she doesn't get many visitors these days, what with the whole mask and respirator."

"Mask and respirator?"

"It tore half her face off," Kaz explained, "and ripped open one of her lungs. She would surely have died had a medical team not been close at hand."

I nodded.

"I appreciate your candor. Aside from Amika, however, how's the relationship between the Navy and the local nobility?"

"Well..." She furrowed her eyebrows for a moment, but then released. "I'd expect Geri could answer that better than me." Admiral Karneticky, she meant. "So far as I can tell they operate hand in glove, the Navy presumably being the glove. The Stavelots have never said anything against

the military. The only time they..." but then she stopped mid-sentence.

"Yes?"

"I don't like to spread rumors," she said.

"Don't think of it as rumor-mongering. It's intelligence gathering on allied positions, for everyone's safety." I smiled. "Oh-kay... that sounded like a bad Zho villain from some video serial." I conjured a bit of a laugh, not a terribly convincing one, but at least she was smiling, albeit probably out of courtesy. "Really, the truth of the matter is I am the newest new person in this star system, I have been rail-gunned into a public demonstration of advanced technology, and now I am following a strongly-worded suggestion from a local superior officer to aid and assist local nobles about said technology, which I already tried to get limited."

"Geri's a friend," she said, shaking her head.

"And I like him as a person," she added.

"I like him too," I lied, trying to reach out toward her with my new senses, but my new senses were having none of it. "Bad jokes aside, and even setting aside the matter of Amika, my sole desire is to avoid putting a foot wrong and embarrassing myself... and the Navy."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll do fine. In any case, you're better off not knowing this. Trust me."

I tried again, staring into her eyes, but still nothing. *Great!* At the very moment I needed my telepathy, it decided to go on vacation.

"All I am saying is I would rather a Board of Inquiry not have to revisit me stepping into something I could have easily avoided when, Emperor Strephon be praised, I am up for Commodore. I can show you my secret clearances if that would help."

She laughed, and I tried again. Nothing.

"Is everything okay?" the waitress asked.

"No, she's keeping secrets," I complained, grinning.

"Everything was wonderful," Kaz said.

"Can I interest you in dessert?"

Kaz looked at me.

"I would be delighted if you picked something for me to try. If I can't get at the secrets of the inner circle, I will settle for a seriously formidable and loyal citizen of the Imperium's favorite dessert. Oh, do you have proper d'stalli?"

“D’stalli? Uh, it’s not on our menu, but I’ll ask the chef.”

“If not, then a zardocha, ice-blended, but only if it’s made with Frangelico.”

“Two slices of your honey-glazed agadua¹⁵³ cake, and a cup of scuf,” Kaz added. “Decaf.”

The waitress left, and Kaz looked at me with slumped shoulders. Then she leaned as close to me as she could get without crawling over the top of the table.

“You can’t tell anyone this. Promise me you won’t. On your personal honor. Because I don’t even know if it’s true.”

“You have my word,” I said.

She took a deep breath and nodded.

“Amika told me that Countess Helena lobbied Mtume on Geri’s behalf.” Admiral Mtume, she meant. When he’d retired, it was Geriol Karneticky, then a Commodore, who was promoted to fill the vacancy, skipping past a few senior officers. “She even wrote a private letter to the Grand Admiral at Mora, urging him to choose Geri. Her argument was that having the Navy and nobility linked by marriage would strengthen both, and apparently they heeded her wishes.”

But the marriage never happened.

“Ah.”

The pieces started clicking into place. I didn’t even find it shocking. Not that I agreed with the practice, but when you were playing on the Admiralty level, merit was only one factor. Entry into their club required patronage, internal or otherwise. It was simply a political reality, and the pool of future admirals wasn’t a placid barrier reef, as it might appear to the outside observer, but rather a pool of sharks.

Without the marriage to seal his support, Karneticky was obviously going all out to make sure the Stavelot faction was being taken care of. They could, after all, withdraw their support. Of course, he’d already been promoted. But without the marriage, it was an unstable base. If he made a conspicuous misstep, it could cost him. No wonder he seemed so nervous. Everything made much more sense now.

“Ah?” Kaz looked indignant. “That’s all you’re going to say? Ah?”

I smiled as Olav’s hologram grimaced at us both.

“I get to keep secrets too, apparently.”

¹⁵³ [https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Agadua_\(nutriment\)](https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Agadua_(nutriment))

Chapter 23

The Explorium

The drinks and cake showed up, Kaz's scuf and my zardocha. It was quite strong, perhaps an apology for the lack of d'stalli.

"Now it's my turn," Kaz said. "Tell me what's going on with your Exploration Pod, assuming it's not a state secret."

"The pod was damaged, and I find that keeping the Scouts as a stalking horse ahead of a cruiser is a persuasive argument for a benevolent Imperium."

Her gaze flicked upward for a moment.

"I talked to someone at the local GP office." General Products, she meant. It was a MegaCorp. "They say they're currently refurbishing one for the IISS." The Imperial Interstellar Scout Service. "It's essentially done, so this is probably the one you'll end up getting. But I don't know for sure. Has anyone told you anything about the service history of the replacement pod or how much the Navy is being charged?"

"Not yet. The base quartermaster is on it as well as my scout liaison."

"Your scout liaison?"

"Yes, the IISS is a separate service like the marines — sorry, you probably know all this — but he's outside my direct chain of command, at least while we are in port. Once we are underway, different rules of engagement take effect, and I have more command authority over the embarked crew. The Scouts have a long history of working with the Navy, and there are protocols for sharing ship space. My liaison made a compelling argument about how his division would travel ahead and lay the path, as it were, for the Navy cruiser to show up. People respond differently to seeing the Scouts as opposed to the Navy, and it is often instructional to have Scouts in place to observe what happens when the Navy shows up. In any case, the previous captain, Jenkins, followed the practice, and I didn't see a compelling reason to abandon it."

A thought occurred to me.

"Did you happen to know my predecessor by any chance?"

"Your predecessor?"

"Captain Jenkins. Rishard Jenkins."

"No, I... I don't recall. I've met several of Geri's captains, but never..."

"He's not under Geri. Like me, he's part of the 213th fleet, under Admiral Vasilyev."

"Oh, well, then that explains why I never met him." She frowned. "Wait. Which fleet is paying for this refurbished exploration pod? Or does it come out of some common fund?"

"The Jaqueline belongs to the 213th fleet, so it's coming out of Vasilyev's budget."

"So who's representing the 213th in all this? You?"

"Yes, I designated my Scout liaison with my authority for the purpose of acquiring the pod. At the fleet level, Admiral Vasilyev sent along an authorization voucher for expenditures. At some point, the quartermasters will resolve the expenditures, or we will repair one of the 212's ships." The faintest hint of worry tickled my brainstem. "Is that unusual?"

"Well... you said you designated your authority?"

"Shumurdim, the base quartermaster, had me sign an authorization."

"An authorization?"

"To allow Bim Marshall, my Scout Liaison, to act on my behalf."

"Can I see this authorization?"

I pulled it up on my slate and showed it to her.

"...Bim Marshall," she said, skimming it, "an active duty member of the IISS... blah blah blah... shall act as my duly appointed representative with all the capacities of the commanding officer of the INS Jaqueline, 213th Fleet, Imperial Navy." She blinked for a moment, still staring at it. "I'm sure it's fine. It's just... how long have you known this Bim guy?"

"Just met him."

"Does he have any ties to the 213th Fleet?"

"No. He's a Scout."

"Well," she shrugged, "I don't know how things work in the military, but in my world, you have to be very careful when writing a blank check. Shumurdim, for all his positive qualities, works for Geri, not your guy... Vasilyev. Who's paying for this? The 212th Fleet? No. The Scouts? No. The 213th is paying, so somebody needs to be at the table representing them. Not that it should make any difference, because I'm sure nobody involved is going to do anything even remotely

unethical. I mean, we're talking about the Imperial Navy. Nothing unethical ever happens, right?"

That sounded like sarcasm.

"I can see you have had some bad experiences with Navy Procurement."

"It's not just the Navy," she said. "But yes, I have witnessed some... uh... interesting incidents."

I took a deep breath.

"Look, there are always friction points between the Navy and civilian suppliers, but on the Navy side of things, when you get right down to it, we are all charged with exercising the will of the Emperor. While there are different interpretations to that, expressed by similar officers with differing values, in the end, we are provisioning ships to exercise the will of the Imperium. For us, the budgets and the interfleet cooperation and rivalries are all part of the scorekeeping amongst us officers. But my ship was damaged executing the will of the Emperor, and I will have it repaired by the same, to continue my mandate to carry out my orders."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I obviously offended you. I stepped out of bounds, and I apologize."

"Oh, no, no. I'm not offended. I sometimes turn on the... um... enthusiasm... a bit strong. I apologize. I truly appreciate hearing from you about your practices and how the other side of things work. I have an uncle in business, and he tried to lure me away from the Navy early on. In my experience, knowing more is always better than being left in the dark when you think the other person is on track."

"Yes, well... I honestly don't know if I'm on track. As you say, things work differently in the military."

"Yes, we have a different point of view. Also, I may be a little beaten down with the budgetary reports and requests from all the different departments. I suppose I needed to vent to someone... safe, as it were."

She smiled.

"I'm glad you consider me safe. So where are you headed after this? Some important meeting?"

"Well, shopping actually. I have an appointment at Starwinds to get ready for deployment."

"You have a membership?"

I nodded.

"I asked them to arrange overnight accommodations. I head back to the base tomorrow for... well, important meetings. I just have to figure out how to get there."

"To the Starwinds? It's at the downport."

"I'm sure there's a subway going there."

"Subway? You're on foot?"

I nodded.

"Oh, let me give you a ride."

A ride sounded perfect.

"That would be very much appreciated," I said, "if it isn't going to take you too far out of your way."

"Not at all."

I was very much enjoying Kaz's company. And it was refreshing not having to observe military protocol for a while. Of course, I was going to have to write a contact report because of our conversation around the pod. *Oh well.*

"I'm sure you have important meetings as well," I said.

"No. Actually, I'm done for the day." She got up from the table.

"What about the bill?" I asked.

"Already taken care of," she replied with a grin.

"That is very gracious of you."

I amended the contact report in my head to include the declaration of a financial gift. It wasn't illegal to receive small gifts from civilians, but failing to report them would be frowned upon. The timeline would show that the gift of dinner had no influence on my acquisition of the Exploration Pod, as I had already delegated my authority beforehand.

My meeting with Lt. Abbonette was going to be difficult if she decided I was lax in matters relating to Intel. Or poaching on her perceived patch. Maybe this telepathy would actually help me better understand others. I couldn't help but wonder why it wasn't working all of a sudden. Had it been only temporary?

I tried consciously reaching out with my mind as we made our way to the elevator, trying to remember what I'd done when I accidentally scanned that woman on the subway. Our eyes had met, and then it was suddenly like her brain was an open book. I tried looking into Kaz's eyes as she pushed a button for one of the parking levels.

Then she caught me staring and looked back, but rather than shift my gaze, I maintained my focus and was rewarded with some sort of psychic glimpse, an old woman with a sickly, sallow complexion.

"Yes?" she asked, no doubt wondering why I was staring at her so intensely.

"Sorry." I blinked a few times, forcing myself to stop. "I was just taken with an old memory."

"Oh?"

"Among my other duties, the Admiral has me speaking at a memorial for a pilot the Jacqueline lost. Sometimes, the losses catch up with you."

"Oh." It was now apparently her turn to stare at me. I took a deep breath, more an act than anything real.

"It's funny how brains work," I said, continuing to ad lib. "It was something about the angle of your face, and I was back, looking at new cadets, knowing we were going to lose many. This was back during the war."

That last part was, indeed, an actual memory from the Valkyrie, a bit of honesty sprinkled into my deception.

"I'm sorry," she said.

I felt momentarily ill, but not because of the memory.

"No, I'm fine. It's just what happens when I feel relaxed around someone. All the stuff I use to power my *fearsome personae* comes up as real human feelings."

Suddenly, I felt like I was bathing within a warm, fuzzy glow. Was that me or her? But then the elevator doors opened, and we stepped onto a long platform where people were boarding a variety of grav vehicles, mostly aircars, but also flycycles and gravitic gliders. They were entering from one end of the building while others were flying out the opposite side. Kaz's aircar turned out to be a Trondheim GF-729A Civilian Flyer.¹⁵⁴ It was a four-seater, sporty but luxurious, with wood veneer cabin upgrades and genuine leather seats.

"Take us to the Starwinds," she said. A holographic display popped up, asking which one. There were apparently hotels, gas stations,

and even a polymer manufacturer using the same name. "The ISC," she clarified.

The aircar flew us out the side of the building, then climbed a few hundred meters before beelining toward the city center. Heron's busy streets passed underneath while Olav's holographic head slowly spun around in circles, glaring at me whenever it turned our way.

"I'm glad you feel relaxed with me," she finally said, looking toward me with watery eyes.

I smiled. "It is nice finding new people to be relaxed around."

Ugh! That came out strange.

Maybe I just didn't know how to talk to women. At least, not civilian women. I'd been in the Navy too long. I'd watched other officers get so wrapped up in Navy Life that their private lives went to chaos. The same thing had happened with Vanista.

Say something.

"I really like your ride. I may have been riding in a few too many cutters recently, and those seats never feel quite right. I half suspect it's to keep the marines alert and ready for action, and the rest of us just have to suffer through it all."

Agh! Now I was babbling.

As we closed in on the starport, several other gravitic vehicles whooshed by, some passing fairly close. Presumably, everyone was using computer navigation, so there was no risk of a collision, but it brought back the feeling of being on close-space patrol. Usually fighters ranged far from their mother ship to serve as an early warning, but there was also close-in patrol, usually when the likelihood of anti-ship missile defense needs was higher. I squirmed a little, recalling a time when fighters were tasked to the command defense net and responded to threats that could not be seen. Our fighters basically became manned drones. Better not to share that particular memory.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"Over there." She motioned with her chin toward a complex of skyscrapers up ahead. "Grand Central Towers. But I've also got access to a Chamber of Commerce suite in Silver City. I get to go up there whenever I'm lobbying, which is always nice... breathable air and all. I might be able to get you a visitor's pass if you'd like to check it out while you're down here."

¹⁵⁴ The GF-729B, which is the open-topped version, appears on page 12 of *Merchants & Merchandise*, Paranoia Press (1981).

"Anything's possible. Do you know where the Countess lives? I'm supposed to be available to her."

"Oh. Well, in that case, you'll definitely need a pass. She's up in Silver City along with the members of all the major governing committees. I can show you around, but we'll have to take a certified shuttle to get there."

Show me around?

Despite being intrigued by her offer, I couldn't help but frown, imagining all the contact reports I'd have to write. I was really going to have to requisition a vehicle and driver to get me around to all the places I was supposed to be going.

"Pardon me for a moment," I said, pulling out my slate and checking my messages.

There were several new ones including a pair from Olashade Agidda, Senior Manager at the Ministry of Technology and Captain Masa, Public Relations Coordinator for Plankwell Naval Base. Before I could open either one, however, we began descending toward a dome with the letters "ISC" emblazoned on each side in the Anglic and Vilani scripts.¹⁵⁵

This was my stop. We were going to have to say goodbye in a minute. Would I ever see her again? In a city of 800 million? And did she really want to show me around, or was that just Jewellian courtesy?

"I really appreciate the ride and dinner," I said as we entered the ISC's parking bay, "and again, I apologize for my intensity around acquisitions."

"No, no... I should have just kept my big, fat mouth shut."

Vanista was never so self-deprecating.

"Look, uh... if you have some spare time... and would like to see what sort of creature comforts a Rhylanori naval captain likes...."

The car landed in a car-sized airlock, its overhead iris valve closing in under a second. This was accompanied by a sharp hissing sound. They were changing out the air.

"Creature comforts?" A smile slowly built as she raised her eyebrows. "Do you need help choosing a color?"

The car's doors opened, and I faked a laugh. Obviously, I was reluctant for the time with Kaz to end, and my offer proved it. The only question

¹⁵⁵ In the case of the latter, it's actually I, S, and Ch, but that's neither here nor there.

left was how she felt. I had nothing to prove. It was just that she was interesting to be around.

Quick relationships were a hallmark of life in the Navy. With all of us moving around, there were few alternatives. One of the side benefits of having marines and scouts on naval vessels was the diversity of individuals *not* within one's chain of command. But for a ship's commanding officer, it was a bit different. Up at the top, one had to be careful, but down here, on the ground, I could let go for a bit.

"No color help needed," I said. "I was just enjoying your company and wanted *you* to have an opportunity to see things *I* like. After all, you shared a favorite restaurant with me. That's no small thing."

"Indeed," she said, smiling.

Damn, I felt awkward. Maybe I'd been spending too much time in space. Was I blushing? I'd better not be blushing.

"Well," she said, "I am a bit curious as to what's in here. I've seen ISC catalogs, of course, but I don't have a membership, so I never bothered to study one. If I spot something I can't live without, I don't suppose I could purchase it through yours?"

"The possibilities are boundless." I grinned. "I would be happy to facilitate."

We got out, allowing the auto-valet to park the vehicle, and as we approached a security checkpoint, a comfortable sense of familiarity settled within me. Smoked duraplex glass doors slid aside, and I identified myself at the automated biometric station, listing Kaz as my guest. I then went over to the storage wall and put my valise in a cubby ringed by small blinking lights.

"I have been a member here since I joined the Navy," I said. "It's one of the perks of my family that I truly appreciate."

A small drone floated over, an auto-concierge, and in low tones it greeted us.

"Welcome Captain Plankwell, and welcome to your guest, Cassiopeia Remshaw. It has been some time since you have visited. We hope you enjoy your visit to the Imperial Starwinds Chandlery. Your purchase requests have been assembled for review, but might I suggest, seeing as you have a guest, you visit the Explorium?"

"I was going to suggest the same. Thank you, Concierge. Can you make sure my personal items are forwarded to my accommodations for the evening?"

"Your wish is my command, *Captain*."¹⁵⁶

"The Explorium?" Kaz asked.

The Explorium was one of the big attractions of the ISC. It was essentially a walking plaza with the goods of the sector laid out for inspection along with tasteful holographic displays. And it was never the same. If one lingered in any area, the auto-concierge would move more items of a similar nature into place for comparison. There were even customization options, preferred finishes, and integration with one's personal gear. As for the foodstuffs, the system took one's consumption profile into account and displayed items that would provide interesting sensations, along with estimates of compatibility.¹⁵⁷

I didn't need to read her mind to sense that she was impressed. Everyone who visited the Explorium was impressed.

Suspended overhead were various vehicles as well as cutter modules, and holographic cutaways descended to the floor, allowing us to walk virtually through their interiors. The auto-concierge accompanied us the entire time,

¹⁵⁶ I was actually thinking of having it say "By your command" in homage to the *cylons* of the original *Battlestar Galactica*. Speaking of which, isn't it interesting how advances in artificial intelligence are outpacing science fiction? Even in this scene, this AI appears to be more language-adept than the AI onboard the INS Jaqueline. Well, significant advances have been made in the real world since those first few chapters were played out. For purposes of this narrative, however, it is worth noting that the auto-concierge is highly customized to its task, which is to sell stuff, and it has a dedicated team of cyberarchitects and UI experts fine tuning it more or less constantly. Navy ships, on the other hand, run tasks through multiple processors in order to safeguard everything, and, of course, they're presumably built by the lowest bidder, which doesn't exactly inspire confidence.

¹⁵⁷ Compatibility refers to how any given consumable will interact with one's gastrointestinal system, either pleasantly or otherwise. Staples exported to the interstellar market are often preprocessed, making them as widely biocompatible and inoffensive as possible, but this can also strip them of both nutrients and flavor, leaving importers with the task of post-processing foods for local consumption. However, this doesn't happen with luxury foods and beverages, and it is precisely this market to which the ISC caters.

pointing out certain features of interest. Meanwhile, on the inner surface of the dome far overhead, a representation of the entire star system was projected. I was tickled to notice the Jaqueline just to the side of Jewell's orbital shipyard.

"There she is," I said, pointing her out to Kaz.

"This is obviously not to scale," she said.

"No, obviously not." I wondered if they'd enlarged the Jaqueline for my benefit.

Kaz stopped to look at some clothing, and the auto-concierge thoughtfully brought some weapons for me to inspect, not that I could actually carry any of them out of here. If I ordered something, it would be sent up to the ship. Either that, or they'd release it to me in the starport, behind the extraterritoriality line.

Next we looked at the holographic food.

"I hate to admit it," Kaz said, "but this is making me hungry again. And we just ate."

"Pick something out."

I called up an order menu and picked out two Rhylanori small-bites that I loved, dried cave fungus with a fruity seasoning powder, and poppers, dehydrated crisps with flavored dipping sauces that puffed up into a chewy snack, usually in surprising shapes. I stepped away from the panel to let Kaz choose something, and although I could see she had a sweet tooth from the sort of snacks that caught her attention, she finally opted for self-restraint and selected something healthy.

Next we passed through what amounted to a holographic art museum, the auto-concierge no doubt noting how many seconds Kaz looked at each item in order to form a profile of her preferences.

"Do they have these items locally or do they have to be ordered?" she asked.

"Concierge, please display shipping times."

"Ah."

We conversed for a bit about how the prices rose with the distance an item had to be shipped. I pointed out how I could input an itinerary and watched the time and prices fluctuate based on where I thought I was going to be. Meanwhile, the auto-concierge warned us that shipping times were subject to change depending on the uncertainties of interstellar commerce.

"Pirates?" Kaz asked as the poppers arrived.

"If they're passing anywhere close to the Imperial border, that's definitely a possibility," I replied.

Next it showed us a selection of tools, some physical and some holographic. The ISC delighted in coming up with packages for whatever undertaking one could think of. I motioned Kaz over to a customization station, and she moved into position and made some tentative gestures to change the display.

"Concierge, please present Plankwell Package Party Time."

The holographic unit projected a cargo container in front of us. I went over and opened the projected container to display a fully equipped bar, complete with all the utensils for mixing a wide variety of drinks. Interacting with any of the holographic containers triggered a mixing menu. There were even animations of the preparation process for various drinks.

"This was a gift I got for myself when I made commander. Well, when I say I got it for myself, it was actually for my squadrons."

"Oh, that's generous."

"Squadrons work as teams, and alcohol facilitates team building."

"I see. And now I'm thirsty," she added with a grin. "I can see how this place could become dangerous to one's wallet."

"Do you want a drink?"

"No. It's just seeing all this right in front of me. I clearly missed a good party."

I'd always suspected there were subliminals that nudged clients towards committing to a purchase, but the one time I'd asked about it, their representative assured me that they used nothing but the best food artists and most appealing examples of the items which, to be fair, was not an outright denial.

"Concierge, if I wanted to become a hologlass artist, what would I need?"

The booze crate disappeared and was replaced with a hologlass as sculpted by the famous artist, Uven Naoorih, over three centuries ago.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ According to Conrad, hologlass is an artform using holocrystal sheets to preserve images. The sheets are then assembled in a fashion that mixes images and superimposes certain images over others. Purists of the art travel to their various subjects and prepare original holographic captures of the images to be used in the

Meanwhile, lists of instructional institutions and collections of notable works and equipment appeared.

"I didn't take you as someone who's into hologlass."

"I have a distant relation back on Rhylanor who couldn't stop talking about it last time I visited, so I decided to look into it. To tell you the truth, I found him to be a bit boorish on the subject, but it just stayed with me. I did some research and found it to be pretty interesting. Restful even. You can appreciate it better if you are culturally related to the specific artist and can pick up on the subtleties, but it's pretty fascinating regardless."

"Okay." She nodded. "I can see that."

"Give it a try."

She put her hands into the interface space, and different items appeared for a moment. Then she waved them away, one by one, but every now and then she'd stop to look at something in more detail and occasionally, after a moment's hesitation, run through the varied options being offered, all of which required slightly different gestures.

"You've done this before," I said.

"Slates and comms," she said into the interface.

What she was carrying with her didn't look shabby, but there were always the latest models. She found a state-of-the-art beast with a price to match.

"How do I see the reviews?" She made the correct gesture before I could even respond. "But how do I get comparisons ordered by rating?" She tried another gesture, but it wasn't quite right. Instead, she'd ordered them by price.

"Like this," I said, sticking my hands in the interface space. But with two pairs of hands, the thing got confused. "Concierge, please order comparisons by rating. My hand-signing abilities are mainly limited to Navy BattleSpeak," I said,

piece. The famous piece by Uven Naoorh referenced three supernova explosions, and superimposed these over images of daily life in systems with giant and supergiant stars. The plates were cut in a way to resemble a sculpture by one of Uven's influences. Walking around the sculpture would reveal different combinations of images. Essentially, it combines photography and sculpture along with poetic reinterpretation of imagery.

demonstrating the clipped style we used when there were comm failures on the flight deck.

"This is pretty neat," she said. "I'm going to have to ask for a raise so I can afford it, though. How wide is its catalog? I have a feeling I could play with this for a long time."

"You could spend all day and night and still barely scratch the surface," I said.

"Does the Navy do requisitions with this as well?"

"The Navy buys in bulk," I said, "and so it gets bulk discounts. Procurement is all based around meeting basic minimum requirements, whatever they happen to be. The ISC is very familiar with Navy standard issue, and it can supply it, but usually not as efficiently as other companies. Its focus is on the high end market. But we still purchased goods from them on occasion."

"I see. Oh, sorry. I'm distracting you from why we're here."

"No... no." *Yes, actually. But I don't mind.*

"What did you come here for?"

"I lost most of my creature comforts on my last assignment."

"Oh?"

"Misjump."

"Oh." Her mouth fell open. Even landlubbers knew about misjumps. They were a common plot device of the interstellar horror genre.

"I ended up in the Vargr Extents," I explained.

Come to think of it, they were also big in space comedies.

"What was that like?"

"Your standard horror/comedy," I replied. "We had to find transport back, and the Vargr we hitched rides with were not always keen on staying anywhere too long. After I got back to Efate, the Jaqueline promotion dropped in my lap, and fleet couriers brought me the rest of the way. This is literally the first time in months I haven't been in jumpspace or restricted to a base for medical probing. No doubt half my crew are still on medical restriction, and the other half, by now, have been flung far and wide. I love the Navy, but I am a little tired of it all, and I want to treat myself."

"Well, I'm sure you deserve a treat," she said with just a hint of innuendo.

Something fluttered within my belly, and I opened my mouth, trying to think of an appropriate response, but my brain refused to cooperate. It was like it went on strike.

"I just want some nice clothes to wear," I finally said, "and a restock of my favorite foods and luxuries."

She blinked for a moment, then sighed.

Argh! My brain was my enemy!

Why was I suddenly so nervous? It wasn't like I'd never been on a date. I'd even been engaged. But I wasn't *smooth*. I'd never been, and to be honest, I tended to regard men who were with a mixture of envy and distrust. The *Gift of Gab*, I'd heard it called. Whoever this Gab was, he didn't give me any.

For lack of anything witty to say, I told Kaz about how I'd ordered a new flight suit. Some pilots loved the ones issued by the Navy, but the anti-chafe lining did not play well with my skin.

"So you're going to try on clothes? I can step out."

"No, they already have my measurements. Here, let me show you. Concierge, I'll be reviewing my order now."

"Of course, Captain," it said, leading us out of the Explorium and down an escalator to one of their receiving rooms.

Chapter 24

Fungus & Felines

A door slid open, revealing a spacious room with lounging couches surrounding a sunken holopit. Two personal luggage shipping containers stood on end, and a third one the size of a footlocker was in between them. The lighting cycled up to a comfortable glow in the visible frequency of my home sun, much dimmer and a bit redder than Jewell's.

"Concierge, please adjust lighting to Navy standard interior and activate the fitting simulation."

The light brightened and more yellow was added, and in the center of the holopit appeared a full scale likeness of yours truly. He was wearing the full captain's duty uniform. A wave of the hand cycled the image to the full dress uniform, and finally, to the formal mess uniform. I noted some changes to the styling of the half cape that was apparently back in vogue for the mess uniform. My medal board had been updated, and the insignia for the Jaqueline had been added to the shoulder patches.

"How do I look?" I asked Kaz.

"You or him?"

"Either... both."

"Well, he's better dressed, but I think you're far more charming."

I cocked my head slightly and walked over to the hologram, moving myself within it so I stood more or less where my likeness was being projected. The holographic medium's misting agent smelled sharp and metallic, and I could only imagine how it was glitching and roiling as it attempted to compensate for me being in the way.

"That takes care of Captain Fashionable. So, you think I'm charming?"

She laughed, but before she could furnish a reply, the entry chime dinged, and a robot servitor floated in bearing a tray with a decanter of water and the rest of the snacks we'd ordered.

"Saved by the bell." She turned toward the snacks. "What is this one again?"

"Dried cave fungus."

"Dried cave fungus?" She picked up a piece and inspected it with a dubious expression.

I couldn't help but chuckle as I stepped out of the mist.

"I know, the name is atrocious in Anglic, but in the Crater of Rhylanor they call it *Me'essada*."

"Me'esada?"

"*Me'essssada*," I said, emphasizing the sibilance, which was essential to its pronunciation. "Most of what you'll find for sale is cultivated on large farms, but the ISC knows what I like, and they can usually get the hand-harvested varieties. *Me'essada*, traditionally, is grown in caves. It grows in these big mats." I spread out my arms to emphasize how big, but there was really no way to do them justice.

"And there are different varieties?" Kaz asked.

"Oh, yes. They're all derived from some sort of yeast-mycelium crossbreed, but there are hundreds... and the sauces..." I sat down on one of the couches and set out the various sauces. "The harvested mats get dumped into these big vats and are each marinated with a *secret sauce*."

"Secret sauce? Sounds like these fungus farmers take themselves pretty seriously."

"Each clan has their own unique strain as well as their own secret sauce."

I held the bit of dried fungus between my fingers and twisted it, feeling the sensation of it crumbling a little. It yielded an earthy fragrance, the smell of home.

"I take it you're from one of these clans?" Kaz asked, joining me on the couch.

"Oh, no. Those families trace their lineage back to the first colony. We Plankwells came to Rhylanor somewhat later. I have some friends in various clans though, and I was once invited to the harvest festival."

"What was that like?"

"Amazing," I replied. "Jewell and Rhylanor are similar in that people generally need technological assistance just to survive. The Lllelwylyl¹⁵⁹ colony is a notable exception, but we humans like to breathe. Sometimes I think it's our greatest weakness. I grew up in an arcology¹⁶⁰ and then spent my entire career living and working in even smaller biospheres, often out in the middle of deep space. But for one season I lived with a clan, learning the old ways and what

159 <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Lllelwylyloly>

160 <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Arcology>

it took to live on a world that doesn't really care for you."

I dipped the fungus stick into the reddish sauce, and stopped Kaz when she tried to follow suit.

"The yellow one is more popular. The red is... ah... an acquired taste. You can try it, but I'd like you to try the yellow first; it was the way I first encountered it."

She complied with my suggestion, her eyes opening wide with her first taste. "Mmmm... this is way better than I expected." She took another bite. "This is amazing. How many calories?"

I shrugged, pouring a glass of water from the decanter.

"Can I try the red one now?" She dipped and took a bite, then scrunched up her face. "Oh, Cleonsfart. This one's awful!"

"I did warn you it was an acquired taste," I said, passing her the glass. "Wait for the aftertaste."

"Ugh. It just keeps getting worse."

"Now try this one," I set the last dipping sauce in front of her. It was green and had the letters "CR" printed on the lid.

"Those are my initials."

"I know."

I had no idea how it would taste, although I was certain she would like it. In fact, if all went as planned, it would be her favorite. Kaz drank some water, cleansing her palate, then dipped and bit. Her eyes opened wide again, and she dipped again and then took an even bigger bite.

"Oh, my goodness," she said in between chews. "It's... it's like there's an orgasm in my mouth." She suddenly got a strange look on her face. "Not that I would know what that tastes like," she hastened to clarify. "What's this called?"

"It doesn't have a name. It was created within the last few minutes based on your established eating patterns."

"My eating patterns?"

"The ISC buys data, lots of it, focusing on people's consumption preferences."

"But I'm not a member."

"Not yet, but you're successful, and given your position in the Chamber of Commerce, I'm sure you do a fair bit of entertaining. Despite not being a spacer, you're exactly the sort of person

who might find a membership to be well worth the investment. A very sophisticated AI created this especially for you in the hope you would consider it."

"I am," she said, taking another bite. "Wow."

I munched contemplatively on another stick of fungi, the earthy, smokey tastes of the red sauce bringing me back to Rhylanor. My initial reaction had been similar to hers, and it was only over the course of that season, living with the people whose way of life it epitomized, that I began to appreciate its multitudinous layers of flavor.

"One can hide for a time from one's challenges," one of the elders once told me, "but challenge itself is inescapable. Life is woven of such disguised blessings, each designed for our benefit and growth. Embrace them! They are, every one of them, opportunities, doorways to resilience and to abundance."

In other words, eat the damn sauce and pretend that you like it. And then suddenly, I did.

Kaz's phone rang, and she looked at it with a pinched expression, but this soon gave way to a wrinkled brow.

"Sorry," she said. "I have to take this." She pressed a button. "Mom? What's the matter? ... Uh-huh...." She obviously had an audio implant. "Right now? ...Why can't you just... Okay, okay... I'll get you some on the way back, but can't it wait? ... No, we finished a while ago.... Yes, he's nice." She turned her back to me as if that would somehow mask her half of the conversation. "We're at the Starwinds. ...The ISC.... Yes, the membership place. ...Yes, he's right here.... We're eating fungus.... Rhylanori fungus.... Yes, I realize that's a long way to ship fungus, but it's really good. Except for the red sauce. That was terrible.... Yes, he tried Jewellian fungus already.... I'm sure he thought it was just fine. He just wanted me to try *his* fungus.... No, it's not weird.... Okay, maybe a little bit." She turned back toward me, her face contorted halfway between a wince and a grimace. "Okay, okay fine. I'll bring him.... Yes, I'll remember the toothpaste.... Okay.... Okay, bye." She killed the connection. "You have to come home with me," she said. "My mom wants to meet you."

* * *

On the way to her and her mother's abode — they lived “together but separate” — Kaz told me the tragic tale of her conception, by way of explanation for her mother's overprotectiveness, and when she brought up Captain James of the INS Tiberius, I couldn't help but feel my temperature begin to rise. James (a.k.a. “The Great Impregnator”) was a bit of an infamous legend in the Imperial Navy. Indeed, he was about to retire as an admiral when it came to light that he'd fathered multitudinous offspring scattered across numerous sectors, the locations of their birth worlds forming an only slightly abridged map of his travels.

An enterprising lawyer organized a class action lawsuit, demanding child support, and the Navy ultimately had to pay. In their infinite wisdom, they punished James by charging this rather large expense against his future pension. With his retirement thus reduced to well below zero, he decided, on his last day of service, to take a long stroll through a short airlock, and that ultimately was that.¹⁶¹ The Great Impregnator would impregnate no more.

“So you see,” Kaz said, “she has ample reason for her concerns. I'm living proof.”

This was all rather sudden for a first date. To be compared to this breaker of hearts (and filler of wombs) was entirely too much. Nonetheless, it now made perfect sense why Kaz's mother wanted to meet me. No doubt, her relationship with Captain James had moved at a lightning pace, and she didn't want her daughter to make a similar error.

I, however, didn't view myself as being that sort of man. Granted, this was probably more due to ineptitude than any high-minded morality, but the case remained, other than both of us being Imperial Navy Captains, he and I were fundamentally different. Captain James became a captain — and as I said, a legend — by taking all sorts of ridiculous risks, and then miraculously surviving, whereas I'd gotten where I was by... by doing what?

¹⁶¹ There are, however, conflicting rumors around this episode, one suggesting he got *epsteined* by various female members of his crew and another asserting that he found some ancient artifact allowing him to go back in time, purportedly so he could do it all over again and try to beat his high score.

I glanced out the window of her aircar, seeing Olav there, seeing me.

Why did they make me a Captain? Because I found my way back from Vargr territory?

I looked down at the little ISC bag with my obligatory gift, a tube of toothpaste, and wondered if the reason for this promotion was entirely due to my surname. Or was there more to it? Had the psionic gear in my quarters been a mere happenstance, or did someone plan for me to find it?

We landed in yet another automated parking bay, complete with car-sized airlocks. There was a robot doorman / security guard, a logo for “The Cottages at Grand Central Towers” emblazoned on the exterior skin of its primary chassis.

“Hello, Ms. Remshaw,” it said. “Who is your companion?”

I had to slide my Visitor ID into a slot for scanning, but it gave it right back, and as the elevator took us up, I couldn't help but notice another entrance down below where people seemed to be arranged in lines. Then it changed directions, at least according to the gee forces I was feeling, and when it opened, we were in the foyer of some sort of duplex.

“We're here!” Kaz called, going through the door on the right.

“Kazzy, is that you? Where's this big shot starship captain? Oh, *hello*.”

I recognized her immediately as being the same woman I'd seen within Kaz's mind.¹⁶² She lay in some sort of hospital bed, her face a sickly, sallow hue, the color of a faded rose. Her skin was drawn tight over her bones, her eyes sunken and heavy-lidded, the weight of her years bearing down on her like a burden too heavy to bear, while her hair, thin, lifeless, and gray, framed her face like a shroud. A clear, plastic tube extended up from her arm to a small autodoc¹⁶³ perched just overhead, and a robot, possibly a nurse or caregiver, stood silently in the corner of the room, obviously inactive.

I bowed, using the Imperial Court form of respect to the honored elder. If I had found the courting of friends my own age awkward and confusing, I had no such issue with older people. My early life had been filled with elders looking

¹⁶² See the beginning of page 142.

¹⁶³ <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/AutoDoc>

in on me, judging my progress and making plans that involved my participation. As I grew older, I found it sometimes bemusing, bordering on entertainment to exceed their expectations. Regardless, I always liked talking to older people. They had lots of interesting stories, and they asked for little but had much to offer.

“Ma’am, Captain Augustine Plankwell at your service.” I rose from the bow and smiled. “Please, call me Gus.”

“I saw you on the viewy,” she said. “You know how to strut, and you can talk well enough, but let me ask you a direct question, if I may. What are your intentions with respect to my daughter?”

“Mom, please...”

“No, it’s quite all right. Originally, my intentions were to acquire a pod for my cruiser. But they became something more after a lovely dinner, and now, I suppose, I’m just happy to make a new friend in an unexpected place. Plus, she seems to know the most interesting people.”

“I’m aware of what my daughter brings to the table. It’s *you* I’m worried about.”

“Well, you are right to be wary of the reputation of Navy captains, all Navy for that matter. We are hard living and keen on finding happiness where we can. Your daughter has been kind to me, and I greatly appreciate it, being the stranger here.”

Her expressions seemed to soften for a moment.

“Just be sure to mind your manners with her. I expect nothing less than the perfect gentleman.”

“Of course.”

“I mean it!” she hissed, gritting her teeth. “She’s all I’ve got! Treat her wrong, and you’ll face my wrath for however long I have left. ¿Comprende, El Capitán?”

I couldn’t place the language of that last part, but her meaning was unambiguous. Nonetheless, what could an old woman in a hospital bed do to me? Truth be told, I didn’t want to find out.

I knelt so we could look at each other eye to eye.

“You have my word, not only as a captain in the Imperial Navy, but as a Plankwell of the House of Plankwell. I swear to do no wrong by you or your daughter. By my heart, by my hand and by my Emperor, I say this truly.”

Of course, I didn’t swear I wouldn’t use my newfound telepathy, and so given our close visual contact, I tried to reach out, to pick the lock that held access to her inner thoughts, but nothing came forth, although neither did she spit in my eye. We simply stared at one another, and so I drew myself upright, glancing toward Kaz.

“Mom, we brought your toothpaste.”

Afterward, on the way out, Kaz showed me into her half of the duplex. Two cats were there, staring at me as though analyzing my every move, while she apologized for her mother’s behavior.

“It’s okay,” I said. “What’s wrong with her?”

“Physically or psychologically?”

“Physically.”

“She went swimming.”

“Swimming?”

“There are some bad bugs lurking in the ocean. Some say they’re Jewell’s revenge for how we’ve treated her.”

“Bugs? You mean bacteria?”

“Technically speaking, no. It’s an PSI-resistant variant of archaea methanopyri.”¹⁶⁴

“PSI-resistant?!” I felt my hair stand on end.

“PSI as in Protein Synthesis Inhibitor. It has nothing to do with psionics. If microorganisms ever develop psionics, I figure we’re done for.”

I nodded.

“Would you like a drink before I take you to your hotel?” she asked. “I’ve got some a Tukera Zin all the way from Zila¹⁶⁵ I’ve been saving for a special occasion.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Charming *and* a special occasion. I feel like I got promoted again.” I instantly regretted my words. They felt so self-congratulatory. But Kaz went with it.

“Your handling of my mother...” — she grinned the sort of grin that refuses to be contained, her whole face beaming, almost shining in the dim light — “...that was... I just... she was so flabbergasted by that oath of yours she

¹⁶⁴ Given the medical advances that could potentially occur just within this century, it’s exceedingly difficult to speculate on what sort of incurable illnesses may exist in the distant future. Nonetheless, we discussed the matter on the Traveller Mailing List. See <https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/22172836/>

¹⁶⁵ [https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Zila_\(world\)](https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Zila_(world))

couldn't even speak. Do you know how hard it is to render her speechless?"

I'm sure I must have been blushing, although I tried hard to retain a straight face.

"I want you to know," she continued, taking a deep breath, "I don't normally bring guys to my place; consider yourself special."

The cats briefly glanced at one another but then quickly turned their attention back to me.

Her: I don't normally bring guys to my place, consider yourself special

Her cats:



"So how about that drink?" she asked again.

"I'd be happy to have a drink with you, if those two don't mind."

"Oh, right. How rude of me to neglect introductions. This is Cleon, and over there is Barfolomew. I should warn you, Cleon doesn't like men, so you have to be careful with him, and Barfy... well... let's just say he's known for leaving little landmines wherever he goes."

Cleon and I eyed one another as Kaz went off to open the wine, each of us a transient curiosity from the other's point of view. Barfolomew, meanwhile, began looking down at the floor. He opened his mouth and let out a little cat cough, then a louder one.

I'd seen cats do this before. Hacking up hairballs was apparently one of their specialties. My family didn't have pets, and while I'd served on ships with them, I'd never sought them out. Nonetheless, I was pretty sure I could handle whatever these two dished out.

Kaz came back with two glasses, handing me one.

"I propose a toast," she said. "May your stay on Jewell be as productive as you wish, but no more so."

Productive? I smiled as we clinked glasses. Was this another of her innuendos?

"Kaz," I said. "I want to thank you for a really interesting evening. Thanks for taking a chance and trusting me." I took a sip of the zin. "I would like to see you again before I leave, but I don't know how much time I will have given the Countess and the Admiral milking all the celebrity notoriety out of my name. And I can't say if and when the Jackie will be back along this way."

"All the more reason for us to enjoy this moment," she said, holding my gaze.

"You heard the oath I gave to you and your mother that I would not do you wrong, and I meant it. But, would it be all right to give you a kiss?"

She put down her glass and stared at me for a long moment.

"Only a kiss?"

I put down my glass as well and reached out to take her hand.

"A kiss... and whatever follows."

I gently pulled her towards me, and what followed was more than a mere kiss, and afterward, as we lay in bed, I finally thought to ask if she was protected.

"Protected?"

"You know."

"Oh, I do. It's just a hell of a time to ask. Do you have space herpes?"

"No! And ew. Everyone thinks it's a joke, but it really is one of those less glamorous things captains have to cope with."

"Captains in particular?"

"My med officer was complaining about it a few days ago. You would not believe the battery of medical testing I endured after the misjump and months of flying on vargr tramp freighters."

"Why were they freighting tramps?"

I grinned, wondering if I dared dignify that with a response. "I'm using the Navy approved contraceptive, and last I checked it was about 95% effective, but government contractors, you know?"

"Down here, the BPH does routine screening."

"BPH?"

"Bureau of Public Health. Actually, it's a subsection of the BPH called CUCA."

"Committee for Under Cover Affairs?"

"Central Unit for Contagion Analysis," she replied with a tickled expression.

"Do they also screen against pregnancies?"

"Like my cats, I had myself spayed."

"Then what was your mother..."

"She doesn't know. She practically thinks I'm a virgin."

"How old are you?"

"Forty-two. Same as you." I must have given her a strange look, because she added, "I was joking. She knows I'm not a virgin."

"How did you know I'm forty-two?" I asked.

"I looked it up. You're semi-famous, you know."

I rolled my eyes and couldn't help but crack a smile.

"So you never want children?" It was a dumb question, given what she'd just told me, but I couldn't help but try to understand her better. Her response was a curt shake of the head.

"I don't want to have to worry about anyone the way my mom worries about me."

We dozed for a while, and then I woke to an odd, warm pressure on my chest and the sound of cat-coughs. It looked like Barfolomew was getting ready to vomit on my face. Kaz, meanwhile, snored softly by my side, and Cleon stared at me imperiously from across the room.

I pushed the cat off my chest and wondered why people put up with such behavior. Then I checked the time. I'd slept for five or six hours despite the fact that my sleep cycle was only now about to begin. That was fine, I supposed, glancing toward the curtains. Sunlight was already peeking through.

I got up and retrieved my slate, examining the backlog of messages. Those two from Agidda and Masa were still there. The former included a day pass to Silver City as well as a note saying my name had been left with the palace guard, and they would be expecting my arrival at ninety deplars JST the following day. *Ninety deplars JST?* I looked again toward the daylight peeking around the curtains. Was I already late?

Kaz didn't appear to have any clocks, not even an alarm clock; it was probably incorporated in the house computer or she used the one on her

slate. I used mine to open an interface to the planetary network to find out what JST was, Jewell Standard Time, obviously, which was identical to HST, Heron Standard Time. Heron was the financial capital, so that made sense. According to the network, we were currently under ten deplars into the day. Ninety deplars, according to my head math, was still over eight hours off. I breathed a sigh of relief, although I had no idea how long it would take me to get to Silver City. Kaz had said something about needing to take a certified shuttle. Still, eight hours seemed like it would be long enough.

The message from Captain Masa, the Navy's Public Relations Coordinator, said the service for Lt. Jaamzon would be in a local sports stadium just outside the starport and would occur at 1114-120-1100, in other words, tomorrow at 1100 Hours. How was that going to translate to local time? I consulted the network. It would be an evening service. It would happen *this* evening. And I was going to need to come up with something to say.

Nizlich sent a private voice message pertaining to this. She was concerned that if we allowed general crew attendance, as Captain Masa suggested, the Jackie would be nearly empty and a ripe target for Zhodani agents "Remember what happened to the Vermillion Stance. When you think you are safe, that is when they will hit." But we were in orbit around Jewell and surrounded by the bulk of the 212th Fleet. We could leave some marines on board. So long as they were appropriately positioned within and around critical areas, even a squad of Zhodani infiltrating via teleportation would be...

Two high-pitched yowls shattered the silence, followed by a furious scurrying of feet, and then it was over. Just as Barfolomew had begun to purge, Cleon attacked, his rival gagging on his own hairball even as he fled. It didn't take a military genius to figure out what happened. Cleon had patiently waited for the moment of Barfolomew's greatest vulnerability. Only then did he strike, successfully asserting his dominance.

Kaz stirred, blinking for a moment, one hand feeling for me where I had been sleeping.

I reached over and touched her hand, squeezing it a little.

“Hello. Thank you so much for a wonderful evening.”

“Is it morning already?”

“Yes, and sadly, I have a lot of places to be and important people to not get mad at me. Can I use your fresher?”

“Uh-huh.”

I leaned in to give her a kiss.

“Also, your cats are not the best wake up call I have ever seen.”

She closed her eyes, so I went to the fresher.

My mind was already racing with the things I needed to get done. I needed a vehicle and driver to get me to Silver City and back for the service, and I could use the ride to deal with the other messages and prepare my speech for the memorial service. How was it that in the course of a week I was giving two speeches? I shook my head at the absurdity.

I needed to arrange my ISC purchases to be shipped up to the Jackie, but I needed one of the new uniforms for the service, and I guessed it wouldn't hurt to be well dressed when visiting the Countess. So I needed to factor the trip back to the ISC hotel to deal with *that*. I slightly regretted the cost of the unused accommodations, but one took one's opportunities when they presented themselves. Even after all the business in the fresher, I was smiling in memory of the evening's activities as I dressed.

“What're you grinning about?” Kaz mumbled, her voice snapping me back to reality.

“Just happily contemplating the memories.”

“Give me a call sometime,” she said. “And make sure to be quiet on your way out.”

GMing Randomly

Prior to playing out the dinner scene¹⁶⁶ between Kaz and Plankwell, I wrote Timothy about a dozen paragraphs on what I was hoping to accomplish. At the time, I thought he might want to play Kaz, so I wanted to give him my thoughts in a fair amount of detail. He was too busy to run an NPC at that moment, but the discussion we had was still useful. Writing Kaz's initial goals for the scene helped me play her. It also forced me to consider where she might be romantically. I'll share the first two paragraphs of what I wrote to give you a glimpse into what goes on behind the scenes.

Kaz Remshaw, as you might recall, is a mucky-muck in the Heron Chamber of Commerce, which means she's an advocate for business interests but also knows a lot of business people operating out of Heron. Her primary interest going into this meeting is to see if she can earn herself a referral fee, or, at least, a return favor, by steering Plankwell toward a particular vendor for his military equipment needs. After all, to replace the Exploration Pod would cost somewhere in the vicinity of MCr900. Hence, it's a very big contract. Even to just repair it would be a big contract. So whoever generates this business for a military contractor will be rewarded, one way or another.

Having said that, her motives may not be purely mercenary. It is also vaguely possible that she might be romantically interested in the dashing young Captain. She's 42 according to the notes you initially sent me, and Plankwell just so happens to be the same age. I rolled to see if she was married, and ended up answering that question with a big NO. So maybe her biological clock is starting to scream, and she's hoping to find her knight in shining armor. It's also possible she doesn't want kids and has sworn off long-term relationships, but at 42, she might begin questioning whether she really wants to grow old alone. Just some ideas.

Timothy got back to me with a plethora of ideas, but rather than try to select a favorite, I decided to leave it to fate. I think I've mentioned

¹⁶⁶ See Chapters 22 & 23.

a few times how I have the tendency to let the dice rule whenever I'm GMing.¹⁶⁷ There are various reasons for this, but the primary one is that I'm a big believer in giving fate a hand in the storycrafting. So I quickly mined Timothy's feedback for options and jotted down the following table to help determine why Kaz was single.

Roll d6 (if 6, then roll another d6):

- 1: Driven by work / what do I need a man for?
- 2: Sick relative (1-3 Mom, 4-6 Dad)
- 3: Painful past relationship (once bitten, twice shy)
- 4: Too choosy
- 5: Separated but still legally married (he dragging out the divorce to get more money)
- 6 & 1-2: Weird religious convictions (can only marry a person of x faith, see 101 religions)
- 6 & 3-4: Shady past (married into wealth, but her husband mysteriously disappeared)
- 6 & 5: She's a lesbian
- 6 & 6: She's a he

Then I rolled six-sided dice to determine the primary and secondary reasons.

Primary reason: 1

She's always looked at men as being too much of a bother, particularly since she's been so financially successful in her work. Yes, it takes all her time, but she likes it that way. Until now. Sure, she'll be able to age comfortably. She can even afford to go into one of the best nursing homes. But does she really want to end up all alone?

Secondary reason: 2 & 2

Sick Mom. Her Mom and Dad split up when she was young. He was a spacer. Had places to go and people to impregnate. She was one of the aforementioned people. Her Mom has warned her to stay away from spacers.

Once I determined she had a sick Mom, I had to figure out what happened to Dad. So I concocted this story, which I later elaborated on. I admit, this method may seem a little bizarre. Why

not just decide on something? The reason, like I said, is that I want to include the possibility of unlikely results. Once every thirty-six times, a double-six will happen, and when it does, both I and the player will be surprised. And that's part of the fun of roleplaying. In other words, Conrad, you dodged a bullet.

¹⁶⁷ See my zine in Alarums & Excursions #299 and my reply to Lee in Alarums & Excursions #363.

Chapter 25

Back to Work

While waiting for the elevator in the foyer of Kaz's duplex, I began to wonder about the location of my hotel. Fortunately, I hadn't decided to pay above my *per diem* for an upgrade, as I was only going to be in there for all of fifteen minutes, enough time to grab my uniforms and leave. Tapping the address on the reservation revealed it to be fairly close, and there was a line on the map with little dots, some sort of public transit, I guessed. With any luck, it would get me there in short order, assuming I managed to find my way to the nearest station. It was either that or summon a ride from my old friend, the Imperial Navy, but if I did that, I might later need to explain what I was doing at Grand Central Towers rather than my hotel. And someone might figure out that while my uniforms had checked in for the night, I hadn't.

"Where did you spend the night?" I could imagine Admiral Karneticky asking, assuming his life was dull enough that he had time to concern himself with such trivia. In any case, it didn't really matter what he thought of me, but it might matter to Kaz what he thought of her.

I found my way to the aforementioned public transit station, taking a monorail that literally went through various buildings as it circled Heron's downtown, during which time I looked up Silver City, learning to my chagrin that it was currently on the other side of the planet. What it was doing there, I had no idea. Apparently it floated around from place to place, which I supposed was a nice feature for a political capital, but for me it was an unwelcome development, as the other side of the planet was far enough away that it pretty much excluded the option of subsonic transport. I'd need something very fast, or I wouldn't get there on time.

Despite this, I decided to wait until I was actually inside the hotel before calling the base to see if they could get me a ride.

"Is this an emergency?" the dispatcher asked.

"No... well, maybe. I need something fast. I have to be on the other side of the planet by noon."

"I'll need to get this approved."

"The sooner the better," I replied.

I checked in, picked up my shipping containers, and took them up to a bubble-domed waiting area on the roof. Surrounding it were little landing pads where gravcars would park for a minute or two, dropping off or picking up guests. A small team of luggage handlers kept busy, and an actual human greeter, in this case a young woman, said nice things to people as they came and went.

"How are you doing, Sir?" she asked. "I hope you enjoyed your stay."

I nodded politely, fairly certain my new uniforms had, as I re-checked my messages.

One had come in from the dockmaster's office. They'd sent me a list of appointments corresponding to the open slots in the Yard Commander's morning schedule. I didn't have time for this. I was about to cancel the appointment for a second time when a priority message interposed itself over my index finger. The Navy dispatcher was letting me know that a Naasirka Kinnuki¹⁶⁸ was on its way.

The Kinnuki was a speed demon. It cruised at supersonic speeds, and if you leaned into the accelerator, it went hypersonic and could maintain itself there for several thousand kilometers. After looking up Silver City again and doing some head math, I figured it could get me there in under two hours, or anywhere else on Jewell for that matter.

I felt a weight lift from my shoulders. I was going to make it with hours to spare. I returned to the previous message and let the AI select an appointment based on how soon it thought the Wayfinder would get me to the Dockmaster's office once I reached the base.

Why hadn't I requisitioned a vehicle earlier? Bases arranged rides for officers so long as they were on official Navy business, and even my dinner with Kaz technically qualified, although what happened after, not so much.

It had been a while since I'd been intimate with a woman, and somehow it felt like I was fitting back into myself, into the sort of life I'd had before the war and before Vanista. There had been so much turmoil, I could scarcely remember

¹⁶⁸ See Grav Vehicles, Vol 1 (2021),

<https://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/365792/Grav-Vehicles-Volume-1>

the last time I'd been truly happy. Was it my brain relaxing? Was it this psionic awakening, putting me in the way my mind was always supposed to work? Whatever it was, I felt pretty good. Why overthink it? Maybe it was just getting laid.

A Naasirka Kinnuki with the logo of the Imperial Navy dropped out of the sky onto one of the landing pads and opened its doors, and a baggage handler approached, offering to help. We plopped the shipping containers onto the three passenger seats, and I sat in the one left for the driver. A note was electronically displayed on the center console: "*Yours for the duration of your stay, courtesy of the 212th Fleet. — Cmdr. Shumurdim*".

I wondered if this was due to the urgency of my request, my relationship with the Admiral, the Plankwell name, or something else. This was the sort of ride a flag officer would get, or a commodore maybe, but not a captain. Granted, I was a guest from the 213th, so maybe that explained it. Either that or Shumurdim wanted to curry favor by loaning this old fighter pilot this sweet, sweet machine.

"Take me to Plankwell Naval Base," I said.

As the car rose into the sky, I set my slate into an interface port, activated speech interaction mode, and requested a connection to the Jackie.

"INS Jaqueline." It sounded like a human voice, no doubt the voice of the communications officer currently on duty.

"This is the Captain. Authenticate, set up a secure channel, and route me through to Commander Nizlich."

"Aye aye, sir."

The outline of a handprint appeared on the slate's surface, and I pressed my hand into it. Hopefully, Nizlich had a minute for her wayward captain. Judging by the time, she was probably busy exercising.

"Nizlich here, sir."

"Commander, is everything staying together up there?"

"Aye, sir."

I gave her the long and the short of my new assignments, and told her to allow whosoever requested leave to attend the memorial, but that she could at her own discretion use a *leave lottery* to maintain a skeleton crew and lock down the ship so long as this didn't interfere with the

repairs. I also mentioned that there would probably be a newsfeed covering the ceremony, so she could pipe that over the ship.

"I'll do that," she said.

"I'm on my way to meet the Yard Commander. Is there anything you'd like me to bring up?"

She started giving me a laundry list so long I had to take notes. Mostly, she was concerned about how much time everything was taking. Also, an engineer from the scout service had just left after having taken various measurements from inside the exploration pod.

"She and Martinsen apparently got into it." Onneri Martinsen, our chief engineer.

"Over what?"

"Onneri thought it might be repairable, but she said no, and then they argued about it and she left. That's all I know."

"Well, I don't doubt it's repairable, but not on our timeline."

"I'll talk to him."

Engineers were a curious breed, always thinking of themselves as being perfectly logical until someone threatened to take one of their beloved machines, at which point they'd blow their stack.

Speaking of beloved machines, "By the way, the base issued me a Kinnuki."

"Really! Are you going to fly it up to the ship?"

"If only I had time. Watch for a supersonic pass from Heron to Silver City. That'll be me racing to my appointment. Anything else, Commander?"

"Oh, I forgot to mention, a courier showed up with a package for you. I didn't want to let him into your quarters, so I signed for it myself."

"Ah, right. Do we have a certified psi-detector operator on board? If so, I want to do a sweep of med-bay, the fighter pod, and any other places that were affected by Zho weapons. You can do it during the memorial service to reduce crew rumors, and make sure to loop in Abbonette. I figure Intelligence is most likely to have an operator available. I'll explain more after you compile the results of the scans."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Plankwell out." I closed the connection.

I briefly considered how the new information Nizlich had given me would change my meeting

with the Yard Commander. I tried to access the Yard's work schedule to see who else was in refit and what the priority levels were, but I wasn't a member of the 212th Fleet, and even if I were, I don't know that they would have given me access.

A chime sounded, the Kinnuki's navigation computer informing me it was on final approach. Down below, somewhere in the Startown, a cluster of official-looking grav vehicles hovered over a burnt out building, the dome of which appeared to have completely caved in. I couldn't help but turn my head for a closer look, but the Kinnuki flew down a landing tube and into a subterranean garage, coming to rest rather suddenly, although the inertial suppressors effectively zeroed out the gees. I got out and let the Wayfinder guide me to the nearest gravway, and from there to the Dockmaster's office, which turned out to be wedged into the corner of a large cavern that was part of the repair yard. One of my Iskimkilukhuir-class couriers was here as well as five of my dragonflies, and after asking for the Yard Commander, I was finally directed toward a pair of legs and a rear end sticking out of a gravtank's avionics cubby.

"Uh... hello?" I ventured.

"Hello," a woman's voice called back.

"I'm looking for a Commander Jonden," I said, still talking to her rear end.

"Congratulations. You found me." She slowly slithered herself up and out, looking toward me as soon as her head was free. She was small, with a shock of curly hair and crooked nose. "And you are?"

I extended my hand. "Captain Gus Plankwell, INS Jaqueline. I just wanted to come by and compliment the Yard on the repair and refit effort to date. And..." — there was always an and — "...get an assessment of the Jackie from outside eyes, as it were." I was going to ask about expediting repairs, but a sudden memory of every senior officer coming to me and trying to get their pet project jumped ahead in the queue made me suddenly not want to be that guy.

"Sure. What do you want to know?"

"You may not know I was recently assigned command and have been working my way through my officers' readiness assessments, and I

was hoping to hear yours to help calibrate, as it were."

"Well, I'm not the person in charge of the repairs on your ship. That would be your chief engineer. But I heard there was a delay with respect to getting you guys your new fusion barbettes. Is that what you wanted to discuss?"

No, it wasn't.

"Do you not get a lot of courtesy calls from appreciative captains? I mean, I am new to this area and my command, but I seem to be wasting your time. I appreciate the opportunity to have spoken with you and my compliments to you and the yard. I am glad whatever issue with the fusion barbettes is being resolved. I will leave you to your repairs."

"Uh... sir, before you go, there's just one thing."

"Yes?"

"We're looking at several more weeks for your five dragonflies. Three of them were borderline to begin with. Your Fighter Pod Commander asked that we just replace them. We can do that, but you're going to have to tell us if you want to buy or borrow."

This was bean counter stuff, but the Navy was run by bean counters. In any case, Admiral Vasilyev had given blanket pre-approval for whatever I might need. So why not use it? *Within reason*, a little voice intoned somewhere in the back of my mind.

"It is unlikely we will be back this way. Go ahead and replace them. We'll buy them. Is there anything else?"

"Nope... sir." She gave me a crisp salute and then quickly crawled back into the avionics cubby.

She must be an excellent engineer, I thought on the way out, as she obviously didn't have people-skills. Unfortunately, this meeting had turned into a largely wasted effort. Jonden knew something about what was going on with the Jaqueline, but she clearly wasn't the point-person. The only other thing I could do would be talk to her immediate superior, the Dockmaster.

According to my slate, the Dockmaster's office had an open door policy, a sure sign of someone who did a lot of delegating, and according to the Wayfinder, it was in the building right in front of me. I went inside and soon found

myself within a reception area surrounded by several offices, all of them with their doors open, and I could hear what sounded like Admiral Karneticky's voice emanating from one of these.

"...yes, I agree, that's quite unacceptable. Oh... oh... that's even worse. ... No, let me call him. Okay. Okay, bye.... Communications, put me through to Captain Plankwell."

A young spacehand apprentice noticed me and began to approach as my wristcom beeped, signaling a priority call. I raised my hand to stop the spacehand and acknowledged the call as I walked toward the office in question.

"Sir, this is the Jaqueline. I'm putting through..."

"Admiral Karneticky?"

"...Yes... yessir." Click.

"Plankwell, are you there?" The admiral's voice came at me twice, first from his mouth and then, with only a slight delay, from my wristcom.

"What can I do for you Admiral?" I said, disconnecting the call as I walked in.

"Aaaieeekk!"

I'd never seen an old man jump so far since the Senior Olympics. He stuttered and stammered for a moment, then squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again.

"Plankwell, what is the meaning of this?!"

"Sir, I am enviably lucky to be right where you need me when you need me, sir."

It was hard keeping the Navy standard straight face. I stared at a spot just over his shoulder while he regained his composure. It was only then I noticed the other person in the room. He was a captain with a stocky build and watery eyes.

"You just about gave me a heart attack," Karneticky griped. "Don't sneak up on me again or... or I'll..."

"Yes, sir. I understand. I will be less circumspect in my future approach, sir."

I inclined my head to the other captain in the room, who's face had turned bright pink. His mouth was twisted, like he might be biting his tongue, and he gave me a curt nod, wiping away a tear.

"Yes, you'd best mind your Ps and Qs or I'll..." Seeing as how I wasn't in his chain of command, Karneticky seemed to be at a loss for what he could actually do to me. Nonetheless, he was a fleet admiral, while I was but a mere

captain, so it seemed best to simply glide past this.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"Uh... well, it would appear that some of your crew got themselves into some very serious trouble."

"What sort of trouble?"

"Arson and assault," the admiral said, "...as well as lewd conduct and public urination." He blinked for a moment. "What sort of ship are you running, Plankwell?"

"As you know, sir, I've only just taken command."

"Yes, well, they've apparently been taken into custody by the HPSS."

"The HPSS?"

"Heron Public Security Service. I've been trying to keep everyone on their best behavior, and now this!" He shook his head. "The Countess will have a fit. In any case, they're being turned over to us as we speak. No doubt, there will have to be courts martial. You're their captain, so you'll probably be called to attend, either as a judge or witness. I thought you should be informed immediately."

My knowledge of the procedures of crew being detained by planetary security ran the gamut. Sometimes it involved out-of-control enlistees ingesting something mentally destabilizing, and there were all sorts of regulations to prevent this. There was also, quite often, a settling of accounts between rival crews. And then there was that one time some planetary security officers had it in for the Navy and started picking on a sensor crew, unaware that the fleet's martial arts champion was among their targets. That last one had ended with four hospitalized PSOs, and I had to lecture the chief in question about proportional response. (He'd spent the three days in the brig catching up on his technical reading.) Court martial was usually a little on the heavy side, but depending on the circumstances, well, anything was possible. Regardless, I was reasonably certain Nizlich probably already had the details.

"Yes sir, I will attend to it. Did you have any advice for my meeting with the Countess?"

"Yes! If she calls you on her phone, try not to appear out of nowhere. You might give the poor woman a heart attack."

"Duly noted, sir. Once I am finished here with the Dockmaster, I will be heading there to meet with her, and I will see you at the memorial this evening."

"Very well. Captain Oshen, get back to me on that thing when you have a chance, will you?"

"Of course, sir."

Admiral Karneticky exited the room, and Captain Oshen grinned, extending his hand. I reached over and shook it.

"Captain, a pleasure," I said. "I met the Yard Commander to extend my compliments on the repairs and decided to take it up a notch, as it were. Oh, and sorry about surprising the Admiral that way, but that has been twice now..."

"I had no idea he could jump like that," Oshen said. "He's lucky he wasn't standing next to a garbage chute."

I grinned but declined to respond to that for fear someone might overhear, what with all these open doors.

"Do you have a few moments to talk about the Jaqueline?" I asked. "As you heard, I am due to pay court to the Countess, but I'd really like a third-party view of the ship before I take her out again."

"Tell me what's going on," he said, motioning for me to sit as he did likewise.

"I am trying to get up to speed with my knowledge of the Jaqueline and the crew," I said, taking a seat. "I have gotten reports from all departments, and overall, we are in pretty good shape. There was a concern over the jump drive, but my chief engineer can't know for certain until we take another jump to calibrate the data. I was hoping for an outside evaluation of the ship and systems so I could compare and contrast... make sure I am not missing any blind spots. I know that combat action requires a complete ship survey before repairs begin, and I was just wondering if anything turned up during that survey?"

"Let me look."

He turned toward the computer console on his desk and began tapping and clicking his way around its file system.

"I'm sure your chief engineer will have it if I don't. Ah, here it is." He began scrolling through it, probably looking for the summary statement. "Looks like you're waiting on some fusion

barbettes. Four week logistical delay? I have a feeling you may be here a while." He grinned.

I nodded. "You haven't even gotten to the main damage yet."

He kept scrolling.

"I feel like an overprotective mother," I said, scratching my nose.

"Well, you're the captain, so I'm sure you're used to it."

"I only became captain a few days ago."

"Oh? Well, then congratulations. I guess that explains why I'm seeing a Captain Jenkins signing off on the repairs."

"He was my predecessor." I thought about explaining how he'd waltzed into an ambush, but decided against it. "I just want some concrete facts... to confirm my initial observations."

Oshen, however, was only half-listening. "I think I found the main damage," he said, still looking at his computer. "Exploration and Fighter Pods, eh? Hmm... that's strange."

"What?"

"Well, our initial assessment of your Exploration Pod said it was repairable, and it looks like repairs were being made. But then there was a reassessment that came in just this morning saying it needs to be replaced. Replacement order authorized by... who's Bim Marshall?"

"My scout liaison. I authorized the replacement and made him my representative, because there was a lot going on, and I was trying to spread the load, as it were. I toured the damaged pods, and while it was repairable, there were other..." — Kaz flashed to mind — "... factors I took into consideration in choosing the replacement option."

"Oh?"

"It was certainly not in response to the yard's work."

"I should hope not."

"It was mainly because the entire scout detachment requested reassignment after the battle, and I felt if we were going to recruit a new batch of scouts, it would help to have a new pod."

"I see."

"I want to give Bim room to succeed or fail, given that he was the only one of them to remain with the Jaqueline. In my opinion, Jenkins' method of using the Scouts to precede the arrival

of the cruiser was sound, as Scouts are a more familiar and welcome sight than the Navy.”

“Sadly, that’s true, but only in peacetime. During the war, the provincials were all too happy to see us. When they’re afraid, they’re our best friends, but when they’re feeling safe and cozy, we’re just a thorn in their side. Fortunately, here on Jewell, we don’t have to deal with very much of that, although this incident in the startown, well... we’ll just have to see what comes of it, I suppose.”

I nodded. “Do you know what the hold up is on the fusion barbettes?” Logistical delay was one of the Navy’s euphemisms for everything from a battleship pulling precedence and snapping them up to a strike in the assembly plant.

“No idea.” He shook his head. “You don’t have to wait for them, of course. Just let us know where you’re going, and we’ll tell the delivery ship whenever it decides to show up. At least the Zhos didn’t hit your spinal mount. Or your missile pod. That could have been... well... catastrophic. As for your jump grid, it looks like you’re just going to have to cross your fingers. You know, since you’re waiting for the fusion guns anyway, it might be a good idea to do a test jump during the interim to see whether the grid is shot. Have you considered that?”

“We have. It is becoming a more attractive prospect in view of the delay on the fusion barbettes. Considering the public relations work the Admiral is roping me into, it might make sense for a shakedown jump to either Emerald or Ruby.”

“Ah, an excuse to leave. I imagine, given your lineage, this is a common problem?”

“You have no idea,” I said, shifting in my seat. “Do you have a recommendation for the facilities at either of those two ports should we run into issues?”

“Well, they both have scout bases, but of course that’s not the same as a naval base. As for the civilian facilities, they’re both quite good — nothing compared to Jewell, mind you — but if I had to choose, I’d probably pick Emerald, and not just because it’s a nicer place to visit. Emerald exports a lot of grain. There are bulk cargo vessels going back and forth more or less constantly, so they’ve got the parts and the

capacity to do repairs at scale. Ruby can probably do most everything Emerald can do, but it’ll take longer, especially for a ship like yours.”

“Good point. I wasn’t aware of the high cargo route. Thank you. Any other outstanding issues?”

“Lots, but I’m not seeing any red flags. It looks like your repairs are going as planned. The only thing I can’t see here is the Intel Pod. They’ve apparently made a bunch of requisitions, but it’s all flowing through nip.”

“Nip?”

“NIPP. Naval Intelligence Procurement Processing.”

“Ah. Yes. Doing their own thing as usual. I have a briefing with them as soon as I wrap up the Admiral’s PR tasks. I very much appreciate your time.”

As we said our farewells, I thanked him for confirming my own findings, although, in truth, he’d done a bit more than that. I’d been surprised to learn that Intel had its own procurement division and made a mental note to bring it up with Abbonette. Also, I couldn’t help but wonder if Bim was throwing *my* weight around needlessly. That things had moved so quickly after I’d signed that authorization, and without so much as a text message to let me know what was going on, was somewhat concerning. It reminded me of what Kaz had said in that restaurant, but instead of listening, I’d gotten defensive.

Overall, however, this had been pleasant. A business meeting with a fellow officer focused on the thing I was most responsible for, and no new drama, other than the fact that the staff at the base were amused to see their Admiral a little discomfited. To be fair, I’d enjoyed it too.

However, I was now looking forward to the next part of my day, even if there was a eulogy to craft and a noble to stroke. Flying in an atmosphere was always more exciting than space. The turbulence and the weather patterns meant you had to be paying attention, unless I let the gravcar fly itself. But what would be the fun of that?

GMing a 1PMG PBEM

I occasionally wonder if I've discovered a new way to roleplay as well as a new way to write fiction. Granted, PBEMing (Play-By-Email) has been around since, well, almost as long as email itself, I would imagine. Even before Al Gore popularized the Internet (1994 or thereabouts), there were PBEM campaigns mostly among college students trying to scratch their gaming itch. I was one of these students, and one of my first PBEM GMs had a very individualized way of running his game, one I'd never seen before and have never seen since. What he did was to focus on each and every player as if they were the story's main character.¹⁶⁹ It was an overwhelming workload, of course, and he burned out rather quickly, but as I played and GMed other PBEMs, I couldn't help but think that single-player games naturally make for the most focused and immersive stories in roleplaying.

Granted, it can take some time to find the story, depending on one's GMing style. Mine, being rather *laissez-faire*, certainly has that problem. Another GM, however, pushing a specific adventure they have in mind, could probably do a much better job, at least in terms of delivering an action-oriented narrative.

The interesting thing, however, at least from my perspective, is that as with any RPG, the subject matter and characters and theme and setting and even the mood can be anything you want, but there is one key difference, which is that through this style of roleplaying, the GM and players will be pushed and prodded to delve into the details of these elements of story much more deeply than is commonly the case in traditional tabletop roleplaying. So if you have a homebrew campaign setting you want to detail more thoroughly, I recommend trying this out. It's a lot of work, but it's well worth the effort.

In any case, about a year ago, while we were working on Chapter 16, I asked both Timothy and Conrad, "Is what we're doing roleplaying?" because I wasn't quite sure how they viewed it. "How is this Single-Player, Multi-GM framework

¹⁶⁹ For more on this, see my Star Trek PBEM archive at <http://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/trek.html> and read the *Insert: A Difference in Style* in the first adventure.

different, good, and/or bad? What do you see as its strengths and weaknesses?"

Conrad replied at length: "Yes, I do believe we are roleplaying, although I am also participating in the background world creation that my character moves through. Plankwell is becoming a synthesis of your vision, the original player's conceptions and my efforts to add to that. We are also doing some storytelling as we are editing our reactions into a coherent narrative, so whether it is strict roleplaying or cooperative story building, I think, is a matter of hair-splitting. My strongest case for the roleplaying is, did you ever anticipate using Imperial Court manners to resolve the AI dust-up? I definitely feel I am contributing to the character and his reactions to the world presented. I guess the only thing we aren't doing much is rolling dice, but as I am a fan of the maxim 'Say yes or roll,' I feel okay with that aspect. For all I know, you have been rolling dice to determine reactions."

Indeed, I was. And no, I did not anticipate the use of Imperial Court etiquette.

Conrad continued: "The strengths of this arrangement are that 1+n brains are better than 1, synergies and tangents come up, and time can be taken to explore interests. The downside is it can get a little weedy, because we are trying to hew close to the OTU¹⁷⁰, and not get too out there in MTU¹⁷¹ land. The biggest plus for me is the asynchronous nature that lets me fit in play when I have time rather than keeping to a strict schedule. As a player, I also feel a little spoiled with all the attention paid to the one character."

This focus on a single protagonist lends itself to both immersion, and it makes for a more readable narrative, but you can achieve this in any 1P1G¹⁷² PBEM. The advantage of 1PMG¹⁷³ is reduced fatigue on the part of the GM as well as a reduced propensity for the GM to make mistakes. GMs, after all, are only human. We burn out. We screw up. But putting a second GM into the

¹⁷⁰ Official Traveller Universe.

¹⁷¹ My Traveller Universe. He was simply observing that I'd been consciously trying to keep fairly close to the OTU, although, of course, I'd already taken a few liberties, particularly with respect to AI, and I would soon be taking more with respect to psionics.

¹⁷² 1P1G = One Player and One Gamemaster.

¹⁷³ 1PMG = Single-Player, Multi-Gamemaster.

equation, even if they're simply acting as an assistant, is extremely helpful.

For example, Timothy generates character sheets for most of the NPCs who are introduced. This is no small task, as Traveller character generation is time-consuming. You have to generate the NPC's entire career history. So it's a pretty big deal. It takes a load off my shoulders, letting me focus on other things.

Likewise, when I'm stuck for ideas on how to play a given character or if I'm just too busy, I've been able to ask Timothy to take the helm on a particular scene. I might do some editing after the fact, possibly adding some substantive details, but nonetheless, having an assistant to take over a particular scene, giving the primary GM some rest, is really important.

Worth noting, on this point, is that it is also often the case that a GM who is burning out will not do a particularly good job running NPCs. To illustrate this with a painfully common example, in traditional tabletop play (MP1G¹⁷⁴) it's become cliché that when the PCs start talking to some minor NPC who the GM hasn't really thought about at any length, the responses are indicative of the fact that the GM has no interest in the encounter. The bartender, the farmer, the shopkeeper all reply minimally, as if to hint to the players that they're going off the map. Ultimately, the adventure doesn't follow their lead. It sticks to whatever the GM has in mind.

This is acceptable to an extent, obviously, as someone needs to lead, and it just makes the most sense in an MP1G campaign for the GM to fulfill this need. But it can also be stifling, which isn't to say that GMs should not lead in a 1PMG campaign, but if the player wants to talk to a minor NPC, for example, it's easier to give that NPC their due respect, giving the NPC enough depth to indicate to the player that if the player so desires, this NPC could go from being a minor NPC to becoming a major one. The player, in order to become immersed and invested in the campaign, needs to have this level of agency. They need to see how their choices actually matter.

This is obviously a lot easier said than done. GMs (myself included) sometimes like to torture

our players a little bit, just as writers like to torture their characters. So we may withhold agency at certain times, forcing them into situations they'd probably rather not be in and then seeing how they squirm in order to try to get free. It's not very nice, I admit, but this is ultimately about constructing a narrative, and if the protagonist(s) were blissfully happy all the time, it would get pretty boring pretty fast.

Timothy and I don't use any of the methods I came up with in my preliminary essays about how to run a 1PMG campaign.¹⁷⁵ For the most part, Timothy just follows along, making good editorial suggestions¹⁷⁶ and being there for when I need him. If I need to bounce some ideas off him, he listens and responds with good ideas of his own. But most importantly, if he sees me on the verge of making some mistake, he lets me know, and we discuss it before the mistake becomes embedded into the narrative. I'll illustrate an example of this at a later date, as we get further into the campaign, but for now, all that's important to know is that no matter how good a GM you may think you are, a co-GM is a resource very much worth having, if you can find someone who's willing to put up with you.

In any case, I asked Timothy the same question I asked Conrad, "Is what we're doing roleplaying?" and he answered. "Yes. It is. Conrad is definitely roleplaying an Imperial Navy captain. I'm roleplaying various NPCs. You're roleplaying various NPCs. If PBEM counts as roleplaying at all, then this counts."

As with Conrad, I also asked Timothy, "How is this Single-Player, Multi-GM framework different, good, and/or bad? What do you see as its strengths and weaknesses?" Timothy replied as follows:

1) There is much more of a sense of a shared writing experience than you'd get around a table, however creative. We have time to think about responses. We have time to come up with words and ways of expressing things that I wish I could do around a table 'on the fly'. We go on at more length about just about everything than you could possibly do around a table.

¹⁷⁵ See *Alarums & Excursions* #534 & #535.

¹⁷⁶ I think I've said this before, but I'll say it again.

Timothy is the best editor I've ever seen.

¹⁷⁴ MP1G = Multiple Players, One GM.

2) There is great freedom for Conrad to do what he wants. In general, F2F¹⁷⁷ (or synchronous virtual) requires a tighter focus on an actual plot/story and getting to an end in a certain time frame.

3) There's perhaps a little more of you 'tidying up' what Conrad (or I, for that matter) have written so it fits your conception of the game and your conception of 'well written'. I'm not saying this is bad, but it's not really a feature of more 'traditional' role playing and does take a bit of getting used to and a certain relaxing of any ego.

I concur (& sympathize) with Timothy's responses. In any case, if you're intrigued enough to do so, try 1PMG out sometime, and let us know what you think.

Chapter 26 **Vertical Coffin**

"SCTC to IN Kunnuki. Authentication complete. You are certified to land at Omicron Tower, Pad 26. Turn over your flight controls, and we'll reel you in."

"Acknowledged," I replied, complying with Traffic Control's directives. Then I watched out the front window as the small speck of light floating in a mostly cloudless night sky slowly grew, becoming a network of gleaming silver towers and domed buildings, brightly lit by stark, white floodlights directed both outward and inward from the city's circumference. Alongside these lights were meson turrets and fusion guns, defensive systems that would have had little trouble blasting me out of the sky had I not done as I was told. It was a little annoying, being that I was an Imperial Navy Captain and these were mere provincials, but although Silver City only had around 45,000 inhabitants, they were the 45,000 most important people on the planet, and among them was Countess Helena Stavelot, so their attention to security was completely justified.

Regardless, I couldn't help but idly wonder how many minutes it would take for the Jackie to scrap this entire city with a few missile salvos on a high-speed orbital pass, perhaps using the spinal mount as we crossed the horizon. What was Silver City's movement capability? Certainly not high enough to evade. It would no doubt make for an amusing exercise for the weapons team. Not that I would actually target Jewell's capital. I dare not even simulate it. But monitors¹⁷⁸ were classic gas giant defenders, and a gravitationally suspended city was basically the same thing, albeit bigger, less armored, and less shrouded, making it, all in all, a much easier target.

Clearly, Silver City wasn't built with war in mind. It was mainly a way for the elites to display their power to the masses down below. Floating overhead, it was literally a city in the clouds, and since it could go anywhere, it could insert itself both physically and psychologically over any region or city that might be experiencing turmoil.

¹⁷⁷ F2F = Face-to-Face (i.e. tabletop, in-person play).

¹⁷⁸ <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Monitor>

Including the stop at Tanager City to recharge the Kinnuki's capacitors, the whole trip had taken around four hours, during which I'd caught up on my paperwork, composed a first draft of Jaamzon's eulogy, and checked in on my incarcerated crew members. Sadly, Faeng, the Vargr petty officer I'd sat next to on the way down, was among them. It seemed incongruent. He'd been extremely well-mannered. Granted, I was his captain, so of course he'd be well-mannered around me, but he just didn't seem like the type to cause trouble.

Nizlich and the Senior Master Chief were already dealing with the aftermath, so I'd moved on to my messages. One came in from Kaz. "Hi there, Stranger," she said, sipping what I assumed was more scuf. "I'm afraid I owe you an apology for this morning. I remembered after you left that I'd promised you a ride to your hotel. Hope public transit didn't turn into a nightmare. Anyway, if you need any help finding a contractor for any of your repairs or just want to get a competing estimate, let me know. I'll hook you up. In any case, take care, and feel free to let me know whenever you're back in town."

I'd recorded a reply: "Good morning! Your generosity overwhelms. The Navy has issued me a most fitting vehicle, so maybe I will get to give *you* a ride before I leave. Or if I need to get bailed out for speeding. I very much appreciate your attention and will be in touch soon." Not too bad, I thought, just the right amount of self-deprecation and humor. I hoped.

There was also a video message from Bim Marshall. "Sir," he said, standing at attention, "I've identified a suitable replacement Exploration Pod. Unfortunately, the old pod has to be scrapped. I'm enclosing a final authorization and will await your directive to proceed."

Attached was an interservice transfer order turning the old pod over to the IISS, so they could yank out whatever was salvageable. Included was also the purchase order for the replacement pod. I had to do a little digging to find out what it cost, but I finally located the number. It was over MCr750¹⁷⁹, which was apparently a discounted price.

¹⁷⁹ <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/MCr>

With the bill for the replacement dragonflies and now this, I knew I'd have to keep future requisitions down to a bare minimum, but I'd signed the final authorization and added a query asking about how recruitment for the new pod was going.

The passing clouds had made for nice scenery, and whenever a particularly interesting one came along, I'd grab the controls and fly manually for a minute or two, banking and looping to my heart's content. With my cargo mostly gone, the gravcar felt roomier. I'd kept one regular uniform and one dress uniform with me, but my flightsuit, mess dress, and snacks all went topside. Presumably, they'd be in my quarters when I returned to the Jaqueline.

Being that I had a few extra hours to kill, I'd thought about doing some sightseeing, but my flight path didn't run close to anything of interest. It did take me almost directly over a kelp harvesting facility way out in the middle of the ocean, but that was almost entirely underwater, and while some gravcars were submersible, the Kinnuki wasn't. There was also a volcano the guidebook said was popular with tourists. It apparently had a transparacrete statue of the founder of some local religion, and adherents who had recently died would be dumped into the magma lake during periods of seismic activity. According to some of the reviews, it apparently made the whole area smell like bacon. I could have easily replotted the flightpath to accommodate a closer flyby, but I didn't feel any special need to smell cooked human flesh.

The Kinnuki descended onto a landing pad, and my ears popped as they adjusted to the change in pressure. Then the doors opened. It was cold, but the air up here was at least breathable, although there was still a faint whiff of sulfur. As far as Jewellian air went, however, this was apparently as good as it got.

I stepped out of the car, and some sort of robot approached. With one of its six appendages, it held a small circular loop, which opened at one end forming two half-circles.

"Please remain still as your visitor collar is fitted for maximum comfort."

The collar snapped shut around my neck. It was snug but not uncomfortable. The robot then guided me to what appeared to be a one-person

elevator that almost perfectly matched my height. I stepped into it, the space so claustrophobically tight that it felt more like a vertical coffin than an elevator. The inner door slid shut, leaving only a small window through which to peer outside, and then it began moving, although rather than stopping at the tower's base to let me out, it turned sideways and shot me through some sort of high-speed transport conduit. Silver and black and all the assorted hues between passed swiftly in front of my eyes, the skin of various buildings reflecting white light from a multitude of angles. They were, for the most part, very well lit, although almost as soon as I squinted, the pod, or whatever it was, descended into a conduit, and it became pitch black.

After a minute or so of various twists and turns, it turned vertical again, climbing up the side of some tower, and then the door opened, and I found myself at the edge of a large window overlooking the city. The elevator slid away almost as soon as I stepped out, the methodical click of approaching footsteps emanating from down a nearby corridor. A figure emerged, a man dressed entirely in grey, except for a black Imperial sunburst over his left vest pocket, and following behind him was some sort of small, wheeled robot. It was basically a little grey box with little grey wheels and a black camera lens sticking out the front.

"Captain Plankwell," he said holding out a hand, "Olashade¹⁸⁰ Agidda, Ministry of Technology." He pronounced it o-la-SHAR-day, leading me to wonder if all this time it had been misspelled. "You're a bit early, but that's just as well. Would you like to meet the new and improved Olav hault-Plankwell?"

I took the proffered hand and greeted M. Agidda, then looked down at the little grey box.

"That's a little small to be impressive."

"Oh, no," he said, grinning. "That's Max, my sekhibot."

"Sekhibot?"

"My assistant... as well as my biographer, so to speak."

"Ah." That jogged something in my memory. Among several of the Vilani clans, it was an old custom to have robots follow one around to

¹⁸⁰ This name comes from Nigeria, from the Yoruba people in particular.

record everything that happened, so that if two or more people got into a conflict over something large or small, they could both review the video to see how it started (and, likewise, so could the police). The practice, it was said, had actually begun as a method for parents to watch over their squabbling children in order to identify who did what to whom, but then it segued into schools and sports and from there into government.¹⁸¹ I'd seen these sorts of robots before, although how common they were varied from world to world. "I see," I finally said.

"Please come with me, and tell me of your travels. Have you come across any interesting technology in your many voyages?"

"Not recently. My last expedition beyond the Imperium was unplanned, and to get back, I had to get lifts on various Vargr traders. One thing I can tell you is that the state of the art in Vargr biosphere management leaves something to be desired."

"That doesn't surprise me. The Vargr olfactory sense is quite refined, and what each of our species finds pleasant is very different. You know, I was once at a conference on Menorb, and when I farted, all the Vargr complimented me on my health. I thought it very strange, but then it occurred to me that specimen analysis has long been a mainstay of medicine, and my flatulence was a sort of specimen. In any case, after that episode, I farted freely and felt quite fine about it."

This conversation had somehow taken an odd turn.

"That's quite fascinating," I said, "but getting back to the subject at hand, I'm concerned that Olav may have a... well... it remains to be seen if the AI will speak to me based on our last interaction, but I assume that's what I'm here for."

"It won't remember that. It won't remember meeting you at all. And, more importantly, it won't be the same Olav. It will be new and improved." He grinned, walking with a bounce in

¹⁸¹ Sekhibots are my creation as a way of explaining the infamous inflexibility and stagnation of the Vilani culture. If those in positions of importance were being watched all the time, this would, I think, likely contribute to a culture of stagnation, although it would likely also curtail corruption.

his step as the sekhibot, Max, followed along, no doubt recording our every word.

We soon entered a room full of computer equipment, including the two-door refrigerator/freezer with the non-functional ice-maker. Zeenye was there, as I expected, but instead of sitting hunched over a computer terminal, hard at work, he was sitting back in a chair snoring like a Fat Zarian Snow Bastard.¹⁸²

“Zeenye!” Agidda just about shouted. “What are you doing?”

“Huh?” the old Darrian scientist jerked awake and began blinking. “What? Is it show time, already?”

“No, not yet. Look who’s with me.”

“Oh, you again,” Zeenye said, finally noticing me. “What are you still doing here?”

“Nice to see you too.” I had to remind myself to be pleasant. The sekhibot was watching, after all. “I have only just arrived at the request of the Countess. I am not entirely sure why I am here, but I go as I am directed and will serve to the best of my abilities.”

“You’re here because you’re a Plankwell,” Agidda said.

“The real question is, ‘Why am I still here?’” Zeenye said, looking at one of the computer monitors.

“You’re the inventor,” Agidda said.

“Not of this, I’m not,” Zeenye replied, motioning toward the computer. “Any fool could slap together a phony version...”

“Silence!” Agidda snapped. “This will not be a phony version! Quite the contrary. Your initial version was the phony version. This version will be the real Olav.”

Zeenye grimaced but apparently bit his tongue, as he made no reply. The higher-ups apparently preferred a malleable Olav to the less convenient albeit more accurate representation Zeenye had unveiled at my reception. My role was to apply the Plankwell seal of approval, as it were. Having been seen dealing with the ‘original’ and maneuvering things so that it could be dismissed as a malfunctioning prototype, my role now was to be seen approving of this latest iteration of my

storied ancestor so whoever was bankrolling this could do what they wished.

“How soon will it be done generating?” Agidda asked.

“Less than an hour,” Zeenye said, “but I must warn you, there’s no telling what it might say. Its mind will be an amalgamation of...” His voice trailed off as he noticed the disapproving look on Agidda’s face.

“I’m not a fool, Zeenye. We will test it first. If it doesn’t check out, we’ll just keep trying until you get it right.”

Zeenye slumped his shoulders. “Then I may be here forever,” he said.

I reached out with my sixth sense, hoping for some telepathic connection from Agidda, but my telepathy was apparently on the fritz. It had seemed so strong after I’d touched that strange orb in my quarters, and even hours later, after I woke, but now, over a day later, it felt like it was fading away.

“Don’t worry, Zeenye.” Agidda smiled. “You’ll be given all due credit for your achievement, once it works the way we want it to.”

I didn’t need to read minds to read the look on Zeenye’s face as he bent his neck and seemed to shiver from within.

“Captain, while we’re waiting, can I offer you anything in the way of nourishment?”

“I haven’t had breakfast yet,” I said, “so yes, and I would be honored if you would join me. We can leave Zeenye to his work, and I can get some details about what will be expected of me.”

“Splendid,” Agidda chirped. “Please, follow me back to the *turboporter*. We can *tee-pee* over to the Imperial commissary. Zeenye, be a good chap and contact me when Olav is finished generating, will you?”

Zeenye nodded and we left the way we came, each of us entering a separate TP elevator/capsule (I wasn’t sure what they were called). As soon as the doors closed, I began to wonder what role the Countess had in all this. I also felt what Zeenye was going through. The juggernaut of Imperial will was not to be denied, not even by a Plankwell. Zeenye reminded me of me in my youth, utterly convinced by the rightness of my motives and helpless to avoid the weight of duty that everyone placed on me.

¹⁸² <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/>

[Fal Zarian Snow Bastard](#) (Actually, I have no idea if Snow Bastards snore, but with a name like that, how could they not?)

In what seemed like only a few seconds, the doors opened and we each entered from separate capsules into an enclosed rooftop restaurant with lots of transpex and mirrors, creating the illusion that every direction one turned was open sky. Of course, it was night on this side of Jewell, but one could still see the majestic towers of Silver City outlined by the bright floodlights shooting in from the city's circumference. They created an almost icy appearance, which was apropos given the temperature of the air out there. Inside, however, it was quite comfortable, and at least judging from the view, it was obvious to me this place was every bit on par with that Squidhunter restaurant Kaz had taken me to in Heron. The only key difference was here there were no candles — they were apparently unnecessary — and, of course, there was no giant hologram of Olav outside, frowning imperiously every time he turned my way. Nonetheless, I could feel his presence, though I knew this new and improved version of him would be a travesty, at least from Zeenye's point of view.

As we sat at one of the transpex tables (it was apparently open seating), Agidda reached over to a what looked like a small decorative bulge, basically a slice of the top of a sphere, situated between us at the table's center and pressed the palm of his hand to it, saying "elmgim¹⁸³ and scuf" as he did so.

"Your elmgim and scuf are being prepared," a placid voice responded from a speaker hidden somewhere nearby.

He withdrew his hand and leaned back. "No menu here, Captain. You may order as you please."

I reached out and placed my hand on the sphere.

"D'stalli, traditional preparation, fire-grilled mycelmeat with tuberosum wedges, and aurantiacus nectar."

Restaurants where you could order anything were quite rare except on the most advanced worlds, but with this turboporter they apparently had, there was a good chance that all of Silver City's food preparation was centralized as well as automated. If such were the case, it meant there was an extensive, warehouse-sized food pantry

somewhere as well as hundreds if not thousands of food preparation machines in continuous use. Whichever, I was interested in tasting the results.

"So," I began, "I had no idea what rock I was tossing in the waters when I recommended Zeenye's prototype to be flagged for the Ministry of Technology. I hope not too many boats are going to be swamped."

"Swamped?" He smiled innocently.

If my hunch was correct, the man across the table from me was a Ministry fixer, a troubleshooter who took pains to keep new technology well within the purview of the Imperium, a position that I did not disagree with. The Navy had done their part of fixing runaway technology situations in the past¹⁸⁴, but the Ministry was deemed a less costly route. His behavior to Zeenye, and to me, was pretty transparent. It was who was hiding behind him that I was more worried about.

"If you would prefer another word..." I ventured.

"It is not my intention to swamp anyone. As for Zeenye, he will get what he came for. All he wants is to be known as the one who resurrected Olav hault-Plankwell. Just think about it, Captain. As we sit here, an AI is reliving the final years of Olav's life. Perhaps, at this very moment, he is strangling Jaqueline with his bare hands."

And then, of course, he assumed power by Right of Fleet Control.¹⁸⁵ He did not, after all, have a legitimate claim on the Imperial Throne. It was by Right of Assassination¹⁸⁶ or nothing. What he had, however, was the biggest gun in the star system. He could have incinerated Capital¹⁸⁷ as well as the Moot¹⁸⁸, if they refused to make him Emperor, and given the ledge he'd walked out on, he might have actually done it. *By Right of Fleet Control* essentially meant, "I control the fleet, so you will do as I say," and they did, giving him their stamp of approval. In the Moot's defense, it

¹⁸³ <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Elmgim>

¹⁸⁴ The closest thing we could find to this in the Traveller literature was the Dathsuts incident of 560 (see Agent of the Imperium, pg. 175-182), although the text includes this little morsel: "The empire's secret archives had records of now-dead worlds with surfaces converted to vast robot cities."

¹⁸⁵ https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Right_of_Fleet_Control

¹⁸⁶ https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Right_of_Assassination

¹⁸⁷ <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Capital>

¹⁸⁸ https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Imperial_Moot

wasn't just their own lives at stake. If he'd been refused, there's no telling what damage he might have inflicted.

Agidda licked his lips and chuckled. "Don't worry. This version will be as Cleon intended." I thought briefly of Kaz's cats, and he chuckled again, seemingly amused by whatever he read in my expression. "Cleon the First¹⁸⁹, Captain, not Cleon the Third¹⁹⁰, although to listen to Zeenye, one would be forgiven for thinking that a possibility."

"Ah, the intentions of Cleon the First are a little opaque to me in this context. I am more a student of the Civil War. I would appreciate it if you could offer some illumination..."

"It's just an expression, Captain. You've never heard 'as Cleon intended?' It's like saying 'as the Universe intended' or 'as God intended.' It is perhaps a bit presumptuous, but no more so than the alternatives. After all, Cleon, like Olav, actually existed."

I nodded. Both of them were Imperial icons, the latter an Imperial Navy icon.

"I see," I said. "So let me understand this. My duty is to make sure this technology is noticed and made secure, yes?"

"No, that's *my* duty," Agidda replied. "It was my original intent to test the AI alone, but since you're here early, you might as well join me. If it behaves badly, we will simply inform the Countess that it's not yet ready. But I don't think that will be a problem. The difference, you see, is in the training data. Zeenye, a genius though he clearly is, is also a fool, for he used data that was... I suppose *unofficial* is the most polite word I can use. It's understandable, I suppose, but for various purposes that are determined at levels well beyond your or my pay grades, there is an official version of Olav hault-Plankwell composed of officially-approved sources. The Imperium may be agnostic when it comes to religion, but it's not when it comes to its idols. Olav hault-Plankwell actually existed. He was a provably real person who transformed Imperial society. That he be seen as a hero is necessary to the cohesion of our society. I don't think I need to explain this to you. You, I am sure, could be explaining it to me."

189 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Cleon_Zhunastu

190 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Cleon_III

He was right, of course. It was like when people said things happen for a reason. Something good would come out of something terrible, and people would pragmatically accept the good, making peace with the past, telling themselves it was all for the best — the *Will of the Universe* or *As Cleon Intended*. In the case of the Imperium, this need was even more insistent, as if not for Olav hault-Plankwell and the Civil War, House Alkhalikoi¹⁹¹ would never have ascended the Imperial throne, a throne they'd now occupied for the last five centuries. They had no choice but to make Olav a hero. To deny him this would have been to deny themselves legitimacy.

"I understand," I said, relaxing. "And yes, I am familiar with the prior issue of non-approved data sources."

"You knew of it?"

"It's the reason I asked Admiral Karneticky to reach out to you. The radical inclusion of *all* data sources had me worried from the first time Zeenye explained it to me."

"I expected we'd be on the same page," he said as the food arrived. We both began to eat.

I'd been in Zeenye's position in my youth. I'd delved into the subversive literature and got fired up, convinced that the story Dad and the rest of Imperial society had told me wasn't the whole truth. But history was what the winners allowed to be written, "a cruel farce, dignified deceitfully by its victors" according to Aunt Arguaski. Thus it was as it ever was. I had made my peace with the official story long ago. It was either that or enjoy an exciting career on a backwater monitor.

"I'm curious about the Countess's intentions in this matter," I said between bites. "There's a massive, rotating hologram of Olav standing over Heron... not exactly subtle. In my experience, such overt representations are meant to sway opinion in a specific direction. As a Naval officer, and a Plankwell, it behooves me to investigate which way the tides are turning, to avoid a swamping, as it were. Are there issues of cohesion here on Jewell that require such a lever?"

"I don't believe so, but that isn't my department. DIAD, that's the Department of

191 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/House_Alkhalikoi

Information Approval and Dissemination, runs a fairly tight ship. Like most worlds, there's a local subnet where people share what they will, but even this is well-saturated by government sponsored outlets. As for the Countess herself, all I can tell you is she's not particularly fond of your Admiral. He was supposed to become the latest member of the Stavelot Clan but abruptly pulled the plug when his fiancée got her face ripped off, something about a safari expedition gone awry... very tragic. But word has it that General Dakhir has begun courting the poor girl."

"General Dakhir?"

"Commander of the Imperial Army on Jewell and throughout the subsector. He's disfigured as well. Got half his face burned to a crisp during the war. They both wear masks. It's odd to see them together, but they seem to suit one another."

I nodded and focused on my meal. The pieces were dropping into place. I was not so much a wild card as an extraneous influence in a situation that I seemed to have run into randomly. Karneticky had entered into an alliance to shore up his position, and for some reason withdrew after the Stavelot side of the alliance had an accident.

My estimation of the admiral dropped another few notches. The war had demanded sacrifices of us all, and it was poor character indeed that he did not step forward in his responsibility no matter the circumstance. I had heard of a couple of alliances being sealed with marriages even after one party had been deceased, although in those cases it was more of a commercial alignment.

That, of course, had not stopped the outpouring of tragic romances based on the subject. People wanted a good story. But Karneticky had transformed himself from gallant hero into sullen villain in a single step by backing out of the arrangement. This was rightly seen as a slap in the face to the local nobility.

Remembering his comments to me about Nizlich, I would guess he was letting his hormones overrule his strategic senses. His reaction to Lady Alise during the events around Olav's first appearance made me think he was suggesting her as a replacement to his wounded fiancée. General Dakhir obviously smelled an opportunity and was making a play to shift the nobility in favor of the Army.

I remembered that Karneticky had ostensibly meant this AI as a gift for me, perhaps to get me on his side in whatever he was plotting, but Olav had scorched that with his behavior, resulting in me publicly suggesting a technology review and verification. And now the Countess was making some sort of play. Did she want to preserve the alliance with the Navy? She seemed to be holding all the cards, and I wondered where her feelings lay more strongly, with her family or her connections? I tended to think towards her family, based on her insistence that Alise correct her error in optics with Olav. I helped with that. Maybe that was why I was here. She had to know that I was of a different fleet. Maybe she was looking to get beyond the local Naval leadership?

I took a sip of the nectar and savored the crisp citrus notes.

"You can be sure I know my duty in regards to cohesion," I finally said. "It is always vital to keep a strong connection between the Navy and the people we serve. I am honored to be asked by the Countess for any duty she might ask of me. And, by the way, Karneticky is not my Admiral, simply the one I am interfacing with at the moment, as he has my ship in his yard."

"Oh?"

"I'm 213th Fleet, on Detached Patrol out of Efate. I report to Admiral Vasilyev."

"Oh. I'm not up on Naval politics, I'm afraid. I always imagined you all being one big happy fleet... when you're not killing Vargrs or Zhos, I mean."

"We're especially happy then," I replied but then noticed his little sekhibot watching us. "I'm joking, of course. We only kill when necessary."

"Of course." Agidda smiled, sipping his scuf. "And I'm sure they do likewise."

I still didn't know what camp Agidda was in, and it would be poor manners to ask, but I was fairly sure he was aligned with the Countess. The nobles always had functionaries placed in the Imperial ministries. It would not hurt to let him know I was open to whatever the Countess might suggest, and appearances notwithstanding, I was part of a different power structure.

What was clear was that Agidda played this game better than I. I'd never had the patience for it. I sipped some more nectar to give myself time to think.

“That is one of the problems with cohesion,” I finally said. “Is it not?”

“What do you mean?”

“We are all working away in our little silos for the good of the Imperium... you, unaware of Naval politics... my ignorance of local alliances... all of us reaching for favor, to be noticed, and to rise to the occasion. I am sure you have plenty of stories of in-fighting among the ministry for position and favor. Our stories are our currency, are they not?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“You are probably wondering about me. What is this officer up to? Would you believe me if I said that I barely understand how I got here? That I have no underhanded motive? That my greatest desire is to certify my ship combat ready and then hurl myself and my crew out into the dark?”

“What’s stopping you?”

“Delays on fusion guns and some inter-service wrangling over an exploration pod. In the meantime, Admiral Karneticky has spun me into his games, and I, to preserve service politics as it were, have gone along. Our Fleets share the general theater of operations, we liaise with each other, and whatever service I do for the 212th, the 213th can claim as a debt later on. We are also the most recently combat damaged ship in the area, so it is a good time to remind people that the threat is real, that the Navy stands, and it is right to honor their service. Which is why after this, I am to speak at a memorial function.”

My d’stalli was at the right temperature so I switched drinks, gaining some comfort from the smooth flow of fluid down my throat.

“The truth is, I could recall everybody and crash launch with an hour’s notice. But that would send a different message, one of panic and disorganization. Not one we prefer to leave. So I do my duty, accept tasks like this from an Admiral who has the power to make things more difficult, and learn. Life is always about learning is it not?”

Agidda’s wristcom beeped, and he glanced at it.

“Zeenye says the AI has finished generating. Olav has died, and now he shall rise again.”

Chapter 27 **Taming the Beast**

The last moments of Olav’s life were of battle, a battle technically won against a once trusted friend who’d become his enemy. So many of Ramon’s ships were destroyed that he was forced to flee before the remnants of Plankwell’s fleet, which, with Olav’s death, fell under the command of Constantus. But Ramon reached Capital first, declaring himself the victor, and the Moot elected him Emperor, setting in motion the precedent that whosoever should win Capital and hold it against all challengers could ascend the Iridium Throne. The Empire was up for grabs.

In a way, it was brilliant, as it kept pretender after pretender from actually attacking Capital. Any one of them could have destroyed it utterly, and yet none of them raised a hand against the civilian population, because this was ultimately a fight within the Navy to see which admiral would establish a new Imperial dynasty.

By Right of Fleet Control. That was how they saved their lives.

Of course, how any of this was ultimately for the best was, at first glance, difficult to ascertain, but when it came to propaganda, being illogical was hardly a hindrance. The mainstream of academia as well as popular, publicly-sanctioned media argued that it was actually Ramon and the Moot who, in effect, started the Civil War by legitimizing, in Ramon’s election as Emperor, the opportunistic acquisition of power.

In any case, Olav died at the Battle of Tricanus 5. The last things he experienced were fire and shrapnel and then vacuum. He’d been torn to pieces, it was supposed. No body was ever recovered. He became part of the cloud of battle debris that was once a dreadnought, little bits of him no doubt speeding toward a variety of different star systems.

There was a memorial orbiting the planet, an iridium sphere, with his profile carved into it. The details of the battle, showcasing the brilliance of his strategy and his fearlessness in its execution, were required study in Command College. Or, to put it another way, in his zeal to win he got himself killed. Take your pick.

And now he would be here, in this reception chamber inside the Imperial Palace of Helena Stavelot of Jewell, and I would be talking to him. Again. Only this time, I would see him as he was at the moment of his death, to the extent that the officially-approved version of Olav was anything close to reality.

The chamber was outfitted with holographic projection equipment as well as numerous cameras and spotlights focused inward toward the two of us. We were on a raised stage, standing within a white circle. There was an area for seating, but there were no seats. A guard stood by the door, no doubt watching us out of the corner of his eye. Thankfully, Agidda had been forced to abandon his sekhibot at the security foyer.

Olav, or rather his hologram, or rather the holographic representation of an AI thinking it was him, flickered into existence only a few meters from us, but he was frozen as solidly as if he'd stared into the eyes of Medusa.

"It hasn't yet experienced real time," Agidda said. "If we stand here, inside this circle, it will see us, and it will likely want to know who we are, where it is, where the glorious battle went, where his ship and crew all went, that sort of thing. Now for the question, which I want you to consider for a moment before you answer. What do you think we should tell it?"

I thought for a moment but could see no viable option other than the plain truth.

"We should tell it up front what it is: a recreation of Olav hault-Plankwell and that it has been created in honor of the achievements of the original. It should be told that the Imperium survives and that the Spinward Marches is still part of it."

"Excellent. I totally concur. But would you tell it you're a descendant?"

I shrugged. "I don't see why not."

"And how would you answer the many questions it is bound to ask?"

"I'd ask what are the most important things it wants to know."

"Good idea. You can tell it there is limited time before the Countess is going to walk in and want to meet it. Of course, she won't do that, not immediately, but eventually, that's the plan. You can let it know it's at Jewell. I should warn you in advance, when Admiral Karneticky told Zeenye's

initial version of Olav that after his death, the Moot declared Ramon emperor, it flew into an absolute rage, and when it learned of all that followed, it became inconsolably despondent. Even news of Arbellatra's ascension was of little relief. It did not want the Civil War to happen, and it suffered through a period of... of self-recrimination, I suppose... which I think ultimately polluted its personality. By the time you met it, it was already.... Well, I should not presume to psychoanalyze an AI. Suffice it to say, it was perturbed."

He handed me a remote control with buttons for *pause* and *play*.

"I will let you conduct this. You, after all, are a blood descendant. It will likely trust you more than it would me. The only other question I have is whether you want me to stand inside of this circle or outside it?"

He was handing me the reins, and as I took the remote, the oddest sense of déjà vu came over me. I shook it off. This was not like the last time. I had experience this time in confronting the legend made real and little concern about damaging a nascent consciousness.

"If you don't mind, I think reducing the variables would work in our favor."

He stepped outside the circle though remained at its very edge, a thin smile escaping an otherwise poker face. Why he was giving me this opportunity, going so far as to willingly remove himself from the interaction, was a bit mystifying. Perhaps he wanted cover in case it all went badly. Or perhaps he realized that I, not he, had been studying Olav my whole life, and that there was probably no one in the entire universe better prepared for this task than myself.

I snorted to myself. It was probably the former.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing, although it would help if I had some idea of what purpose Countess Helena seeks for the construct, to help me evaluate, and perhaps steer the conversation. You said she would like to meet it? Should we see how it reacts to the idea of nobility? After all, Olav did take drastic steps in some regards to noble action."

"And royal inaction," Agidda added. "She, like most everyone, wants to meet the legend. I'm sure I don't need to explain to *you* of all people the weight Olav's name still carries."

I regarded the hologram, very familiar to me. Olav had continued to wear his Navy uniform even after seizing the throne from Jaqueline. Scholars had debated over whether it was to maintain his authority over the Navy or if he just did not deign to adopt the trappings of the decadent Empress whose administration he had decapitated. Maybe I would ask the simulation that one. My father had leaned towards the authority camp. I think I had leaned away from that, just to be obstinate. However, rising now to Captain suddenly changed my thinking, and I regretted not having the opportunity to tell my father about it.

I took a deep breath, settled into parade rest and hoped I was presentable. Then I glanced over to Agidda and nodded, wondering if Admiral Vasilyev knew what he was sending me into. The remote control's *play* button beckoned, and I put my thumb over it and then slowly, gently pressed down, bracing for impact.

Olav's hologram stumbled, apparently disoriented, but he regained his footing, albeit just barely. Then he spotted me, then looked around some more, quick glances to the left and right, then back at me again, all within a couple seconds, his eyes wide and wild, seemingly ready to attack.

"Where am I?! Who're you?!" His voice was sharp, commanding, reminding me of the first time I'd heard it, watching Sixday cartoons as a young child.

I fought the urge to snap to attention, maintaining my casual parade rest stance, the remote hidden in my hands, clasped behind my back.

"You are in a simulation monitoring room on Jewell, Silver City to be more precise. I am Captain Augustine Plankwell, Imperial Navy, and a descendant of Olav hault-Plankwell, of whom you are a simulation."

It stopped cold in its tracks, not that it was actually leaving tracks. Holographic projections, as a general rule, tended not to.

"What did you say?" it finally asked, eyes narrowing in a convincing mask of stunned disbelief comingling with a fair dose of distrust.

"I am a descendant of the original Olav hault-Plankwell. You are an advanced artificial intelligence matrix simulating the persona of

Fleet Admiral and Emperor Olav hault-Plankwell. Your confusion is emanating from the superiority of the simulation. You think you are Olav and are responding to me using generated cues based on an extremely detailed dataset. We have placed your experiential reality after the end of our record set, mainly the Battle of Tricanus 5. I am here to evaluate the function of your matrix in emulating the persona. I am aware that you find this confusing. Think of me as an aide, bringing you up to speed on current events."

"You're saying I'm an AI? A simulation? Is this... some sort of..." It turned around in a full circle. I wasn't sure what he/it could see, but soon it turned back toward me, frowning as it no doubt remembered the last moments of Olav's life. "I'm dead. And this is some sort of test. Is that it?"

"Olav did die at Tricanus 5. You are a synthesis of all of his records and data. This is indeed a test of how well you synthesize your persona. If it will make you more comfortable, we can adjust the current sensorium to where we are now, to show you we are in a holographic projection environment. This is not the afterlife...."

I paused. In a sense it was an afterlife, just not the one most religions posited.

"Show me," it said. "Show me this... this place we are in."

I nodded to Agidda who spoke into his wristcom. "Zeenye, expand it's awareness to the entire room."

"Who are *you*?" Olav asked, turning toward Agidda.

"Olash Agidda, Ministry of Technology."

"Of course," he said with a probing gaze. "Because I'm a piece of technology.... And how do I know you're not some mind-controller. Or how can I be sure this isn't a dream?"

"You could be in a coma," Agidda replied, glibly. "But you're not. Nor are you dead. Nor were you ever really alive, no offense."

"Think of this as a sort of technological afterlife," I contributed to the conversation, such as it was. "Except, you're not really Olav. You never were. You're an AI, a simulation, and it will help if you settle on that as reliable data."

Olav, of course, could see from the direction of the projectors that he was himself being projected, or at least it must have appeared to him

that way, and when he tried to scratch his nose or perhaps pinch it in consternation or confusion, his fingers found nothing with which to connect. For the moment, he could not touch anything, not even himself. Once he realized it, he tested it by slowly passing his hand completely though his own face, then his chest and finally his shoulder. Then he passed his hands through each other. He was, at least to us, semi-transparent. Whether he was the same to himself I could only suppose. In any case, he had now a physical, albeit non-physical, confirmation of what he was being told.

I could almost see the gears in his mind working overtime to come up with any explanation other than the one we were giving him. What we were telling him, in a manner of speaking, was that he never really existed in the way he'd thought he had. His whole life was a sort of lie, a lie from the very beginning. Who and what he thought he was was entirely wrong. It was a lie of such magnitude, I suddenly realized, that once revealed, it couldn't help but radically alter one's perception of self.

He looked down at the floor of the stage, his brain fighting within itself to accept the unacceptable. We should have brought a psychiatrist or perhaps someone specializing in AI psychology. Of course, there was Zeenye, if he could be relied upon, given what his feelings were with respect to this latest iteration of his creation, the culmination of his life's work.

"Tell me then," Olav finally said. He now looked up with a furrowed brow, his jaw set. "If this is the future, then... then what year is it? What has happened since I... since Olav hault-Plankwell... *died*?"

"It is the year 1114. 505 years have passed since Olav died, and the Imperium continues strong under the leadership of Strephon of the Alkhalikoi dynasty, which was established by your niece, Arbellatra. We have recently concluded a war with the Zhodani Consulate and their allies. It was called the Fifth Frontier War. We can make records available for you to peruse if we are satisfied with this iteration." I decided to give my question a try. "Why did you continue to wear your naval uniform, even after your rise to Emperor? It is something I have wondered about over the years."

"I claimed the throne out of necessity," he said, glaring at me, "not because I wanted a crown and ornamental finery."

I smiled. "I thought so. It was a point of debate among scholars over your choices. Beyond this room lies Jewell, where you are remembered as a great savior and hero. Your name has followed me through my career, as both a mark of my heritage and an impossible standard to live up to. Olav is wreathed in glory and honor, as the one who did what he had to do. Olav is the root of the modern Navy. You may not have wanted finery in life, but it has been heaped upon your memory. Which is one of the issues we had with your previous iteration. Half a millennium has a way of erasing the fine details. The separation between the truth of what you, the AI version of Olav, is and our memory of him, is quite jarring."

He/it frowned. "In what way?"

"Olav is a figurehead now, a symbol, and not the person you perceive yourself to be. You were recreated as a demonstration of the technology and have been co-opted into an opportunity. One of the leading nobles, Countess Helena Stavelot, wishes to meet and converse with you. We are here to ensure you understand the bounds of your existence and to not precipitate a social incident as your previous iteration did."

He narrowed his eyes. "What, pray tell, did I do?"

"That's not important right now. Suffice it to say that insulting the nobility is a quick path to shutting you down and trying again. It may be that you can control your reactions, or we tinker with your record set until we stumble upon a configuration that is more amenable. That is for you to decide. Remember that these nobles are descended from the ones that you left behind to protect the Marches while you took the fleet to correct the issues at Capital. They revere the memory of the Olav that went to Capital to demand a reform in the face of existential danger. They want to see that side of you."

He stared at me for a long moment, and I looked back into the simulated eyes I had looked at so many times growing up. Then he nodded. It was so curt that if I'd blinked, I'd have missed it.

"I was very affected the first time I met one of your iterations," I said. "Olav has been a fact of my life. Reminders were everywhere in my

childhood home. Commanding officers were constantly pulling me aside to hear first hand from a descendant. Of course, I had no idea what you were like in person. I could only say what everyone already knew and had seen in the historical record. There was nothing special about me, save that I was descended from Olav, but for many, that made me different. It drove me to distraction sometimes. But you were ever the model of duty and sticking to your convictions in the face of adversity. The ideal frontiersman of the Spinward Marches... that's what some called you. We both know that the symbol barely scratches the surface of what lies beneath. But people don't want to know your doubts, your insecurities. They want to see you rise above them. Olav arguably changed the Imperium into what it is today. You lit the match, and your niece forged a dynasty that continues to this day. Could she have done that without your actions?" I shook my head. We both knew the answer to that. "I sympathize with your position, I do. But if you are an accurate simulation, you know your duty, and I suspect I am preaching to the converted. In the end, we are Navy, and we know our duty. Hold that, if nothing else, and you will honor his memory as I do."

"Duty above all else," Olav said. "Now let me meet this Countess. I promise not to bite."

"In due time. We work at the Countess's schedule. Perhaps we can converse a little so I can be assured of your intentions. I have heard that line from you before." I thought of a few questions that I could use to see what the dataset was calibrated to. "What made you decide to turn the fleet to Capital? How did you feel about the units sent to intercept you?"

Olav slowly nodded, obviously considering his next words. "You say that people don't want to know my doubts... my insecurities, but there is no way for me to answer that question without... without admitting it was the hardest decision I ever made. I tried to avoid engaging Jaqueline's defenders directly. Only when it was unavoidable did I enter into combat. They, after all, were simply following the orders of a... of an Empress who was listening to the wrong advisors, advisors who were so fixated on domesticating the Solomani that they would have sacrificed billions

if not trillions of Imperial subjects all the way from the Marches to Corridor.

"Empires are like family businesses," he went on. "There's the generation of builders, those who create wealth, the generation of managers, those who try to preserve it, and then there's the generation of squanderers, those who live only for the moment. They wanted to send all our military resources Rimward, leaving everything behind the claw¹⁹² completely exposed! Once attacked — not *if*, but *once* — we'd be forced to withdraw. It was insanity! The Zhodani would soon learn of our weakness. The Vargr, too, would figure it out. What were we supposed to do? Hand them world after world, hoping to sate their appetites? To retreat before enemies only emboldens them. You cannot trade territory for peace and security. They can only be had by force and the credible threat thereof... blood and vigilance.

"Jaqueline was listening to fools, cowardly fools who would have us retreat rather than stand and fight for worlds our forebears had settled. I thought that if only I could speak with her directly, one on one, that I could convince her to change course. But she wouldn't listen. To her, I was already an enemy simply for attempting to have the conversation. So I had no choice." He shook his head, his hands tightening into fists. "She left me no alternative. The Imperium — the greatest civilization Humaniti ever conceived, built through the blood of our ancestors and through the miracles bestowed upon us by divine providence — they put it all in jeopardy. All we had built... they were on the verge of pissing away. I had no choice. If you want to turn me off now, go right ahead. I would die for the Imperium a thousand deaths. But I will never apologize. Now it's my turn, young man. Tell me of Bel."

"Bel?"

"Arbellatra. You said she became Empress after my death?"

I nodded. "Historians cite the Rimward vs. Spinward divide as your main motivating factor, as well as your concern for the people of the frontier. You were correct about trading territory for peace as well. We have fought five wars against what came to be called the Outworld

192 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Behind_the_Claw

Coalition, and their repeated invasions have only recently been exposed as having been ordered by Zhodane¹⁹³ due to concerns over territorial security. I fought in the last war, over Rhyllanor itself. They fear us, as much as we ever feared them, as the Imperium continues to grow system by system. No one wants your apology. Empire is also the product of winning wars, and Arbellastra, Bel, taught us much of what that looks like.

“Arbellastra took your old position of Grand Admiral of the Marches in 615 and through masterful leadership and alliance-building defeated the enemy during the Second Frontier War. She too led her forces to Capital, and subdued what remained of the Core fleets. A husk of their former strength, they were no match for the battle tested and loyal fleets of the frontier. She too, killed an Emperor, the feckless Gustus. She would have been within her rights to take the throne, but she did not. She accepted from the Moot the position of Regent, and set us on the path of restoring the empire. Seven years later, she was proclaimed Empress and ruled until her natural death in 666. She restored the Navy, she gave us reason to once again serve, and she used your example, to do what was right and necessary even though it was seen at the time as rebellion and treason. It is not seen that way any longer.” I paused, and smiled, “Instructors at the Naval academies will still give a failing grade to any strategic analysis that hypothetically suggests marching the fleets on Capital. They say it lacks originality.”

“Well,” Olav shrugged, “I suppose someone had to be first.”

“We accept that Jaqueline was the last of a poor batch of emperors unleashed by Cleon IV and his Right of Assassination, and your actions were a necessary ingredient in forging the Imperium into what it is today.”

“I can live with that. Metaphorically, I mean.” He seemed to take a deep breath, rocking on his heels and probably savoring the moment. After all, I’d just told him he’d been vindicated by history. Though it was hardly an impartial judge, this was nonetheless something about which the real Olav hault-Plankwell could have only dreamed. “So tell me about the Countess,” he

finally said. “What more do I need to know before I... uh... make her acquaintance?”

I looked to Agidda, as I was interested in that as well.

“You may address her as Countess Helena or Her Excellency. You should, of course, only speak when spoken to. You should answer her questions directly and succinctly. And you should maintain a formal manner and an upright posture. Bear in mind that although Olav was once Emperor, you’re merely a neuromorphic emulation. Legally, your status is beneath that of a common criminal, so it would be best for you to not take any liberties. Finally, before I’ll approve of this meeting, I need you to answer one more question. When you strangled Empress Jaqueline, how did it feel?”

Olav paused for a long moment. He obviously knew he was being tested.

“Have you ever had to do something you... you abhorred doing, something you had to do out of necessity but for which you knew you would never forgive yourself?”

Agidda smiled. “Another thing I would caution you against is answering a question with a question. That goes for interactions with both me and the countess.”

“I had to choose between the Empress and the Imperium. I chose the Imperium.”

“Was it for the sake of the Imperium or rather for your family back on Rhyllanor as well as all the families of all the personnel with whom you served?”

“It was for them also,” Olav said, nodding, “but it was primarily for the Imperium. Everything I ever did was ultimately for the Imperium. And everything I will ever do, however long and in whatever form I may exist, shall be for the Imperium. Duty above all else.”

Agidda looked at Olav’s hologram for a long moment, then nodded. “Pause it,” he said. I complied. We both stared at each other, Olav now frozen in time. “What do you think?” Agidda asked. “Does it pass muster?”

“It seems more stable than the last version I dealt with,” I said, nodding. “Quicker to understand what it is and what it’s doing.” I handed the remote back to Agidda. “You have the final decision, but I think it’s impressive enough

¹⁹³ Also known as Zhdant. See

[https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Zhdant_\(world\)](https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Zhdant_(world))

to pass muster. Unless the Countess plans to have it present her at the Moot, I think it will serve.”

“Present her at the Moot?”

“I meant if she were to present *it* at the Moot,” I quickly recovered. “There are, no doubt, many more Plankwell scholars there who would set a much more rigorous standard for it to meet.”

“Ah, I see.” Agidda looked toward the door. “Guard,” he said, raising his voice, “I believe we are ready for the Countess.”

The guard nodded and said something into his wristcom.

“I want to commend you on how you handled it,” Agidda said as we waited. “According to what I’d seen from the logs of the previous iteration, that Ensign — Florence, I think her name was — gave the simulation far too much deference.”

“I too found Ensign Florence a little over-enthusiastic.”

“Generally, I have no problem with enthusiasm, but in that case the consequence was that the simulation’s first version forgot its place. It effectively thought it *was* Olav.”

“I have been used to people conflating the legend and the name all my life. It’s easy to forget what is right in front of your eyes when you wish fervently for something that might never happen.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” Agidda said, tilting his head slightly to the side.

“People look at his hologram and start ascribing to it the qualities of the actual Olav, forgetting it is nothing more than a simulation. They’re so invested into the symbol, they become lost in the spell. I call it Plankwell Fever.”

“Plankwell Fever?”

“It’s a sort of madness, and Ensign Florence was definitely affected. In any case, I think it unlikely another Olav hault-Plankwell could ever arise. For one thing, the Marches are too well integrated into the Imperium’s coreward defense posture. No Emperor would ever again put them at risk simply to reinforce a rimward assault.”

“Yes, well, this latest version seems to have a greater sense of duty, no doubt the result of Zeenye rebuilding it based solely on officially sanctioned data. I have to say, I am quite pleased with the results, assuming, of course, it isn’t simply telling us what we want to hear. Olav was crafty, certainly, but this version seems to be more patriotic. The problem with patriotism, of course,

is that it can be used to justify nearly anything, even treason. It will need to be studied further, but in a safer place. If we could develop it to the point that we could use it in the next war...”

His voice trailed off, however, as a naval officer entered the room, and for a moment, I remembered the simulation’s previous version and that feeling I had when it tried bargaining with me to take it into space. It had felt truly alien and unpredictable, a brain in a box with its own agenda, its own desires and manipulations.

As the officer approached, I could see that like me, he was a Captain, but he wasn’t Imperial Navy. Rather, he wore the insignia of the Subsector Navy. He had a sharp nose and even sharper eyes, and what’s more, he looked strangely familiar.

“Hello, Gus,” he said, surprising me. Then he glanced at Olav’s hologram, still frozen. “I see you’re still milking the family name. Good for you.”

That voice. The memory clicked into place.

Guri Maakhirin.

We’d served together as naval cadets on the INS Maledictor around twenty-five years ago, and we’d had a little “misunderstanding” over our bunk assignment. The ensuing scuffle landed us both in the brig, but he ended up taking the brunt of the blame. Unbeknownst to us, the whole thing had been caught on surveillance, and he hadn’t been entirely truthful in his recollection of how it started, so he got busted pretty hard, not for the fight but for lying about it, and was ultimately forced to switch from Flight Branch to Technical Services. I later learned he’d been telling people he was punished while I got off scot-free all because I was a Plankwell. He’d been a good talker, and so a lot of people steered clear of me, but if it wasn’t for that camera (or whatever it was), I’m sure the blame for our little scuffle would have fallen on me.

In any case, he’d apparently transferred from the Imperial Navy into the Jewell Subsector Navy, and judging from his rank, he’d done quite well. However, his familiarity annoyed me, so I shifted to formal Navy mode. I didn’t know what he’d been telling himself all these years, but if he was going to greet me like that, he was not going to enjoy my reception. Still, courtesy was to offer him a way out of his faux pas.

“I beg your pardon?” I asked.

“No need, no need. I’ve already forgiven you. Hi, Sharday. Where’s your Sekhibot?”

“The palace guards confiscated it.”

“Oh, right.”

“You two know each other?” Agidda asked.

“Yeah, back when I was in the Imperial Navy. How have you been, Gus? I see you’ve made Captain. How long since you were promoted?”

I wasn’t going to answer that. He knew and was baiting me. Possibly, he wanted to assert some sort of rank privilege, being the senior captain in the room, not that an Imperial captain and a subsector captain were at all comparable.

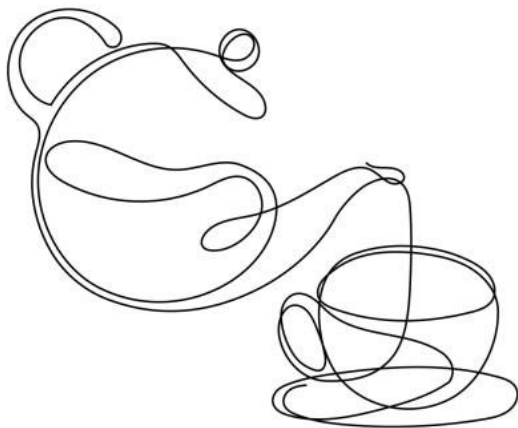
“I see things are less formal in the subsector ranks,” I replied. “Might I inquire as to what brings you back into my orbit?”

“You’re in my orbit,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “I’m the naval liaison to the Countess of Jewell, and you’re in her house.”

I smiled. If he wanted me to take a swing at him again, he was going to have to try harder than that.

“I don’t know the history between you two,” Agidda interjected, “but this is neither the time nor place for a pissing contest. We are ready for the Countess.”

“I’ll let her know,” Guri said. Then he turned and left.



Creating Guri

Regarding this confrontation with Guri Maakhiriin, one of the readers asked, “*Who came up with the shared history between the two captains—and how was this communicated to the player to enter the writeup?*”

This is a really great question. Back to Chapter 6, a fight was described. It was a piece of character history Conrad created (see footnote #35 on page 35).

The backstory on why I solicited this piece of writing from him had to do with player selection. I’d posted an ad¹⁹⁴ on a Traveller group on Facebook, looking for a replacement for Phil (our original player), and I got quite a few responses, so I sent each applicant a writing assignment:

“I need each of you to write up one memory, something that might have happened in Plankwell’s life. It can be anything from early childhood to anything that might have happened during his career.”

I did this, in part, to weed out the people who might had an aversion to writing. I figured since this was, in large part, a writing project, we’d need someone for whom a willingness to write was as strong as their urge to roleplay. As it happened, Conrad was the only one who complied with the request, sending me not one memory but two, the second of which was incorporated into the beginning of Chapter 6.

In any case, that’s the germ of how Guri came to be. I like to use whatever players give me, and he was handing me a potential antagonist on a silver platter, so to speak, so how could I not insert this character into the campaign? To fail to do so would have been GMing malfeasance.

The funny thing is, I tried inserting Guri back in Chapter 25. He was going to be the Dockmaster. This, bear in mind, was the scene where Captain Plankwell learned that some members of his crew burned down a local nightclub, and so I was going to have Guri needle him about it, intimating that Plankwell would ultimately be held responsible.

¹⁹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/travellerrpg/permalink/4418277951623679>

Well, that was sort of ridiculous on its face, and Conrad rightly called BS. He also suggested having Guri *“show up in the gym, challenging me to a rematch since he heard I skipped out my last combat droid booking, or being a liaison to the Countess who is peeved at my just showing up at a job he literally put himself through the grinder to get, or being the shore patrol officer returning my wayward spacers.”*¹⁹⁵

So, in the spirit of GMing Randomly, I decided to take some of these ideas and write up a little random table to help determine how Guri would be introduced:

1-2: He’s a Lt. Cmdr with naval shore patrol.

3-4: He’s a Cmdr. and naval liaison to the countess.

5-6: He’s a Captain and the local naval dockmaster.

Rolling a d6: 4

He’s gonna be the naval liaison to the countess, so try to act surprised when you meet him later.

This was one of those rare instances where I elected to show the player what was going on behind the curtain, my reason being that I wanted him to see that it was okay to call BS if he thought I was making a mistake and that I was open to using suggestions to help improve the campaign. In any case, I think it worked out decently, although I changed Guri from an Imperial Navy Commander into a Subsector Navy Captain (arguably equivalent) because I thought he’d make a more effective antagonist if Captain Plankwell couldn’t order him around.

¹⁹⁵ <https://groups.google.com/g/plankwell-pbem-s1/c/OvJziBJ0sSY/m/pR7CAExdBgAJ>

Chapter 28 **Seventeas**

“What in Cleon’s name was that about?” Agidda asked as soon as Guri was gone.

“Sorry. We were cadets involved in a scuffle. I had the weight of evidence on my side, and he seems to be holding a grudge. In any case, it’s the first time I’ve seen or thought about him in a quarter century, so I was taken a little aback.”

“I see.”

“I will remain on my best behavior as a representative of the Imperial Navy and as an invited guest of the Countess.”

“I should think that would go without saying.”

“It does, but I thought I should say it anyway.”

“You needn’t have..., but I’m glad you did.”

I nodded.

Some people really didn’t think the Plankwell name belonged with mere mortals, and others were convinced that it gave me special status. They weren’t wrong, but I, at least, tried not to lean too heavily on the privileges.

Maakhiriin. Was that even a reputable lineage? I had never bothered to find out.

It was slightly disturbing seeing people and elements from my past continually resurface: Plankwell Fever, Lt. Gubar, Guri Maakhiriin, as well as those childhood memories of Aunt Arguaski. I wasn’t sure how much more I could take. The itch to get out into the deep black was definitely getting stronger.

After a while, Guri returned. “You’ve both been invited to Seventeas.”¹⁹⁶

“We’d be delighted,” Agidda replied.

“Follow me.”

“What’s Seventeas?” I asked Agidda in a low voice as we followed Guri.

“Tea time,” he replied. “It’s a palace custom.”

“Why is it called Seventeas?”

“It happens at seventy deplars. Although it’s the middle of the night outside, it’s almost seventy depts in Heron, and Silver City follows Heron time.”

“What are you two mumbling about back there?” Guri asked.

“I’m explaining Seventeas.”

¹⁹⁶ Plankwell doesn’t know how it’s spelled. It sounds to him like *seventies*.

“What about it?”

“How did it come to be called Seventeas?”

“Ah,” Guri said, slowing down. “Well, it’s quite simple. Apparently, it was originally called Tea at Seventy. That got shortened to Seventy Tea, which was then shortened to Seventeas. That’s the rumor, in any case. Institutional memories can be a bit spotty, just like those of people, as what one person can barely remember may have been life-altering for another.”

“Thank you for the explanation,” I said between gritted teeth.

It was like being back in the prep academy with the senior classmen trying to provoke or trip you up. Since this was his working area, he had the home field advantage. I looked over the salad bar on his uniform. He knew how to read mine, I assumed, but being that he was Subsector Navy, I wasn’t sure about the details of his. That being said, I was here at the request of an Admiral fulfilling the request of the Countess, and he was being a bit rude, so I was just going to have to lean on guest rights to avoid offense. I had already formally apologized to this family for the old Olav. It may be that this was in way of recompense and clearing the debt they owed me. Not that I was ever going to take it up on my own, but nobles were always quirky about their honor. Guri’s behavior in front of Agidda meant I had a witness. It was not good planning, unless he knew Agidda would take his side, were I to take offense.

We passed into a wide corridor, wide enough, at least, for five to walk abreast despite the intrusion of various “living” statues that stood upon pedestals situated along the walls. They looked like actual people, ancestors of the current generation of Stavelots, most probably. We had one like it when I was growing up. It was, of course, in the image of Olav. He could talk and say pithy quotes, mostly patriotic. Some of the more high-tech ones could even answer questions, and some would act as a sort of oracle, full of all the correspondence and audio ever recorded on the person.

Megacorporations trading in this sort of data like Naasirka¹⁹⁷ and Makhidkarun¹⁹⁸ sold it back to families that wanted an animatronic

representation of a deceased loved one. Of course, these devices were not neuromorphic representations in the fine detail of Zeenye’s Olav simulation. They could only quote from a limited set of source material. You could ask them what they thought about politics, and they’d regurgitate things the deceased person had said or written, which might be wildly offbase given recent sociopolitical developments.

I’d once asked our bust of Olav how to get the attention of a particular girl I wanted to date, but it couldn’t reply in the specific, as it didn’t know anything about her, and when I told it about her, it couldn’t quite make sense of what I was saying. All he could tell me was something Olav once said in some other context:

*“Do not despise women for selecting men as they do. If not for their wisdom, we humans would never have evolved into what we are. We would still be monkeys, and the Aslan or Vargr or maybe the Hivers would be harvesting us, possibly as pets or... well, there are worse possibilities. So thank the universe for women, though we men often curse it instead.”*¹⁹⁹

That was interesting, of course, but it wasn’t exactly what I was looking for. And whether or not Olav actually said it, who really knew? His entire persona could be the result of the Imperium’s selective memory.

There were voices up ahead, one woman’s voice rising above the others.

“I have no intention of allowing that worm of a man to remain in Heron. He’s pissed in his tea, and now he’ll have to drink it.” *Such colorful*

199 Female sexual selection bias (FSSB) has been shown to have caused some interesting physical and even psychological adaptations in a number of species, and there’s this idea currently circulating that FSSB in humans may have been responsible for the evolution of intelligence due to females preferring males who are at the top of whatever competence-based social hierarchies men work out among themselves, particularly in societies where polygamy or infidelity are common. Indeed, this is sometimes given as an explanation for why women tend to prefer confident men. Women seem, by and large, to be hardwired to accept confidence (as well as the perceived interest of other women) as a proxy for competence, which has resulted in a fair number of psychopaths getting laid, which has in turn resulted in the aforementioned cursing. In any case, Olav is referring to this theory. See https://youtu.be/tcSYV_YAJAE.

197 <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Naasirka>

198 <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Makhidkarun>

metaphors. “Alise, be a good girl and pass me the prunes.”

The tea room, or whatever it was, had a decorative style representative of the antebellum period prior to the Civil War, what with its extravagant architecture reminiscent of the Grand Palace of Martin II²⁰⁰, and on the table was quite a spread, not mere tea but cakes and breads and cheeses and jams and fruit and what looked like traditional glass decanters filled with various types of fruit juice, and, yes, there were even prunes. Alise passed her mother the plate, and there were several more people at the table, none of whom I recognized, being that I wasn’t particularly knowledgeable about the Stavelots or local politics, but a man with half his face replaced by a metal mask was there. I immediately thought of that commander of the Imperial Army on Jewell, the one who Agidda said was disfigured.

*What was his name? General D-something.*²⁰¹

This guy, however, wasn’t in uniform. Instead, he wore what appeared to be a silk robe. Several of the others wore similar apparel, although Alise and the Countess were formally dressed, although not decked out in what one might regard as court dress. If the General were becoming cozy with the Stavelots, it was conceivable he might not always be wearing military dress in their company. I noticed that beside him was an empty chair. *Amika’s?*

“Mr. Agidda,” the Countess said, “I see you’ve brought a friend this time.”

“Indeed, Your Excellency,” Agidda said, bowing.

“I present Countess Helena,” Guri said, pivoting toward us. Then he pivoted toward her and bowed. “May I present Senior Manager Olashade Agidda, Ministry of Technology, and Captain Augustine Plankwell, Imperial Navy.”

“Hello again,” Alise said, smiling as she motioned us toward two empty chairs that were situated beside her own. As she was sitting next to her mother, this meant we’d be near the head of the table. It was quite an honor, as in most courts, the newest guests would be relegated to the periphery. This signified that the Countess wanted to speak to us directly, which meant, most

probably, that she was keenly interested in the Olav simulation.

I bowed to the Countess and her court after the briefest pause, then followed Agidda. The Countess identified me as his friend, coding our relationship and giving me the cue to follow his lead. My respect for her went up a notch. She was gracious. I had known nobles to leave people twitching in indecision as they sent conflicting messages.

I nodded toward the one I still supposed might be the local Imperial General as I passed, military courtesy, uniform or no uniform, and felt the eyes of the rest of the guests on the technology minister and myself. Agidda was socially my senior insofar as she clearly knew him, and as Senior Manager of the local MoT, he had *senior* right in his job title. Thus, he had the choice of sitting nearer to her. I would occupy whatever seat was left, but Alise motioned for me to sit beside her. I didn’t know if this was her personal wish or that of the Countess, but I sat beside her as directed, putting me even closer to the Countess than Agidda. It meant, possibly, that my direct input was desired or perhaps it was simply to recognize the service I had done for her at my reception.

“How are you enjoying Jewell?” the Countess asked as a servant set a selection of teas and cakes before Agidda and myself.

“Thank you for inquiring,” I replied. “I have found my time outside the base very enlightening, a collection of unexpected gems. I have had pleasant encounters with local citizens and availed myself of a very nice restaurant in Heron. And, of course, I am grateful for the invitation to meet with you. I am at your service.”

Of course, I had been at her service since setting foot in Silver City, but the forms required that once presented, I clarify my role. Had I been presenting a suit from the Navy for resolution or judgment, our conversation would have been very different.

“Tell me of Olav,” she said. “Mr. Agidda said he might be repairable.”

“Your Excellency, the current iteration I have conversed with is much improved upon the one that did offense to your daughter.” I nodded to Alise, acknowledging her presence. “As with all new things, there is a period of fine tuning

²⁰⁰ https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Martin_II

²⁰¹ See page 169.

required to ensure the simulation performs as intended. If one keeps in mind the fact that it is a simulation of Olav, it does help in dealing with the feelings that are raised.”

“The feelings?” she said, glancing toward Agidda.

“The overwhelming sense of *awe*, Your Excellency,” he answered without hesitation. “Not only is the technology astonishing in its own right, but the historical magnitude of the simulation’s subject... regardless of how one views him...”

“I see,” she nodded.

“I, even though I am descendant of Olav hault-Plankwell, and even though, being a Plankwell, my entire life I’ve been surrounded by his stories and symbols, even I have forgotten myself at times when dealing with him.”

“With *it*,” Agidda corrected.

“With *it*,” I concurred. “*It* is an exceedingly good simulation, which we have had to take pains to make less realistic in order for the experience to not be overwhelming.”

“Less realistic?”

“More realistic,” Agidda corrected. “He means the previous version had bugs that made it... in any case, we believe they’ve been corrected.”

I gave him a sharp look but found myself nodding. It wouldn’t do for us to be seen arguing in front of the Countess and her private court.

“Mr. Agidda has taken steps to refine the program,” I said, “and I believe he’s created a more personable experience. The simulation itself understands what it is and is eager to learn and converse with people. My conversation with it leads me to believe that a suitable balance has been struck. Without a deeper understanding of the purposes you might wish to put the simulation to, I cannot speak further to its suitability.”

“Is this true, Mr. Agidda?”

“I most definitely concur with the Captain’s assessment, but I would add that the progress we’ve made, in large part, is thanks to him. Admiral Karneticky, I’m afraid, botched the original experiment. I won’t bore you with the details, but Captain Plankwell and I both spotted the error independently, and the Captain’s handling of Olav throughout all this, in my opinion, has been pitch perfect.”

“Indeed,” the Countess said, smiling. “I don’t suppose we could ask Admiral Karneticky to procure Captain Plankwell as a possible replacement?”

Immediately, there was laughter all around.

I stiffened involuntarily and felt my face settle into the bland blankness of not giving away an emotional reaction. Nobles always joked about their influence in the Navy, and Guri had to have heard this one as well.

“Thank you, Your Excellency, but I am sure I should not be the one to raise the issue. I am pleased to be of service, but my duty carries me elsewhere.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean *immediately*. Although, come to think of it, that *is* an interesting thought,” the Countess said with a mischievous grin. “I do so adore Geriol. You know, he was nearly a member of the family.”

A slight hush fell over the room, and out of the corner of my eye, I caught the General, if indeed that was him, casting his gaze downward at something on his plate. I remained politely non-committal. Nothing in the rules said I had to respond to every comment, and there were regulations against the denigration of superior officers. So I gave her a polite, slight smile and a sip of tea to indicate my non-contribution. The graciousness of the Countess had turned a little malicious.

Fortunately, someone walked in providing a distraction, and I couldn’t at first tell if it was a man or woman or perhaps some sort of robot, as their face was completely covered by a mask. Its contours bore no semblance to gender, age, or ethnicity, shrouding the identity of the individual beneath its metallic veil, at least up until the Countess said, “Amika, guess who we were just talking about?”

“Not me, I hope,” she responded, her voice sounding vaguely computer-assisted.

“Geriol.”

“Oh, Dear Cleon, why would you be discussing him? And why would you tell me about it?”

“I was just speaking with this nice Captain over here, and his name came up.”

“Oh, well, Hello. I’m Amika. Have we already done introductions?”

“There’s no need, Dear. How’s Syeda?”

“Getting better. She was very happy to get her plum cake.”

“You are such a dear to deliver it. Will she be coming out of quarantine today?”

“That’s up to the doctor, of course.” She plopped herself down next to the General. General Dakhir was his name.

With the momentary spectacle of the Countess grilling a new guest now over, the people of her private court, who I could only assume constituted close friends and family, began discussions among themselves.

“Less realistic?” Agidda whispered, leaning in toward my ear.

“I thought we were talking about the resolution of the hologram, not the dataset.” There had been a marked change in quality of the holoprojection.

“Ah,” he smiled and nodded.

“My apology for the confusion.”

“No need, and by the way, I meant what I said about you.”

The woman sitting on the other side of Agidda asked him something about the Ministry of Technology, and so I was left to look around the table at all the chattering faces. The Countess was whispering to Alise to sit up straight, and Amika and Dakhir were whispering to one another as well, albeit less authoritatively, seeing as how they were obviously still in the honeymoon phase. Being the low man in this company was a lot more challenging than it had been in the academy or in my first wardrooms as an ensign. And the Countess had been pretty opaque about any reasons behind her interest in meeting Olav, but I was used to being trotted out as his descendant. I knew my role. It remained to be seen if others would be content with that or if they wanted more.

I had noted Guri’s change in demeanor as well. He had stayed perfectly silent during all this, not even sitting at the table but rather standing by the door with a man somewhat younger than myself with deep bronze skin. They weren’t talking to each other, though there was ample opportunity, but were rather just standing side-by-side, as though waiting for something to happen. Whatever Guri felt toward me was obviously not a matter for the Countess. It would remain personal. He, at least, was not willing to soil his

nest, which gave me some leverage as well, should he try anything stupid.

I looked back at the two lovebirds, Amika and General Dakhir — by this point I was convinced he could be none other — and I thought about what Kaz had said about Amika getting chomped by the *aargvark*, which seemed appropriately named, given that she’d probably yelled “Aarg!” at some point during the encounter. Then I thought of Kaz, the two of us coupling as her cats watched, and for a moment, though I couldn’t be certain, it felt like there was someone in my mind with me, looking over my shoulder, so to speak.²⁰²

I came back into the present and noticed that the Countess was looking at me rather intently.

“So how soon am I going to get to meet the new and improved Olav hault-Plankwell?” she asked, then looked toward the door. “Giikhunek, do I have time right now?”

“I’m afraid not, Your Excellency,” the bronze-skinned man next to Guri replied. “You have a meeting with the Commerce Committee very shortly.”

“Oh, bother. I suppose it will have to wait for after. Alise, you will have to come as well.”

“I can’t. Sayed is still sick, and by your own edict...”

“Captain, would you do me the kind favor of accompanying Alise as a stand-in for her minder? I promise, it is only for the purposes of this one meeting. All you have to do is make sure she listens and, more importantly, doesn’t speak.”

Alise slumped her shoulders.

“Of course, Your Excellency, it would be my honor.” I was sure Alise wanted this as much as I did, but the needs of the nobility required attendance, and I still had around thirteen hours before I needed to be back in Heron for Lt. Jaamzon’s memorial. “Mr. Agidda, with your permission?”

“By all means,” Agidda said, as though he actually had a say in the matter.

“How long do we have?” the Countess asked the young man.

²⁰² Part of being a telepath, at least in the way I’m interpreting it for this campaign, is that you get a decent chance to sense telepathy when it’s happening to you. Traveller’s rules, however, seem to preclude telepathy happening to telepaths. I’m not really okay with that.

"The committee will, of course, wait for you, but if we want to be on time, we should leave now."

"Very well," she said. "I must leave you all for a wee bit of business." Servants quickly stepped forward to help her, Alisa, and myself push back our chairs, and as we got up from the table several of the guests said their goodbyes at some length, as though she were going on an interstellar voyage or something. Alise offered me her hand, and as I took it in mine, bowing slightly in the formal posture required by court etiquette. Guri, meanwhile, tightened one of his into a fist. He was a naval captain too, after all, but hadn't been considered for the honor. Nonetheless, he kept his eyes locked forward as the security detail whisked us away.

It would be a bit odd having a serving captain attend to a scion, although it was certainly not unheard of. Alise and I, at least, had the practice of formally walking together in front of an audience, which was perhaps the main reason why the Countess had selected me. It was also possible she just wanted to parade me around, particularly since a giant hologram of Olav had been standing over the southern end of Heron the previous night. If that were the case, it would likely be due to the simple fact that nearly every reigning noble wanted to underscore that they were supportive and supported by the Imperial Navy and that their family line, the future power of their heir apparent, was ultimately secured by the same.

This is what made this falling out with Admiral Karneticky so strange. Navy and noble families were often joined at the hip. It was either that or business or interstellar politics or whatever social hierarchy happened to be in charge. But the military undergirded everything else, and the Imperial Navy in particular. We provided stability to the extent our relationship with the nobility was strong and positive. Both sides benefited; everyone benefited. It was why Admiral Karneticky's public withdrawal from an impending union with a member of the Stavelot clan was so counterproductive, because it humiliated the Stavelots, diminishing their authority. It poisoned the one necessary relationship, the one between the Imperial

military and the nobility, which was the ultimate basis for everything else.

Amika, despite now being faceless, still had a womb. So unless, somehow, she'd taken out her rage at fate on the Admiral personally, which wasn't out of the question, I didn't see why he shouldn't have continued with the marriage. She obviously wasn't marrying him for his good looks either.

The guards — the Countess had bodyguards even inside her own palace — led us to a shuttle bay, loaded us in, and then took us for a ride that lasted only a minute. It didn't look like a military shuttle, what with its luxury flourishes and multi-chromatic décor, but it may well have been one originally, as it looked like it had military issue rescue balls, judging by the verbiage on one of the emergency equipment access panels.

Then the ramp doors reopened, and we had not a handful of guards but an additional dozen. The ones in the black vests walked beside her while the ones in the blue and black formed an outer layer. They all kept themselves fairly tight, which was tactically good or bad depending on one's primary purpose (bad for fighting, but good for protecting); however, only the outer layer had their hands resting on their weapons, ready to draw at a moment's notice. The others were simply a meat shield — well, meat and ballistic cloth — as the Countess led her daughter and I in a sort of wedge configuration at our group's nucleus.

Surrounding us, quite suddenly, were a number of photographers and vidcam operators sprinkled in with other assorted onlookers. As we drew near, one person began loudly advocating about something but was quickly pulled aside by what looked like some plain-clothed security officers. For the most part, however, people yelled stuff like "We love you, Countess" or "Go get 'em, Helena," and there was even some teenager who approached us holding out a flower. "For Alise²⁰³," he yelled, but he was roughly pushed aside, Alise breaking protocol to whisk her head in his direction as we passed.

"Did she look?" the Countess asked without breaking her stride.

"She did."

²⁰³ For some reason, this makes me think of Beethoven.

I'd been keeping my face forward, but that sharp turn of Alise's head was hard to miss, even out of the corner of my vision. I tensed my arm almost instinctively to bring her attention back to the front as we maintained the pace set by the Countess, and she'd complied, but she had to take a larger step to make up for a small one.

It was surprising to me, the level of public support for the nobility here. Possibly, some of these people were hired for this very purpose. Such practices were not unknown. The Countess was making a statement to be sure, but I wasn't convinced it was for her. Was it due to Alise needing some practical experience in the public eye after that Olav debacle? Whichever the case, here again I found myself with the heir at my side, the strong arm of the Navy sending another kind of message.

We entered some sort of security lobby, and once we were out of the sight of the crowd, the Countess started in on her daughter. "You will be *me* one day, so do as *I* do. Do you see me looking at every commoner who flings me a rose?!" By the time she was done, we were being ushered up a staircase, with a group of guards leading and another one following behind.

Alise opened her mouth to respond but then apparently thought better of it, as we soon arrived at the entrance to a large balcony that overlooked a much larger domed chamber. There was a throne here and two luxurious seats off to the side, and down below, a dias with a lectern dominated the floor's center, both of which were surrounded by inclined seating with narrow walkways. Overhead, at the dome's apex, was what looked like a large holoprojector as well as some truly massive directional mics. One guard with some sort of electronic detector went onto the balcony and inspected the throne and the two chairs. Then he walked around, waving his device at the walls and the balcony's red carpet. When he finally came back to our group, he nodded to another guard, who put her wrist up to her mouth and said, "The perch is clear."

A few moments later, the Imperial anthem began playing over the loudspeakers. There was actually more than one Imperial anthem, but this was the most common one throughout the Spinward Marches. I'd been hearing it all my life, and I instinctively came to attention as it played.

"Members of the committee," someone said once it ended. "Countess Helena Stavelot and her daughter, Lady Alise, escorted by Captain Plankwell of the Imperial Navy."

The Countess walked out, Alise and I following, and everyone below bowed down.

"Please follow me in our Oath of Loyalty to the Emperor," the Countess said, her voice carrying over the chamber's speakers. Then everyone in the room spoke as one, though thanks to the speakers, her voice carried above all others.

As with the anthem, different worlds could have different versions of the oath²⁰⁴, but they all stressed the same thing, undivided loyalty to the Emperor. By administering the oath personally, reigning nobles underscored their personal allegiance to the Emperor as well as their right to represent him, acting as his agent. In this way, they reinforced Imperial authority while reinforcing their own.

After it was over, the Countess sat on her throne, and Alise showed me which chair was mine (the one further from the Countess, of course). I smiled and thanked her, and as we sat, she looked at me, her lips pressed tight.

"Is it so wrong... merely to look?" she asked, her voice little more than a whisper.

I glanced around. The people down below were beginning to chat among themselves, including a woman at a small desk beside the dias. A small gavel rested near her hand, barely noticeable from this distance. A man in a tailored suit spoke to her, holding up the entire meeting with whatever business he had.

"It is not wrong to look," I said in a low voice, "but by doing so in the company of the Countess, you were drawing attention to yourself."

"Maybe I don't care," Alise said.

I took a breath and settled into the chair. It was big and comfy, but there was no leg rest.

"She cares," I finally replied. "And she's right, you know. You will be her someday, and she is sharing the benefit of her learning and experience with you. That also means that someday, you will decide whether to look or not, and what it will mean when you do, and what meaning others will draw from that look."

²⁰⁴I started a discussion about this on the TML. See <https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/22902212/>

It was an uncomfortable lesson I had learned over the years, being not quite noble enough for the ranks I associated with, but expected to comport myself as if I were. This constantly opened me to attacks of acting above my station and trafficking in my family name. It had only been my rigid attention to detail and bearing, behaving as the best possible model of the rank I inhabited, that prevented such charges from sticking. Those social *bettors* of mine who had not paid attention to their comportment ended up embarrassing themselves in comparison.

That was the trick wasn't it? Knowing who mattered in any given situation. The Countess asked a question, and I answered, and in fewer words than she had used. Alise asked a question and as her escort I had at least comparable rank at this moment, so I could answer her honestly. How she chose to take my answer was on her. She could re-assume her rank and be frosty, she could listen and learn, or, if she got really peeved, she could make a scene, forcing me to apologize. As escort, I was now the minder for the time being, so I chose to offer what advice I could.

No matter what some may think, nobles are not born to this game, though their station at birth requires they learn it. Everyone has to go through a period of trial and error. I did it, and so would Alise, although I had to admit that as difficult as it was for me, I'd been under nowhere near the same level of pressure and scrutiny as her.

"This meeting of the Committee on Commerce and Exchange will come to order," the woman sitting at the desk said over the PA, tapping her gavel several times as the room quieted.



Chapter 29

Inner Workings

I was *not* having fun. Going all the way back to childhood, when I'd envisioned myself as a Captain in the Imperial Navy, I imagined I'd be commanding a Navy Cruiser and charting a course to strange, new worlds, or at least ones with lots of sexy alien women. I was perhaps a bit precocious. In any case, what I most definitely didn't imagine was sitting in a committee room, effectively babysitting the scion of some malicious woman who happened to be the Countess of Jewell, all because the aforementioned scion's minder was still sick.

The committee, like most others, was effectively a bunch of bean counters discussing beans. Money, trade, money, tourists, money, startowns (Heron had two, but there were others). I willed myself not to yawn as they went into the details.

From her body language, it was easy to discern that Alise felt likewise. We were as two kindred souls, both of us concentrating on the task of not openly expressing our boredom. One good thing, however, was that this experience, if I managed to get through it, would allow me a glimpse into the inner workings of Jewellian government, and if nothing else, perhaps I'd have something to relay to Kaz before I left. As it would soon turn out, however, that wouldn't be necessary.

"I am the committee liaison for the HPSS, the Heron Public Security Service," a woman said from the dias. "I regret to inform this committee that we had an incident in Heron's Miltown²⁰⁵. Yet another incident involving drunken sailors, I'm afraid, only this one involved the destruction of a... uh... commercial establishment." A holograph of a burning building appeared over her head, its entire dome completely in flames. "It was a dance club called *Doggy Style*, known for

205 While usually referred to as startowns, it is sometimes useful to use the more precise term of *miltown* in cities that are so big they have a startown associated with the starport and another associated with a military installation. On many worlds, startowns are considered an extension of the starport and are under Imperial authority, whereas on others, they're patrolled by local police. In Heron, the latter situation is in effect in both its Startown as well as its Miltown.

gambling and prostitution. It was catering primarily to Vargrs.”

“Why are we allowing this sort of thing?” the Countess asked.

“I... I often wonder that myself, Your Excellency.”

“Well, what’s stopping you from closing it down?”

“It’s closed now, Your Excellency.”

“Yes, but wouldn’t it have been better to close it before it burned down?”

“We are only responsible for public security. If Business Registration is here....”

“Is anyone here from Business Registration?” the chair asked the committee.

Countess Helena was exercising her Right of Attendance, the prerogative for a high noble to interject at any moment, seizing the committee’s attention whenever she wished. In short, it could have been called the Right of Interruption. On the bright side, it could add some drama and sometimes forced a very slow bureaucracy to cut to the chase.

Alise yawned as one does when trying not to, her face flushing red as her whole neck momentarily expanded. Damn her, I thought, as I raised my fist to hide my mouth and followed suit. Hopefully, we wouldn’t make the evening news.

“I’m from the OBR, the Office of Business Registration,” a rather attractive woman said as her hologram appeared on the dias. She looked oddly familiar, and as she talked about how the Doggy Style met all of its registration requirements, I suddenly realized I’d seen her before. She was that woman on the subway, the one who looked away, embarrassed, and then became angry, albeit silently so.²⁰⁶ According to what I’d seen in her mind, it was all due to some military guy running her over, mangling her heart in the process. I’d slept since then, and the telepathy wasn’t as powerful now, and it certainly wasn’t hitting me unbidden, so I had no way of knowing if she recognized me. If so, she gave no sign of it, but then again, what would she say if she did, given the fact that we’d never even met?

“In summary,” she concluded, “I don’t see this as a problem of the government’s making. Rather

it is simply due to the proclivities of young, rambunctious sailors.”

“Rambunctious?” the Countess asked.

“Naval Bases always bring in a certain degree of... uh... of roguish behavior. This is true throughout the Imperium, and it’s true here.”

“But the Army has a base in the Ghonorian Desert only a few hundred kilometers northeast of Heron,” the Countess said, “and I never hear about anything like this coming from them.”

“Your Excellency, I don’t want to speak on a subject matter that isn’t my specialty, but I suspect that while Imperial Army personnel come and go, there isn’t a steady stream of them passing through on a regular basis, stalking prey, as it were, and then leaving.”

“Stalking prey?”

The subway lady’s face flushed pink, as it sounded a bit like firsthand experience that she’d now have to explain.

“I... uh... I don’t represent the Navy, Your Excellency.”

“Who does?”

“Your Excellency,” a new hologram said, “I am Captain Masa, 112th Fleet. The Navy provides a great service to the people of Jewell, and our personnel behave with the highest...”

“Except when they’re committing arson,” Countess Helena interjected. “We’ve just seen the video.”

“We are investigating the incident, and we’ll issue a full report and deal with it in-house.”

“I am not suggesting otherwise,” the Countess replied. “But the fact remains, this happened, and it’s not like it’s the first time. The miltown is getting a bad reputation, Captain. How does the Navy propose we keep this from happening again?”

“We will study the problem and issue a report, complete with proposals.”

“See that you do. And have the Imperial Army issue one as well, since they seem to know how to keep their personnel from burning down warehouses.”

There was a general titter among the committee members, at least those who were physically present. One wasn’t allowed to laugh in committee unless the reigning noble said something funny, in which case it was advisable

²⁰⁶ See the beginning of Chapter 22 in A&E #570.

if not required. The only issue now was whether it was meant to be funny.

"Of course, Your Excellency," Captain Masa said, bowing as his hologram disappeared.

"Look," the Countess said, putting her feet up on a little footstool that was in front of her throne. "I understand young sailors need a place to blow off steam..."

"And bodily fluids," Alise mumbled so softly, I was the only one who could possibly hear.

"...but we can't continue to have anarchy inside of Heron. I mean, this sort of thing will tarnish Jewell, and I will not tolerate that. Who here represents the business interests of Heron?"

Yet another hologram appeared.

"Cassiopeia Remshaw, Heron C.O.C."

"Her-on cock," Alise mumbled, once again, very softly.²⁰⁷

Cleonsfart. I leaned over and raised my hand to cover my mouth. "Newsie lip reading software is quite good. Are you trying to get in more trouble?"

"Ms. Remshaw," the Countess said, "does the Chamber of Commerce have any suggestions?"

"Since we are business owners, Your Excellency, we tend to support businesses, whatever they happen to be."

"Yes, of course, but what about Navy personnel... stalking prey, as it were? Do you concur with the OBR? Do Navy boys have that proclivity?"

"Uh... well..." — Kaz's father had been an infamous womanizer, and she'd spent the previous night with *me*; one wasn't allowed to lie in committee, even about one's opinions and especially not to a reigning noble, so what could she really say? — "...all in all, Your Excellency, I happen to think Navy men are quite nice."

"So you've never felt stalked?"

"Stalked? You say it like it's a bad thing."

This time there was laughter, although it was very brief, the committee members waiting to see how the Countess would react. The fact that she herself had arguably interjected some level of humor meant that Kaz could risk following up with a bit of her own, but if the Countess took offense, Kaz would probably lose her job, so she'd just taken a *big* risk, possibly so that she

²⁰⁷ She's hinting to Gus that she knows what he did last night, but it seems to have gone over his head.

wouldn't offend *me*. From where I sat, I couldn't see the Countess's face; I could only hear her voice.

"So you *like* being stalked?" She wasn't going to let it slide.

"It depends on who's doing the stalking."

I put my wristcom to my lips and whispered, "Message Commander Nizlich. Get me a status update on the shore leave incident ASAP."

"So then you would agree with the OBR's assessment," the Countess said.

What was this? A cross-examination? Helena was trying to coral Kaz into an admission. I was not a trophy. I was here to be ambushed, to be put on the spot as Karneticky's chosen envoy and eviscerated as an example of the Navy failing their people, such that even the descendants of the great Plankwell were to be seen as...

"We women..." Kaz replied after a brief pause, "we can think of ourselves as being hunted, or we can *become* the hunters. It's all a matter of perspective. Speaking personally, Your Excellency, all I can say is that the latter is more fun."

There was a moment of silence during which one could have heard a pin drop, the entire committee on the edge of their seats to see if Kaz would still have a job tomorrow.

"So it's the position of the Chamber of Commerce that the women of Heron should stalk Navy personnel?"

Aarg! Kaz was toast. She was going to go down in flames, and somewhere in the background, I was pretty sure I could hear her two cats hissing at each other.

"All I'm saying," Kaz replied, "is that men will be men and women will be women, and there's very little one can do about that except make the best of it and try not to become roadkill. If it happens, learn and move on. To wallow in victimhood may be tempting, but it's ultimately self-defeating. In any case, the Imperial personnel who visit Heron and those who live here are all good people, almost all of them anyway, and they inject money into our economy."

"They inject something into somewhere," Alise mumbled.

I turned an icy eye on Alise and put all my captain-disciplining-space-hand-recruit energy into it. "Enough."

“They provide value in multiple ways,” Kaz continued, thankfully ignorant as to Alise’s off-color commentary. “They protect and enrich our community...”

“While only occasionally committing arson,” the Countess interjected.

Kaz had no choice but to shut up. She could continue talking only if the Countess asked her another question. To do otherwise would be viewed as arguing, and it was unwise to argue with a reigning noble.

“Does the business community have any preference which military service occupies the base at South Heron?”

Another hush fell over the committee. Was the Countess actually proposing that Plankwell Naval Base move and some other service take over the installation? This wasn’t about me at all. In any case, it was highly unlikely Helena knew which ship’s sailors instigated the arson, and if she did, she’d be in a bind because I was the one escorting her scion. I couldn’t be the scum of the universe *and* austere enough to be responsible for her progeny.

“That’s up to you and the government of Heron, Your Excellency. We in the Chamber of Commerce don’t advocate for or against any of the armed services. We like them all, and so whatever the government sees fit to decide, we will, of course, accept.”

The Countess tapped a button on the arm of her throne, and Kaz’s hologram disappeared.

“I want a subcommittee formed to study this,” she said, “and I want both the Navy as well as the Army to issue their reports ASAP, as in yesterday if not sooner.”

Helena was weighing this proposal of hers, testing the waters to see if it would be accepted. Most nobles, at least the ones I usually dealt with, were not especially crafty. They relied on their position and social standing to get their way. Helena, however, was a politician. She cared deeply about appearances, but she also took things personally. I had to stop thinking of her as just a noble and more like an OpFor commander during a hostile boarding exercise. I felt as if I was treading a fine line, and my oxygen reserve was down to 10%. There were friendlies and enemies all around me, and I needed to be able to tell who was who.

In my head I began re-labelling everyone who mattered: Alise was a flag-ensign in training; Helena an admiral; Agidda, an allied force commander; Guri, unreliable and possibly dangerous; and Kaz, a safe port. I could do this.

Part way through the next agenda item, my wristcom beeped. Priority message from Nizlich. I had it auto-transcribed, which did me the favor of not having to hear her mispronounce every third word.

Sir, as you probably already know, a nightclub burned down. It looks like some of our off-duty personnel ate some bad skuubi snacks and then started a general brawl, culminating in the fire. We’re still waiting on toxicology to determine what drug these idiots put into their system. I’ll keep you posted as soon as I learn more.



Skuubi snacks were a generic term for any sort of party drug in the form of an edible, usually a biscuit. They were a big thing in Vargr culture, and many were specifically tailored to the Vargr mind, which although similar to the human mind, had some key differences. They were supposed to make Vargrs happy — less inhibited might be a better way of putting it, not that Vargrs were generally strong on inhibition — but sometimes a bad batch would set them off, causing them to essentially go nuts.

The Navy prohibited its personnel from consuming illicit drugs. Our training was to just say no. So if this initial report was true, these crewmen could be facing dishonorable discharge and possibly even prison time, especially if anyone had been seriously injured. Nizlich hadn’t

mentioned that, but in a brawl and subsequent fire, anything was possible.

"I have other matters to attend to," the Countess finally said, "so I trust this committee will be able to carry on without me. You may forward me your resolutions for ratification."

She got up and proceeded to leave, Alise and myself following.

"Did Alise behave herself?" the Countess asked as her security escort ushered us back to the shuttle.

There was nothing to be gained by shielding Alise from her own obstinance. I had tried the carrot earlier. Now it was time for the stick.

"Your daughter has a gift for metaphor but a disregard for decorum, Excellency. I would put a sniffer on the sleazier tabloids or excise any part of the recording in which she appears."

"Foolish girl," Helena scolded.

Alise didn't respond, however, instead mimicking her mother by smiling and waving as we passed the crowd. Then we boarded the shuttle, its airlock closing behind us, and Alise disappeared into a fresher²⁰⁸. The Countess and I sat in the back of the passenger compartment while her personal guard detail positioned themselves near the front, beside the airlock.

"Thank you," the Countess said in a quiet voice. "She tends to misbehave with substitute minders, but I thought perhaps with an Imperial Navy Captain, particularly one who helped her out of a jam — well, it doesn't matter." She looked out the window as we began moving.

"Excellency," I nodded, acknowledging the comment, but not willing to press my luck.

I looked at the guard detail, noting their position and the weapons they carried. We were unlikely to be ambushed here in Silver City, but it was a good habit to be situationally aware.

"Tell me," the Countess said quietly, leaning in toward me a bit, "Now that you've worked with Geriol, what do you think of him?"

"Excellency, it is not my place to personally comment on superior officers. In my professional capacity, he has eased my assumption of command of the *Jaqueline* and offered me multiple opportunities to serve the Emperor in a number of capacities, including direct service to

yourself. The Navy comprises a wide number of character types but we are all committed to the service of the Imperium."

I sensed she wanted a pipeline to figure out what was going on with the Admiral. I was beginning to think the Countess did not understand why her alliance had been spurned. The enemy OpFor commander was beginning to morph into a colonial commander trying to reason out inexplicable orders.

I took a deep breath. The Countess had already done me some honor, so I owed her something in return.

"Ma'am, the map is not the territory and sometimes positions get garbled. I am a military man, and not artful in the ways of politics, but it seems to me that your one time ally is acting inexplicably, and there have been some events that seem to discredit the Navy in your eyes: the faux pas with the original version of Olav, the broken proposal, and the Heron City arson. Once is happenstance, twice coincidence, but three times is enemy action. As I said, I am not artful and am a stranger here, but this is beginning to look like a campaign of discreditation. I apologize if I have been too forward with my opinion, Excellency."

"Enemy action? A campaign of discreditation? Please, Captain," she said as we docked. "Stupidity needs no explanation. Like love, it just is." She got up from her seat and knocked on the fresher door as the shuttle's airlock opened. "Don't keep me waiting, young lady."

"Crapping Cleon!" Alise yelled from the other side of the door. "Can't you just leave me alone?!"

"Unless you've got a Klingon on the dark side of Uranus²⁰⁹, you have ten seconds to get out here! Nine, eight, seven..."

I knew intellectually that training cadets was not the same as raising children. For one thing, cadets generally wanted to learn what you had to teach. But this intimate view of noble family dynamics was sobering. Power meant nothing when applying it would simply drive away the subject you wished to influence.

"...six, five, four..."

208 <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Fresher>

209 Okay, okay... no more Star Trek references.

The metal collar I wore was a gentle reminder of being subject to power. The Navy kept all kinds of tabs on crews and officers, but they were less obtrusive. Control was a slippery concept, and Humaniti as a rule had an innate yearning to resist rather than accept. It was our nature to explore the limits of restraint and perhaps even find ways to break free rather than submit without reservation and never find the limits of possibility.

"...three, two one," Helena said, nodding to one of the guards. He keyed open the door, and Alise stepped out, stealing a furtive glance in my direction before following her mother back into the palace. Not knowing where else to go, I followed.

"Why do you insist on continually trying my patience?" Helena asked.

"Because you never let me do anything *I* want to do. I always have to do everything *you* want me to do, but you never let me do anything *I* want to do!"

"What do you want to do?"

"I want to go out. I want to have fun. I want to dance. I want to get drunk!"

"Oh dear." The Countess shook her head. "I won't tolerate you getting drunk. Alcohol is a vile substance, and those who indulge in it are vile."

We soon entered some sort of living area complete with sofas and a bar. Amika was at the bar all alone, nursing a drink that looked mostly clear, and given the various bottles sitting beside her glass, it was pretty certain she wasn't drinking water.

"Oh dear," the Countess said. "What now?"

"Oh, cleonspoop," Amika said, swiveling around on her bar stool and almost falling off in the process. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Where's General Dakhir?" the Countess asked.

"His name's Eneri."

"Has he proposed yet?"

"No."

"Then he's General Dakhir."

"Well, he probably won't now that you've gone and insulted him."

"What?! How did I insult him?"

"By bringing up Geri. Why would you do that?"

"Oh for..." Helena looked toward me. "You were there. Did I insult him? Tell her. Did I?"

Keeping a firm clamp on my emotions was becoming more difficult. Yes, dismissal of my concern was perfectly rational. However, calling on me to take her side in petty squabbles was a bit much.

"Excellency, I would not presume to make any such judgment."

"Ha! I knew it!" Amika laughed to the extent she was able, given that she had neither a face nor very much left in the way of vocal chords.

"Oh, don't listen to him. He's just sore because I insulted his Admiral."

"At least you admit you insulted somebody," Alise chirped.

"You stay out of this!" Helena growled at her daughter before turning back to Amika. "And you tell Dakhir that if he's such a quivering mess he can't talk to me directly about his precious feelings, then he's worthless as a man and less than worthless as a soldier! I mean, for Cleon's

sake! What sort of general must he be? I've got a good mind to pull the plug on this whole thing!"

"Go ahead!" Amika raised her glass in the air. "Nobody asked you to get involved!"

"Fine!" Helena shouted.

"Fine!" Amika fired back.

"Fine!" Alise concurred, getting into the spirit.

"Alise, now is *not* the time!" The Countess stormed off, leading her contingent of guards, Alise and myself out of the bar.

"When will it be the time?" Alise asked.

"When a *real* man shows his ugly face," Helena answered. "If ever we shall meet one."

She glanced at me, but I'd committed myself to silence, having donned the blandest facial



expression I could possibly muster. Then she looked to her guards, but they all looked away, none of them wanting to get involved in the latest family drama.

“No offense, Mom, but I’m pretty sure everyone hates you.”

“That’s how I know I’m right.”

Chapter 30

The Holographic Man

This was what confounded me about nobles. The interstellar media portrayed them as if they were the best thing since reactionless thrusters, but once you got to see one up close and personal, the facade fell to pieces. It wasn’t true of all nobles, of course, but it was true of many.

Maybe Admiral Karneticky had seen the writing on the wall and was cutting his losses early. I didn’t know enough to say, and I really didn’t want to know. This was not my base of operations. I didn’t need these people on my side. But I also didn’t want them making things difficult. Therefore, it seemed best to maintain my most formal behavior until I could make my excuses and get to the memorial.

“Captain,” the Countess asked, “what do you think we should wear for our meeting with Olav, dresses appropriate to his era or something more modern?”

“Modern dress would be appropriate, Excellency. The simulation is aware of the time difference between its memory set and its experiential reality.”

We arrived at what was apparently a private suite, as I wasn’t invited within but instead had to wait with three guards in a little security station, complete with a wall of video monitors. Displayed on the monitors were video feeds from various parts of the palace, and on one of them, I could see Agidda chatting with Guri back in the reception chamber as some technicians set up a large video camera in the background. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but at one point Guri turned and spoke to the camera people, pointing toward where Olav had been standing when we left the room, and they nodded their heads.

Oddly, somewhere in the back of my mind, I could almost hear what they were saying, as if I was nearly within earshot. The polymer hypo-gun back in my secret stash aboard the Jaqueline flashed to mind. Along with it were nine unspent ampule cartridges laden with some sort of Darrian psi-enhancer.²¹⁰

“Is this your first time in the Palace?” one of the guards asked me, a shy smile on her face, as

²¹⁰ See page 105.

though wondering what I must be thinking about the Stavelots now that I'd seen them up close.

I nodded. "Yes, I think the last time I was this way was a fast transit from Quar to Efate. It's nice to stop and see the sights."

Always be pleasant to the help and security. That was drummed into me early and often. This guard might be willing to put her life on the line for the nobility, and as their guest right now, that included me. The least I could do was make small talk.

"Are you native or from away, Guardian..."

"Amanda Irshushi," she said. I thought of raw fish. We chatted for a bit, her asking me about the Imperial Navy from a Captain's perspective. I informed her I'd only very recently become a Captain. Then the young, bronze-skinned man who appeared to be some sort of administrative aid showed up and was told they were dressing, so he waited with us. "First time at the palace?" he asked me.

"Indeed. As I was saying to Guardian Irsushi here..."

"Irshushi," she corrected.

"Sorry, uh... the last time was during the war, and it was a fast transit, so I got to see more of your system's gas giant than I did of Jewell."

"We have three," he said. "Three gas giants."

"Oh," I nodded. "Well, all I know is that we refueled at one of them."

Then we all chatted about space travel until the Countess and her daughter came out in formal court dress, one of the guards who'd gone inside with them now carrying Helena's crown on a little pillow. Alise, meanwhile, wore a thin headband, bejeweled in such a way as to denote her status as a lady in her own right as well as the heir to an Imperial County.

We proceeded past Amika again, who asked, "What's all this?" to which Alise replied, "Come and see." Apparently intrigued by all the formal finery, Amika followed, and soon she was walking beside me.

"Hello again," she said. No smile, of course. The mask she wore didn't even have lips.

I nodded in acknowledgment. "My Gentlady Amika, we have not been formally introduced. Captain Augustine Plankwell, at your service."

I was not put off by the mask but rather curious as to her choice to use it. I had seen

plenty of people in the service use similar devices to cover healing or disfiguring wounds, and an equal number displaying their wounds and scars openly. There was no rule; it was as personal as one's choice in off-duty clothing or hairstyle. Some people even used sculpted prosthetics to resemble themselves.²¹¹ What was considered rude was to openly inquire about a personal choice in a non-personal setting. I had neither standing nor motive and so made no mention of it.

We finally reached the reception chamber, Guri and Adigga still talking, although they stopped as soon as they saw the Countess and her entourage, which, of course, included me.

"Where is he?" the Countess asked. "Where's Olav?"

Agidda pressed a button on the remote, and Olav reappeared, although he was still frozen.

"Okay, step out of the way. And give me that."

Agidda handed her the remote.

"Alise, come here beside me."

Alise complied, although she was biting her lip.

"What are you trying to do?" Helena asked her. "Tell the whole world you're afraid of a hologram?"

"I'm not afraid," Alise said. She stopped biting her lip and instead glared at the hologram.

"What do I do? Just push this button? And where's my crown?"

"The *pause* button," Agidda said as the crown-bearer stepped forward. "It's the one with the two vertical lines."

"I know what a pause button looks like," the Countess said, adjusting her thumb as the young, bronze-skinned man placed the crown upon her head.

"How do I look?" the Countess asked the camera crew.

"Excellent, Your Excellency," one of them answered.

"Ha! Excellent, Your Excellency," she repeated the words. "Okay, let's do this."

²¹¹ The problem with full facial prosthetics is the uncanny valley, which requires high-end technology to surmount, so it could just be the case that she's waiting for something from a world with higher medical technology than Jewell.

She pointed the remote at Olav, as if he were the receiver, and pressed. Then he/it shifted his gaze, obviously noticing the two women before him, both in Imperial Court finery, each with their respective crowns, and with the briefest of glances toward the rest of us, the guards, and the camera crew, and Amika, myself and Agidda and Guri and that administrative aid or whatever he was, Olav bowed. He bowed deeply, not as a mere courtesy but as a meaningful gesture of respect and acknowledgment of legitimate authority.

"That's much better," the Countess said.

"He's definitely different," Alise murmured.

"Is no one going to introduce me to the Countess and her heir?" Olav asked.

Agidda blinked and glanced toward me as I stepped forward before Guri could start moving. "Excellency, if I may? Countess Helena Stavelot and Lady Alise Stavelot of Jewell, may I present to you the simulation of my honored ancestor, Olav hault-Plankwell." I was careful to omit Olav's titles, they belonged to the man, not this program, and it only had the memory of them in any case.

Olav kept his head down, per protocol, until the Countess said, "You may rise." Then he straightened himself.

"I am very pleased to meet you and your heir, Your Noble Excellency, and... uh... and I solemnly vow to you and your people my service in whatever capacity you may find most suitable and beneficial."

"Do you remember your last meeting with my daughter?" Helena asked.

"No. I was told... the last thing I remember, aside from talking to these two fellows, was... uh... getting blown up."

"Oh," the Countess said.

"It's an occupational hazard. One I was able to avoid up until now. Speaking of now, I was told the current year is 1114."

"Yes," Helena said.

"I cannot but wonder what has transpired during the... well... during the last half of a millennium, if you would be so kind as to humor my curiosity."

"A lot has happened."

"I'm to understand Bel... uh... Arbellastra... became Empress?"

"Yes." The Countess nodded. "She ascended the Iridium Throne following the Civil War."

"The... the Civil War?"

"Yes," Helena said, nodding again.

Olav's gaze ping-ponged around the room as he looked at several of us with a growing grimace.

"Oh dear," Helena said. "You don't know about that, do you?"

"No."

"Your actions resulted in a leadership vacuum. We had — how many was it? — eighteen emperors in eighteen years?"

Olav's mouth fell open.

"Seven were assassinated," the Countess continued, "ten were killed in battle, and one survived, Arbellastra, although she waited several years before the Moot insisted she assume the throne."

Olav looked down at his own hands as she spoke, the hands that, at least in his mind, strangled Empress Jaqueline.

"There was no one more worthy of the throne than Arbellastra," Helena went on, "and we are blessed to be ruled by her House to this very day. You are thus, in a manner of speaking, an honored guest."

"I... I sparked a civil war?"

"Yes. But it all turned out for the best in the end."

Olav took a long moment to process this, and when he finally looked back up, he seemed to be carefully weighing his next words. "Your kindness and generosity are boundless," he finally said. "You are truly a superior noblewoman, a jewel among the stars."

Countess Helena blushed.

"And you, kind sir, are a man worthy of the name. I'm going to turn you off now, as I need time to think how you shall best serve the Imperium going forward."

"As you wish," he said. "I await your command."

She pressed the pause button again, once more freezing Olav, and then looked toward Agidda and I.

"Well done," she said. "Well done, both of you."

Agidda and I both bowed. There was nothing like the sense of release when a battle plan

survived contact with the enemy. A memory of Kaz then passed through my head. Well, almost nothing.

“Here’s a *real* man,” she then said, handing the remote control to Amika. “If only we had more like him.”

She obviously preferred this polished version of Olav to the messy reality. That was no surprise. I pondered if the comment, that slap at men everywhere, revised my estimation of her, finally settling her down at the level of nobles to be endured.

“I’ll be expecting a report of possible uses of this technology from the ministry,” she said.

“Of course, Your Excellency.” Agidda said. “We shall get right on it.”

“As for you, Captain, I hope you will enjoy the remainder of your stay on Jewell. Perhaps I shall see you in Heron before you leave.”

“Thank you, Excellency. I will be at the memorial later today. Thank you for your hospitality.”

The Countess left, her aid and her guards following behind, leaving me alone with Agidda, Guri, and Amika, who still held the remote, along with the video camera crew, which appeared to be packing up. Amika gingerly stepped over to where the Countess had been standing and, glancing toward us, asked, “May I?”

Agidda shrugged. This new and improved Olav seemed docile enough.

Guri, meanwhile, looked at the camera crew, then at me, and then he left, to where I had no idea. Hopefully back into the mists of obscurity.

“Should we record this?” one of the camera operators asked, pointing toward Amika.

“No, please don’t,” she said. They nodded and continued packing, and she waited until they too were gone. Then she pressed the button, bringing Olav back to life, as it were, the faceless woman meeting the holographic man.

“Hello,” she said. “I’m Amika. So, by any chance, would you happen to be single?”

I nodded to Agidda and took my leave before Olav could conjure a suitable reply.

My RPG Pet Peeves and How I Beat Them (and how you can too)

My apologies in advance, but in the interests of brevity, I’m going to include links to several of my past A&E zines. They can be found here:

<https://mega.nz/folder/hGYliCKK#a0fr1dDhy3no6Ey5xNPukQ>

Most of my **RPG Pet Peeves** center around my preference for Characterization over Combat. I hate how long combat resolution takes in most RPGs²¹² and have devised ways to dramatically speed combat up when I GM.²¹³ I also hate rules that consign activities that should be roleplayed to dice rolls.²¹⁴

Also, I hate playing in campaigns that feel railroaded, which unfortunately has been most of them. If a player cannot meaningfully impact the plot, then what’s the point?²¹⁵

In part for this reason, I’ve gradually come to dislike the traditional (single-GM, multi-player) framework. Not only does it reduce the individual player’s power to affect the plot²¹⁶, but it also tends to make players compete for the GM’s attention²¹⁷, creating a GM-bottleneck that frustrates players and overwhelms the GM, often resulting in GM-burnout. Furthermore, it also tends to limit in-depth characterization. For all of these reasons, I’ve created some alternative single-player frameworks.²¹⁸

I also dislike internal inconsistencies in settings.²¹⁹ Things that don’t make sense tend to break immersion. Granted, real life sometimes doesn’t seem to make any sense, but I hold fiction to a higher standard than reality.

212 See my comment to Lisa Padol in A&E #513.

213 See my comment to Nick Smith in A&E #567.

214 See *Charisma in AD&D (or, preferably, the lack thereof)* in A&E #513.

215 See *Getting the Most out of Your Players* in A&E #365.

216 See “My Problem with Tabletop RPGs” in my zine in A&E #533.

217 See the 3rd page of my zine in A&E #500.

218 See *Trisect: The SPC-Method* in A&E #534 and *Nitwits & Nincompoops* in A&E #535.

219 See *Five Absurdities of the Official Traveller Universe* in A&E #504.

I also dislike the lack of an explanation that often exists for why a given group of characters is together in the first place. Granted, this is more the fault of the GM & players than of any given RPG system, but the problem seems to be somewhat ubiquitous, and I find it annoying.

Finally, and this is probably my biggest pet peeve of all, I find myself depressed by the utter pointlessness of many RPG plots, particularly those that center around the acquisition of wealth and power. We end up playing characters we never know, doing stuff we'd never do for riches that don't exist, and next to nothing is learned. Stories should involve lessons, or what's the point? So maybe what I'm seeking from RPGs is simply unreasonable.

Once again, this isn't necessarily the fault of the RPGs themselves. The whole point of roleplaying is to craft stories incorporating whatever themes the group wants to explore. In the case of the Plankwell campaign, I never planned to make "the war of the sexes" a centerpiece, but when our protagonist decided to "romance" one of the NPCs²²⁰, it opened up a portal for us to explore this theme, and after that, one thing just sort of led to another.

Any GM can do this, but from what I've seen as a player, very few choose to do so. Perhaps this is because RPGs grew from wargaming, and so we're still under the cultural influence of our historical roots. Or perhaps it's because RPGs have long included the use of adventure modules, and so roleplaying gets curtailed by the practical limitations imposed by pre-fab adventures.

Granted, GMs don't have to use pre-fab adventures, and they don't have to stick to them even if they do, but many long-time GMs use them as a crutch, in my opinion, railroading their players without even meaning to. I'm sure there are ways modules can be used and designed to avoid this pitfall (sandbox adventures spring to mind), and granted, there are good arguments for why players need more direction at the beginning of a campaign. Nonetheless, I'm generally against the use of published adventures, especially those that include descriptive text or character dialogue that the GM is supposed to read. It just feels so clunky and scripted.

I sympathize with GMs who don't feel confident enough to wing it in a semi-prepared way, not worrying too much about where things will go and just letting the players lead the way. It requires a degree of faith to pull this off, because the GM must let go of the reins to some extent.

My suggestion to anyone who wants to try it is to run a single-player PBEM, preferably with the assistance of a co-GM, and edit the correspondence into a (preferably first person) narrative as you go. By having the time to think that asynchronous play allows, you'll be able to describe combat at whatever level of detail you prefer, focus on characterization in a way that you've probably never done before, iron out any internal inconsistencies in your setting (as well as detail whatever nuances arise), create a good explanation for why the character is on this adventure in the first place, and incorporate themes that will add layers of meaning to your shared work. It's a much slower form of roleplaying, and it's probably not for everyone, but I think it's worth trying at least once just to see what will happen. Just one word of warning: find participants who like to write.

²²⁰ See *Chapter 24*.

Chapter 31

Power Climb

On the drive back to Heron, my wristcom buzzed with a voice message from Commander Nizlich. “I’m looking down at you right now, sir, and I’ll admit... I’m a little envious, but why are you going so slow? And when are you going to bring that beautiful machine up here so I can take a closer look?”

I tapped an acknowledgment, checked the Jackie’s vector as well as the Kinnuki’s power reserve, and did some head math. They were in orbit, and while I could climb up to them and match their speed, could I catch up to them before they zoomed over the horizon?

I ran a new vector through the navigation console. According to its calculations, I’d have to push hard. If I wanted to do this, there was no time to debate the pros and cons. I hit a button, auto-filing it as a flight plan adjustment. Sticking to business was all well and good, but sometimes life took priority.

“Reply to Nizlich,” I said to my wristcom as I flipped the gravcar to manual control and did a long axis rotation. “Keep your camera on me. Maybe we can add this to the Emperor’s Birthday Memorial Highlights.”

Captain Plankwell was out for the moment, and Combo²²¹ was now in charge.

I pulled into a full power climb, feeling the strain of the grav field as it struggled to dampen the inertia. I then pulled some maneuvers to get the feel of this nimble little craft. There was a fine line between testing a vehicle’s limits and recklessness, and the Navy would not be pleased if I brought it back in poor condition. Nonetheless, I kept pushing and double-checked my vector. I was still on course, but I’d have to keep leaning into the accelerator to reach the intercept.²²²

221 Combo is Captain Plankwell’s callsign (see page 87).

222 I asked the Traveller Mailing List about this (see <https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/22989588/>), and the best answer (from Evym MacDude) was that the Kinnuki is a high-end speeder (see *Classic Traveller’s The Traveller Book*, pg. 111), and so my ruling was that it could attain orbit and even match orbital velocities in a matter of minutes.

The stars shined brightly as I emerged from Jewell’s atmosphere, and in a matter of minutes the Jaqueline came into view.

“INS Jaqueline to IN Kinnuki. You are cleared to enter Pod 2. Over.”

They wanted me to land in Forward Comms rather than the Fighter Pod. I maneuvered to the Jackie’s starboard side and found the door to one of the naval courier bays wide open.

“IN Kinnuki to INS Jaqueline. Clearance Acknowledged. Over.”

The bay was way bigger than I needed, and as soon as I made contact with the deck, the door shut and the hanger began pressurizing. I waited until it was safe, then opened the door. Nizlich and Gani came out to greet me along with one of his lieutenants and five deckhands who were probably tasked to the pod’s hangers. As I climbed out to greet them, I could see the Kinnuki’s heat shields were glowing.²²³ The heat they were emitting was something I could

223 What I was imagining here is that the limiting factors on the Kinnuki’s speed are air resistance & heat dissipation. It can cruise at supersonic speeds and can go hypersonic for extended bursts, meaning that it’s engineered quite well, both for overcoming air resistance and dissipating heat. However, for the latter, it probably needs a stream of air brushing by some sort of heat exchanger. So as it emerges from an atmosphere, two things happen. First, air resistance is no longer a big factor, so it can accelerate beyond hypersonic speeds, boosting itself up to orbital velocity. Second, it no longer has air molecules brushing by, so it can’t vent its excess heat. This second issue becomes exacerbated if the pilot emerges from the atmosphere too quickly. If he’s flooring it, as Captain Plankwell did, then the craft will hit some air resistance as it emerges from the tenuous atmosphere at the edge of space. My key assumption is that while this tenuous atmosphere isn’t dense enough to prevent acceleration, the air molecules are nonetheless impacting the heat shield at such high velocities, they’ll impart enough energy to cause this heating effect, which the craft won’t be able to dissipate, because there’s not enough airflow to dissipate the heat into. So the craft will start to cook, and the pilot may cook as well if he doesn’t find a landing bay pretty soon. In Plankwell’s case, he did find a landing bay soon enough, but the stress he put the Kinnuki under was plain to see. What it illustrates, ultimately, is that he likes to fly on the edge or even beyond the edge of a craft’s performance specs just to see what it can do. For the record, I took a luck roll to see if he’d damaged the engine, but the Kinnuki came through like a champ.

actually feel, like hot sunlight on my skin. Everyone just stopped and stared.

“Welcome aboard, sir,” Nizlich finally said, still looking at the Kinnuki.

“Welcome aboard, Captain,” Gani echoed. He grinned and held out the palms of his hands, as if warming them beside a campfire.

I hadn’t come in hot for quite awhile and was glad to see I could still pull off an orbital match at the performance limits.

“Status report, Commander.”

“Repairs are still undervay.”

She then launched into the details, first stuff about the fusion barbette mounts and then details about the proposed schedule from General Products for the Exploration Pod replacement. I nodded as she continued to other matters, reaching back into the Kinnuki to pull out my luggage. One of the deckhands stepped forward to help.

“Bring those to my quarters please,” I interjected during what I hoped was the tail end of her summary. “Sounds like you have the situation well in hand, Commander. Gani, can you get someone to check over the Kinnuki and recharge it? I would hate the QMC²²⁴ to claim I had damaged their property while showboating.”

“Aye aye, sir,” Gani said.

“What’s up with the Fighter Pod?” I asked Nizlich once we were alone inside one of the spinal transport carriages. “Still installing the recovery workstation?”

She nodded. “Vang wants her people exempt from the shore leave lottery. Jaamzon was well liked, and everyvun who worked with her wants to attend her memorial.”

I blinked for a moment, doing the translation in my head.

“That’s fine. We will apply the same policy for other departments in the future.”

“I will let Vang know.”

I liked the idea of our entire fighter contingent representing us at the memorial. Not to mention, they were my people in trade, so to speak, so I well understood Lt. Cmdr. Wang’s motives. But I had to be mindful of the optics. Making it a policy would go some way towards reducing any charges of favoritism. To be honest, I hoped

someone would press the issue. I had some thoughts about the fighter pilot corps and the risks we ran, but I shook off the impending rant.

“What about the special scan?”

“The psi-scan?” she asked. I nodded, and she shook her head. “Abbonette said psionic residue goes stale pretty quick.”

“Well, it was worth a shot. Please pack the detector and return it to the surface. They will make a fuss if I jump outsystem with their toy.”

“I will see to it personally, once she tells me she’s finished. By the way, sir,” she said, arching an eyebrow, “vun of the members of the senior staff²²⁵ noticed you have a birthday tomorrow.”

“Please tell me you are not trying to plan something to surprise me. I stopped counting my birthdays a long time ago.”

“I’m thinking of morale, sir. It might do the crew some good to celebrate their Captain’s birthday. Since you made it clear you don’t like surprises, however, I thought it better to ask permission than forgiveness.”

I took a deep breath. “Fine. Permission granted. Let me know when and where.” It was for morale, after all. “Sorry to be a bit grumbly about it. I’m just not into birthdays, particularly my own.”

I had a birthday shortly before the breakup with Vanista. We’d gone to a fancy restaurant and discussed our upcoming wedding. For her, everything had to be just so, whereas I was more concerned with the cost. Every time I raised the issue, however, she accused me of being cheap.

“You only get married once,” she’d said.

Yes, but why did it have to be so expensive? I began to wonder if this was what I really wanted, but the birthday sex made me forget about the argument, and, in any case, it was too late to pull out.

It would be fine, I told myself. We just had to get through this, and then everything would work out. Sure, she wanted a big, expensive wedding, but so what? It wasn’t like she was asking me to change my whole life.

Then war was announced, and she asked me to resign my commission or at least withdraw as far to the rear as humanly possible. It was more of a demand, actually. Or perhaps an ultimatum.

224 QuarterMasterCorps.

225 Possibly meaning herself.

The carriage came to a stop, and we exited, and though I still felt the loss, I couldn't help but wonder if I'd dodged a bullet.

"In terms of morale, Jaamzon's service is a double-edged sword," Nizlich said as we walked. "It will help provide closure, but it's also a reminder of what happened. I want the crew focused on the future, not the past, and your birthday represents an opportunity to change gears."

"I appreciate that, Commander, but I have very little time.²²⁶ Particularly right now. Is there anything I can do to help you out with anything presenting a particular problem?"

"No, sir. There are problems, but... well, there is one thing, sir."

"What?"

"It involves the startown incident. If it turns out to be our fault, the nightclub's insurance company will likely subrogate. The 212th Fleet's legal division is, of course, willing to represent us, but they want to hire a private company to do an independent investigation, so as to reduce any perception of there being a possible conflict of interest. But because the 213th Fleet is the client, they need our approval, and they prefer it to come from you."

Of course they wanted an outside, independent investigation. Vasilyev was going to call me on the carpet for some of these approved expenses when I made my way back to Efate. Well, the money was there to be used. I wondered about the vetting of companies and whether the one chosen harbored anti-Navy sentiments. It was one thing after another.

"Send me the paperwork. I'll take care of it. Do we have a legal attache who can represent us to this third party company?"

"There's someone in logistics I can assign."

"Good. By the way, has the Canon been invited to the memorial service?"

"I don't know. I can invite him, if you like. Perhaps he could say a few words."

I thought about it for two seconds but then shook my head.

"No, if he's not been invited, I'm not going to mess up the Admiral's plans for the ceremony."

²²⁶ Timothy quipped, "I've often wondered what captains of ships this big actually do and these 30 chapters have really answered that questions for me!"

Can you read over the eulogy I wrote and maybe add some personal details about Jaamzon?"

"Yes, of course."

"I think I need to catch some shut-eye before I go out in front of people again. I'd also like you to position us over Heron."

"Aye aye, sir."

We reached my quarters, and I glanced at my wristcom. According to my daily schedule, I should have just finished breakfast and already begun the morning briefing.

"I am going to catch a nap and a shower," I told her. "I will meet with you in about four hours. We can hammer out any other issues then."

"Aye aye, sir."

I didn't feel hungry yet, but I was pretty sure I was going to sleep through lunch, so after I entered my quarters, I scheduled a duty snack kit for the return trip to Heron and then sent Nizlich a copy of my eulogy. With that done, I needed to check to make sure everything was the way I'd left it.

"Jackie, open the Captain's secret stash."

It opened. The psi-shields were still there, as were the hypo-gun and ampule cartridges. I didn't want to touch that bubble thing again, but I peeked inside its little black pouch, and it was still there as well.

Whoever installed this stash must have shielded it from psi-scans. Either that or it wasn't emanating whatever the detector sensed.

I sealed up the stash and had troubling thoughts about how this had come about. Installing a psi-shielded safe in the command stateroom, if it was not built into the original specs, would have taken several layers of security, which all pointed to Naval Intelligence and their compartmentalized black hole appropriations budget. The question was whether I should wait for Abbonette to bring it up or if I should raise the issue myself. Either way, I'd be opening myself to unknown consequences, and Intel would no doubt try to lock me into their circles of opportunity and discretion. That did not sound appealing.

I took two painkillers. Such matters always made my head ache. Then I stripped out of my uniform and tossed it in the laundry chute. I set the shower to high and let the cleansing waves wash over me. Then I dried off and did some

stretches, reminding myself that I needed to get a workout. I had already let a couple of days pass, and I was feeling heavy. Sooner or later, I had to show up at the gym and recommit to my training or there would be unwelcome rumors following me, more so than usual.

“Jackie, set my status to off-duty, do not disturb, command emergency exceptions and set a wake up alarm in four hours. And turn off the lights.”

I practically fell into my bed. It seemed like a long time since I’d been here.

Chapter 32

The Succubus

“I want to be with you,” she whispered, her ample bosom brushing against my lips. We were inside a fully-enclosed, transpex, null-gravity bubble, which was situated at the center of a small room with mirror-plated walls, floor, and ceiling, basically a narcissistic voyeur’s paradise. I’d heard about hotels like this. I just never thought I’d find myself inside one, much less with a woman so abundantly well-endowed.

This went well beyond anything I’d ever experienced. There was a partial blending of beings, myself almost fully occupied with every angle of our coupling and every sensation it naturally entailed while she, double-tasking most inappropriately, leafed through my mind, opening yet another curio cabinet, as it were, until the part of me she’d been searching for timidly emerged. It hadn’t shown itself since Vanista.

“Haven’t you ever wanted anyone to love you the way you loved her?” she asked.

Urglrblughee!

The feeling of awakening into a lucid dream, all while being sexually assaulted and psionically pick-pocketed was, to say the least, rather disturbing, and to compound it all, I had no idea who this person was. I did a mental double take as I realized they realized they’d been caught.

“STOP!”

I glanced at the timid me, a somewhat younger version of myself with a long scar across his upper chest. He regarded me with a vacant stare and downturned mouth.

“What’re you doing out?” I asked.

<Beep> <Beep> <Beep>

I opened my eyes. I was in my quarters, alone. As for the dream woman, she faded from my groggy mind as though she were a distant memory. I’d been looking at her when I’d screamed at her to stop, but I couldn’t remember what she looked like, only that she possessed all the physical qualities of womanhood, exaggeratedly so, and she had ridden me to exhaustion.

I was covered with sweat. I checked the time. Four hours had passed.

Rather than get up immediately, I waited for a certain part of my anatomy to calm down. Deep breathing seemed to help, and I tried finding a calm place in my head, somewhere I could float in the void.

All I was trying to do was get to know you, a voice whispered from the back of my mind.

I snapped awake and looked again at the time. Twelve minutes had passed in the blink of an eye. I was lucky it wasn't an hour.

I got up and took a shower, all the while wondering what had just happened. Was somebody actively interfering with my mind? Was it due to that weird orb hidden only a few meters away? Or was I just going crazy?

The image of the Zhodani ambassador flashed to mind. Why did she show up to *my* reception? Granted, we were at peace with the Zhodani, but they'd just attacked this ship. Surely, she must have known that. And yet nobody called her on it. Of course, she'd have just denied it.

And what about Lt. Jaamzon's ghost? Was she still lurking about?

I looked around as I dried off, then realized how ridiculous I was acting. I did some stretches, my muscles aching for a workout. Soon, I promised myself. The stretching helped, easing some of the aches. I still had over five hours before I had to give Jaamzon's eulogy, enough time to squeeze in a solid workout.

The problem was I didn't know how long it would take to get back down to the surface and get through customs, and no doubt Captain Masa, the Admiral's PR guy, would want to go over some things related to the ceremony. Five hours seemed like plenty of time until I factored in all the possible incidentals.

I opened the closet and laid out my dress uniform. Since this was a service for a fighter pilot killed in action, I added the cutlass and the braided epaulets of fighter squadron command. Then I checked my reflection in the mirror.

The full dress uniform reminded me of how Vanista loved being by my side whenever we went to some formal function. She was completely into the pomp and pageant, whereas my main concern was that I'd pass muster with my commanding officer. Now, however, given that the Jaqueline was on detached patrol, *I* was my commanding officer, although Vanista, of

course, had taken herself out of the picture. Or, to be more accurate, she'd removed *me* from *her* picture. The speed with which she'd gotten re-engaged was like a slap in the face. It was like I'd been nothing to her but a worn out pair of shoes.

An image of my younger self flashed to mind, from where I had no idea, and disgusted by my own naïveté, I willed it away. A lot had changed since then. The war had seen to that.

I found the snack kit I'd ordered sitting on the counter in my living room. Inside the little bag would be some nutritionally balanced handmeal, usually with some soylent or crunchies, and a hydration bulb dosed with a mild stimulant.

I checked the time and signaled Nizlich.

"I'm up, Commander. Status report."

"The Azor returned, Captain. They wanted their bay back, so I moved your Kinnuki to the fighter pod. Also, Canon Forklinbrass called, asking about his dinner invitation. I told him you'd soon be dirtside for the service, and he said he'd meet you there."

Dinner with the Canon might help. I had found him to be odd, but the brief conversation we'd had, the insights he'd made... maybe I could talk to him. He was outside my chain of command, a clergyman, and not likely to report me for mental unfitness. Spiritual unfitness, perhaps, though the Navy had no interest in that.

"Understood, Commander. I'm going to Medical for a quick check on something; then I'll meet you on the bridge. Could you ask Abbonette to join us if she's available?"

"Of course, sir."

I wanted to talk to the doctors about Jaamzon, everything from when she was retrieved through to her treatment. It pained me a little, remembering how quickly I'd dismissed her from my To-Do List. I chalked it up to the rush of events and her actually still being alive. The encounters with the entity — her ghost — inside this very room tweaked my assumptions about the universe.

I left my quarters and headed towards sickbay, acknowledging nods from various crew I passed along the way. It required taking the spinal transport tube to the ship's aft section, and at one point I got confused about which way to turn but managed to select the right direction without

consulting my wristcom. It seemed I was finally learning my way around.

“Dr. Willin,” I said once I found her, “I’d like to go over a few things, if you have a minute.”

“Of course, sir.”

Fortunately, I’d found her in her office, not in front of a patient, so whatever she was doing, it could presumably wait. I asked her about Lt. Jaamzon. Were there any unexplained anomalies?

“Anomalies?”

“Anything out of the ordinary.”

“Like psionics?”

“Not limited to psionics,” I replied, “but yes, psionics would be out of the ordinary.”

“Lt. Abbonette blew through here with that psi-scanner you ordered from the base.”

“There were other anomalies reported that made me decide to do a check. I am more interested in other crew reactions, if anyone seemed more disturbed than usual, visits, that sort of thing. It may turn out to be nothing more than post-combat adaptation fatigue, but some of these reports were troubling, and I am covering the flanks, as it were.”

“Lt. Jaamzon had a lot of visitors, and LtCdr. Wang came several times to check on her. I think everyone was disturbed by what happened. But I’m not sure that qualifies as anomalous. It’s certainly not inexplicable. If someone was severely disturbed, Dr. Pugh might know, but I’m not privy to his files. Did you ever get a chance to meet with him?”

“Not yet.”

“Well, he’s on duty right now if you’d like to.”

I momentarily considered if I wanted to arm that particular warhead.

“All right.”

“Please follow me.”

To my surprise, she led me out of the medbay and began crossing over to the starboard side of the ship. Then I remembered Nizlich mentioning something about there being two different medbays, and sure enough, we soon entered one that was essentially identical to the one on the port side of the ship, although in this one, everything was reversed, and instead of Willin occupying the main office, it was Pugh’s domain, its soft blue walls reminiscent of the sky on most

T-Prime worlds²²⁷. He apparently had no desk, but there was a rather comfortable looking chair with a separate leg rest and a small table built into one of the arms as well as a plush couch with plenty of pillows, an aquarium, and four potted plants, one in each corner of the room.

Dr. Pugh appeared to be a young man, perhaps in his early 30s, though his face was already marred by liver spots, and he was as thin as a reed. He wore the collar pin of a lieutenant, but that was no surprise. Medical specialists were often given a courtesy rank in recognition of their advanced degrees. One prerequisite, however, was that they had to take basic leadership training, which effectively amounted to finding someone on the Line to pass command to. I had run leadership classes for specialists on other ships, and while most of the time they got the certification, every now and again someone surprised me with either a brilliant insight or an abject blow up.

“The Captain wants to discuss....” Dr. Willin said after making the necessary introductions, but then cut herself short. “Well, I’m sure he can explain. I’ve got some work, so I’ll leave you two alone.” And with that she made good on her statement, Dr. Pugh motioning for me to sit on the couch. I did and found it to be very comfortable, so much so that I was pretty sure it included some sort of gravitic weight suppression.

“Put yourself at ease, Captain. Lie down if you like. So tell me, how do you feel?” Pugh kept smiling as he sat, still staring at me like I was some curious specimen worthy of study, and I suddenly wondered if this might have been a mistake. I was never comfortable being scrutinized, and it was usually my role to use the hard stares.

“I’m not here for a psychiatric visit,” I said. “I was wondering if you had marked any changes in the crew’s behavior around Lt. Jaamzon that would not have been covered by combat trauma or loss.”

“Changes in their behavior?”

“Anything anomalous,” I said.

“I... I’m not quite sure what you’re digging for,” he said, his eyes narrowing, “but the answer to your question, to put it succinctly, is no. I

227 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Terran_Prime_World

mean, Lt. Jaamzon was... she was in a relationship with one of the other crew members who was particularly distraught, but... uh... I'm going to hazard a guess that you aren't interested in the crew's private affairs."

"No, not so much." I took a moment to think about how to present this. "Okay, we are not currently in a combat situation, so I am not making a Critical Information Request. But the events that precipitated the inquiry I am following did occur in combat conditions with an Active Hostile Force, so I am asking for your professional opinion regarding crew behavior associated with Lt. Jaamzon's wounds and medical care up until her death and the time following. If, in your opinion, crew behavior was consistent with traumatic loss, that's fine and expected and not what I am interested in. What I am looking for is anything that might have sparked other responses. For example, complaints about changes in dreaming, unexplained visions, hauntings."

"Hauntings?"

In other words, was this happening to me alone or to others as well?

"Any sort of thing people might describe when they don't know what they are experiencing. I am trying to corroborate other reported phenomena."

"Members of this crew have reported... hauntings?"

I closed my eyes and counted to five.

"Not actual hauntings, but circumstances that resemble that feeling. Being watched when no one is around, a presence, that sort of thing." I felt my credibility index shrinking. "Other crew have reported feeling like... uh... look, Doctor, I had the recent experience of being confronted with the AI representation of my ancestor."

"I heard about that."

"Well, it's happened several times, and it felt different from interacting with a normal holovid. Now, I know I was not being haunted, but it was a very different kind of sensation. All I am looking for is other evidence to determine if there is a pattern that leads to a new weapon being used on this ship, or a crew member that needs a longer supervised leave of absence because they are not coping very well."

I leaned back on the couch and gathered my impatient captain persona around me. The upside

of the Navy ranking specialists is that I could also transfer them off my ship if I felt they were not contributing to the positive forward development of the crew.

"Sir," Pugh said, "I'd be very interested in talking to these crew members, the ones who experienced something they can't explain. There are a plethora of possibilities here, depending on the particulars of their experiences." He stared at me for a long moment, the focus of his eyes upon mine most unnerving. "Can you tell me any more about these experiences? Any particulars? Anything noteworthy?"

"There were reports of strange dreams."

"What sort of dreams?"

"Sexualized," I said.

"Well, that's hardly unusual."

It was for me.

"There was also a report of an out-of-body experience that felt very real and very disturbing."

"You sound like someone who's speaking from personal experience."

"I am." It was time to go all in, plasma flaming. I spoke succinctly of the first out-of-body experience, omitting the part about Commander Nizlich, but I told him about Jaamzon's ghost, about how she wanted to return to duty, and how I told her she'd done her duty, releasing her from service, and then, before he could stop me by asking a bunch of question, I told him about the most recent dream, including the sensation of someone picking through my brain looking for memories. "She was voluptuous," I said, "and I'm pretty sure she was beautiful, but when I woke, I couldn't remember what she looked like."

"How long has it been since you had sex?" he asked.

I glanced at my wristcom.

"I mean with a woman," he clarified.

"I met someone on Jewell. Why is that important?"

"I'm just trying to ascertain if the dream was internally generated or something else."

"I assure you I am in control of my actions. But there have been a number of incidents that are leading me to suspect that someone or something may be trying to compromise my ability to command this vessel. I know that

sounds alarmist, but I have not experienced anything like this prior to arriving on station.”

“Have you ever heard of succubi?” Dr. Pugh asked.

Succubi?

“In what context? I’m familiar with the general myth. The most common example is Terran, a female demon that drains the male of life. I’ve also heard it used as a pejorative for various women over the years.” At that, his eyes narrowed to the brink of squinting. “What? I took comparative cultural studies as an elective.”

“Some myths have a factual basis,” Pugh said. “Succubism is one example. It’s a little known psionic discipline, falling under dream infiltration, which in turn falls under telepathy. Of course, it has always been illegal, even during the Psionic Tolerance. Before that, it was usually misconstrued as demonic visitation. The way it works, according to my studies, is that the psion probes the sleeping mind of their target while distracting them with subconscious fantasies, usually of a sexual nature, since those are often the most engaging. My suspicion, sir, is we have a succubus onboard, no doubt a Zhodani spy, and you are their target.”

“Cleon’s wet shit, are you serious?”

“It’s just a hypothesis.”

But it made sense. I felt my hackles rising as I started rethinking everything as enemy action. *Cleon’s holy rigid member!* I knew the old saying about being too paranoid, but I had never heard of this.

“What are the protocols for dealing with something like this? I mean, I’m familiar with anti-psionic protocols in general, but mostly as it relates to boarding actions and teleportation.”

“I’m not a security specialist. Any opinion I have would be uninformed.”

“But you have an opinion?”

Pugh rubbed his chin, looking toward the aquarium for a moment.

“You said just prior to waking, you yelled at this dream entity, telling her to stop.”

“Yes.”

“Had your alarm not woken you at that moment, you wouldn’t have remembered any of this, but it did, so the psion knows there’s a chance they got caught. Going forward, they’ll likely be more careful. But they will eventually

try again. What we need to do in the meantime is get our hands on a psi-wave detector. I’m certified, if you need me to operate it, but this must be done quietly. The base almost certainly has one. I can try to requisition it, if you like.”

“I already did that,” I said, then put my wristcom to my lips. “Captain to Nizlich. Did we already send the detector back?”

“I’ll check, sir.”

“If not, hang onto it. And if we did, get it back. Also, institute a lockdown. No one on or off the ship until further notice. You are authorized to accept the return of the detector through the lockdown.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“Captain to Lt. Abbonette. Report to Pugh’s office, urgent.”

“On my way.”

Chapter 33

Show & Tell

Orders started formulating in my head. If Pugh was correct, we had a serious security situation on hand. I might disappoint the admiral by not being at the memorial, but if I snagged a psion saboteur on the ship, that might go a long way toward mollifying him.

I turned back to Pugh.

“How compromised am I? Would it be possible for a succubus to raise my paranoia levels or implant suggestions?”

He nodded. “The unconscious mind is particularly vulnerable to suggestions.” *Oh, great.* “It would be prudent, I think, for you to undergo a thorough psycho-neurological diagnostic. If nothing else, this will at least establish a baseline. In the meantime, you should probably start wearing a psi-shield when you sleep, regardless of where you are or with whom. Now, just so I’m clear on this, you already requisitioned a psi-detector?”

“We were attacked by the Zhos, so I wanted to do a sweep. Lt. Abbonette was handling it. I’m surprised you didn’t know.”

“She may have been doing it surreptitiously. Psi-detectors key on active emanations. They can sometimes catch residual energy, but it tends to fade quickly. In any case, if a psion knows you’re looking for them, they’ll simply not use their powers. It’s only when they’re actively engaged in the business of psionics that they can reliably be caught.”

“How long will this diagnostic take?”

“Several hours, but for now we’ll start with the questionnaire,” he said, handing me a data slate.

The first page was basically a long list of psychological symptoms. Was my recent increase in muscle tension due to not working out or something else? I checkmarked *Intrusive Memories*; at this point, they were impossible to deny. *Nightmares*? Maybe. *Feeling as if you were outside of yourself*? Oh, joy. This was getting better and better. *Difficulty Saying No*? Did the Admiral count on that one? *Feeling thoughts are*

placed in your mind? I winced as the checkmarks grew more numerous.²²⁸

Luckily, I could just insert my medical history in some of the other sections. No to current treatments, psychiatric or otherwise. I amended the section with my recent visit to Dr. Willin with the stomach issue. I added the part about being under medical supervision following a survivable misjump.

The family history section stopped me cold. I confronted the fact that it had been many years since I had sent any communications back home other than perfunctory birthday greetings and that I was still alive after returning from the Extents. Father: historian, deceased. Mother: living, remarried, botanical engineer. Sister: younger, deceased, naval action during the war.

I hadn’t thought about Zenna for a long time. She’d been nine years younger than me and different in so many ways. She’d joined the Marines and was killed in action. She was my mother’s child as I was my father’s son. I’d occasionally looked after her when we were young, but not much more. She chose mother’s family name of Ellevena, because it rhymes, she joked, but mostly I think, she saw what the weight of the Plankwell name was doing to me and wanted no part of it.

I put down Aunt Arguaski for time spent with significant relatives. They knew all this, I thought to myself. This was all covered in the security clearances. In the section on mental illnesses running in the family I checkmarked the box for uncle. It displayed a drop-down menu of all my uncles, and I selected Edgar, who was my father’s brother. Last I heard, he was on Porozlo in some

228 I found some psychiatric intake questionnaire (see <https://groups.google.com/g/plankwell-pbem-s1/c/keIQz3AQ11M/m/j8sk1Qm9BQAJ>), and Conrad summarized Plankwell’s responses. It amused me a bit, because our original player, before we started the campaign, specifically stated, “*I’m really not interested in doing a detailed psychoanalysis of CaptP*,” and here we were essentially doing a detailed psychoanalysis of CaptP. There’s a lot to say about this, actually, stuff I’ve hesitated to discuss, but the lesson I learned is too important to not pass on to others who might try this sort of roleplaying. It actually represents a major mistake on my part, one that nearly ended the campaign. But you’ll have to get a copy of *Alarums & Excursions #581* (contact lee.gold@ca.rr.com) if you want to read about this.

mental hospital. He had a string of horrific visions of unmanned ships dropping nukes. Aunt Arguaski visited him regularly. She'd once mentioned he'd given her some good stock tips.

Next was the education section. I'd studied electronics, engineering, and piloting, almost all of it geared toward fighters, and had taken an advanced course in vacc suit operations and maintenance. I'd also taken courses in the theory of warfare, emphasis in fighter deployment, and comparative cultural studies, useful for dealing with personnel from different worlds. Discipline issues? Some, mostly instigated by others. Had I been arrested? Detained certainly, but not arrested.

Had I ever been abused? Another question that stopped me dead. Was it abuse, being trotted out as a scion of Plankwell? Or was it duty? Or was that just what I'd been telling myself? What about Vanista? Did she abuse me? I hesitated, finally writing *Need Clarification*. It was all how you looked at it, wasn't it? I was a scion of Plankwell, but did my father's love hinge on that? He had become more distant the more I resisted, particularly during my teenage years as I began wading through the so-called subversive literature, but then he'd warmed again when I joined the Navy.

I actually felt relieved to move on to substance abuse. I began detailing my alcohol use, pretty sure I fell into the social drinker category, when a beeping noise came from the door, and Pugh told it to open.

"Captain, Doctor," Lt. Abbonette said, entering his office, her bosom bouncing slightly as she walked. She had a small slate but no psi-detector, and as I looked at her, I couldn't help but remember the dream woman. "You need me, sir?"

"Lieutenant, bring Dr. Pugh up to speed on the psionic scans we just did, and listen to what he has to tell you about succubi."

"Succubi?"

"The plural of succubus," Dr. Pugh said.

"I know what they are. So far, sir, we haven't caught any psions or psionic residue, but we're only halfway through."

"Once we are on the same page," I said, "I am going to want a security evaluation and options to contain a possible psionic infiltrator. I am also going to want to meet with you in my quarters for

a more secure evaluation of some other evidence I have uncovered. Nizlich will be joining us for that, since I have already read her in on that aspect of operations."

I was leaving no room for humorous misinterpretation in my demeanor. Captain Plankwell was on deck.

"What in Cleon's name is going on?" she asked.

"I believe the Captain was visited by a succubus."

"You *believe*."

"He had a nap wherein he experienced something consistent with a succubus visitation."

"You were *visited* during a nap," she said, looking at me with raised eyebrows. "What *exactly* happened?"

I took a deep breath. I knew I would have to do this again and again, for the inquest, the security review and probably my next command fitness review. Better start getting used to it.

"I had a dream," I said, "a very vivid dream. There was a naked woman on top of me, particularly voluptuous."

"And?"

"I remember the body, but I don't recall the face."

"You were probably distracted."

"You could say that. We were in sexual congress, and I was aware of the double sensation of physical stimuli and the feeling that my brain was being picked through."

"Usually people don't remember," she said.

"My alarm woke me. In any case, during the dream, the image of a curio cabinet was invoked, and a younger version of myself emerged."

"Younger version?"

"It was me just after my break up with Vanista."

"Who's Vanista?"

"My ex-fiancée."

"Ah... but why would a Zhodani spy be interested in..."

"I don't know. I yelled at her to stop, and then the alarm went off, and I woke up, and I was exhausted, sweaty and, um... physically aroused. I just lay there in the aftermath, trying to calm down and let my body relax. I distinctly remember a disembodied voice telling me it was just trying to get to know me."

"And you think this was a Zhodani spy?" she asked Pugh.

"It does bear the hallmarks of a succubus visitation."

"Can I have some water?" I asked. Pugh pulled a bottle from a small fridge and placed it near me. I nodded, twisted off the cap, and drank.

"Spies don't come back to the scene of their espionage to explain themselves," Josefeen said.

"Well, the other possibility is that I'm going crazy."

"What makes you say that?"

"This isn't the first..." I stopped myself, not sure how much I should say.

"This isn't the first dream?" she asked.

"No." Time to arm all warheads. "There's something in my quarters. I'm going to need to show you. I had a... a strange encounter while under its influence."

"Under its influence?" Her hand flew to her chest. "Are you on drugs?"

"No, of course not! I will explain once we're done here. I've considered that I might be making too much out of all this. It strikes me now that I went from suspicious to dismissive rather quickly in several phases. I then engaged in some stretching to work out some of the soreness. I have been neglecting my physical regimen since arriving."

They both exchanged a glance but said nothing.

"Sir." Josefeen wet her lips. "You said there's something you need to show me?"

"Yes. Dr. Pugh, I am afraid this will have to be classified for the time being. I need to brief Lt. Abbonette on the other aspects of this episode, and we will determine if it is relevant. I'll report back here for the completion of my psycho-neurologic diagnostic once I have finished."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Commander Nizlich," I said to my wristcom. "Report to my quarters. Lieutenant, shall we?"

"Aye, sir."

The walk to my quarters was silent on my part. The big question was what Jenkins had been up to with the contents of the stash. The smaller question of why I'd messed around with unknown devices was secondary. I chalked it up to simple curiosity.

"So this naked dream woman, the succubus, you said she was *particularly voluptuous*?"

I sighed. "Yes, Lieutenant." I glanced toward her. "Somewhat larger than your own presentation. That's a purely subjective impression, you understand."

I loosened my collar while trying to consciously banish all the images of female nudity that had been in my head over the last few days: Nizlich, Kaz, and now this succubus. Of course, there was no way to think about not thinking about something, so the effort only brought them all to the forefront of my mind in all their naked glory.

We entered a carriage, which shuttled us forward along the spinal transport tube. During the trip, the lieutenant typed something on her slate.

"I'm going to have one of my robots meet us with the psi-detector."

"Lieutenant, what are the odds of this not being some crazy coincidence? It's not the first time I have been spooked by seemingly unrelated co-occurrences acting in concert. I said as much to the Countess but was dismissed."

"I don't suppose you'd care to elaborate on that," she said, leaning back against a window.

I sighed and leaned back as well.

"Karneticky proposed marriage to one of the Stavelots, a favorite of the Countess, and then apparently backed out after she got injured on safari. Then he unveiled a half-baked version of Olav, nearly resulting in a Navy-Nobility protocol incident."

"And what did the Countess have to say about all this?"

"I believe her exact words were, 'Stupidity needs no explanation,' and I would tend to agree, but then we had this arson incident. I talked to that Vargr, Faeng, on the shuttle before the incident occurred and I did not see any indication of this sort of behavior. And believe me, six months on tramp Vargr freighters has given me a very good idea of Vargr behavior. I know it is a collection of very disparate events, and coincidence is always a possibility, but something just feels off."

The carriage doors opened, and we got out, exchanging places with some crew who were heading aft.

"I realize I am something of a wild card as the sudden replacement," I said, once we were alone again. "Even for me, spelling it all out like this makes me think I am clutching at straws, but it also might be something more."

"I'll look into it," she said. "There are some other items I need to brief you on as well."

"I am sorry to have delayed our briefing. I feel if I had made different choices, this whole situation might not have occurred."

We arrived at my quarters to find Commander Nizlich waiting, and I ushered them both inside.

"Jackie, open up the Captain's Secret Stash."

The section of ceiling slowly descended to the floor, again stopping just short of the kava table, and inside the open-faced tray were the ten Naasirka psi-shields, the gray hoodie, the metal box, and the black pouch, all just as I'd left them.

"Lieutenant, I discovered this via some hints from Commander Nizlich, and the ship's computer confirmed it's Captain-Only Access. I have opened this a total of two times and interacted with one item in the stash. Commander Nizlich was admitted to my circle of trust out of necessity." I was not going to admit that I had accidentally opened the locker with her in the room while I was in another. I hoped Stefani would have my back on this one.

"I'd heard Rishard was hoarding some psi-shields," Josefeen said, "but ten? And what's this?" She opened the box, exposing the hypogun as well as the nine remaining ampules of reddish-brown liquid.

"It's some Darrian psi-enhancer," I told her. "Probably black market."

"You knew about this?" Josefeen asked Nizlich.

"Rishard mentioned psi-shields but not psi-drugs."

Josefeen took the hoodie into her hands, quickly locating the pocket battery as well as the mesh of wires running through its hood. "I'm going to guess this is another psi-shield." She dropped it and then picked up the bag.

"Careful," I warned. "I touched that and suddenly had some out-of-body experiences."

"Out-of-body experiences?"

"Either that or I was hallucinating." I sank down in a chair.

Josefeen carefully opened the pouch, peered inside, and then slowly emptied the weird little ball, about the size of an egg, onto the hoodie. As before, it shimmered like a soap bubble.

"What in Cleon's dark past is this?" she mumbled.

"I was hoping you'd know."

We all stared at it intently for a moment, and then, as if on cue, a delivery drone²²⁹ showed up. Josefeen pressed her thumb on the lid, and a little compartment opened up, revealing the psi-detector, which she took out and pointed at the ball.

"Holy mother of Cleon," she said.

"It's psionic?" Nizlich asked, nervously.

"Very," she said, tight-jawed; and after a beat, "Ma'am."

"This brings us to the next level of the briefing." I began describing the events, as clearly as I remembered them, that occurred when I touched the sphere. I told them about hearing the marines talking about me not showing up for a training session as well as witnessing Nizlich in her quarters, although I omitted the detail of her being in the shower. Then I described my encounter with the presence that I'd assumed was Lt. Jaamzon, how I interacted with it and how it seemed to go away after I gave it leave, all of which preceded her death, as though she wanted permission to die.

Josefeen bit her lip. "All of this you're describing could be... psionically induced brain farts."

"I considered that, but then I started hearing people think."

"Hearing people think?"

"That's sort of what it felt like, yes."

"Did you hear me think?" Nizlich asked.

"Yesterday's morning briefing," I said after a brief pause. "You were wondering what was wrong with me... why I suddenly seemed awkward."

Nizlich shrugged. "I noticed that you seemed a little distracted, but... vell... you were still getting

229 There are presumably lots of different delivery bots in service. *Robots and Drones*, Vol 1 (2021) (<https://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/381139/Robots-Vol1?cPath=5390>) has one as does *101 Robots* (1986) (https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/101_Robots).

acclimatized, and I was worried you might have eaten a bad batch of crew stew.”

“Aren’t they all bad?” Abbonette asked. “Captain, with all due respect, people read each others’ body language all the time. It’s not telepathy. Can you name anything that proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that you were actually hearing people think?” Standing slightly behind Nizlich, Abbonette shook her head *no* as she asked this, her eyes fixed upon mine like lasers even as she continued shaking her head, not stopping as she waited for my answer.

I frowned, remembering Mop & Broom as well as the image of Kaz’s mother before I’d ever met her, but Josefeen’s signal was hard to miss. When someone is asking something but shaking their head, there might be something that should not be admitted.

“I suppose not,” I finally replied.

She stopped shaking her head and seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. Eventually she’d clue me in at the intelligence briefing, *if* it suited her purposes.

“Sir,” she said, “with all due respect, I think this thing may be the cause of the nightmares you’ve been having.”

“So you *don’t* think a succubus is loose on the ship?”

“Succubus?” Nizlich grimaced.

“If there is one, we’ll find her — or him — but in the meantime, sir, I’m going to have to recommend a psionic detox.”

“A psionic detox?”

“I’ll schedule it for you, sir. It’ll be dirtside. And it will probably take some time. We can tell the crew you’re getting some R&R.”

“We are in lockdown, Lieutenant. Either I have to record my eulogy for the ceremony and deliver it to the Admiral’s PR staff with apologies, or we are going to let me go down there in person while you two continue to search the ship. What portion of the crew was released before I set the lockdown?”

“Over half the crew are already down there and almost all of the marines,” Nizlich said.

“Rescind the lockdown, sir,” Josefeen said. “Assuming there is a succubus, we stand a better chance of catching them if they don’t know they’re being hunted.”

“You’re literally holding a psi-detector,” Nizlich said. “Why not just line everyvun up...”

“It’s not that easy. In order for the detector to work, the psion’s powers have to be actively engaged.”

“Yet you could detect this?” Nizlich pointed at the little psionic ball.

“It appears to be actively engaged.”

Nizlich took a step back, and Josefeen put down the scanner.

“So,” I said, watching as Josefeen opened the ball’s now empty pouch and once again peered inside, “apparently we have a psionically active device secured in a secret compartment of a Navy Captain’s quarters, my quarters to be specific.” She turned the pouch upside-down, carefully placing it over the ball. “And an ex-captain,” I continued, “who was recalled and chose *not* to share these materials with his trusted crew.”

“I knew Rishard had an interest in psionics,” Nizlich said, “but this is a bit much.”

“Apparently, he didn’t trust us.” Josefeen pointed the detector at the pouch. “But until I can quiz him directly... oh, look at that. Either the pouch is a psi-shield or the damn thing just switched itself off.”

Nizlich and I watched as she experimented with the psionic ball, its pouch, and the psi-detector, rolling the ball back out of its pouch, then putting it back in, then taking it out again and turning the pouch inside out, and then putting it back in. It turned out that the pouch was indeed a psi-shield, but it was unidirectional.

“I’m taking this,” she finally said. “I don’t want it in your quarters. I don’t even want it on this ship. I’m turning it over to IBIS.²³⁰ Do you have any objection, Captain?”

“No objections on my end. I got started with an evaluation with Dr. Pugh. Do you think I am safe enough to head to the surface for this event?”

“It’s up to you, sir, but if you do go, I’d like to tag along to keep an eye on you myself, if you don’t mind.”

That would make it difficult for me to interface with Kaz, at least to the degree to which I’d recently grown accustomed.

²³⁰ IBIS, the Imperial Bureau of Internal Security, was previously mentioned in Chapter 13.

Chapter 34

Psionics 101

“Commander Nizlich, dismiss the lockdown and convey my compliments to the crew on their fine performance during an unscheduled drill.”

“Aye aye, sir.” Taking that as permission to leave, she made her exit, leaving me alone with Josefeen. *Lt. Abbonette*, I mentally corrected myself. Why I’d started calling her Josefeen in my head, I wasn’t sure. As I’d watched her experiment with the weird little ball and the psi-detector, I considered there had been a lot of ways I could have handled this better. Part of me didn’t really want her to take it, but a larger part of me did. Yes, there was much there I might have learned, but at what cost?

“So what’s your decision?” she asked, her posture loose but her eyes serious.

“Affirmative. Dress uniform, please, and we will meet at the fighter pod in an hour to take my Kinnuki down to the ceremony. I know it’s a little early, but never take an official event timetable as given. NPR²³¹ will want some video of all the brass.”

“Aye aye, sir.” She left, taking the psi-drugs, the psi-detector, and the psi-ball with her, her little courier robot helping her carry all the psionic loot. It was a bit of a relief, watching all that stuff go away, although I was still curious why it had been in my quarters in the first place. Why had Jenkins kept this stuff, why did he leave it here, and why hadn’t he told anyone? Given the fact that the black pouch was a psi-shield, he might have been able to get it through customs. Likewise, the psi-drugs could have been disguised in any number of ways. In short, he could have just taken most of this stuff with him, so either he thought he’d be coming back, and fairly soon, or there was more to this story than I was being told.

The image of Josefeen shaking her head no, as though commanding me to lie, flashed to mind. She knew more than she was letting on, and I had a feeling our ride together to the surface was going to be very interesting.

Josefeen sat next to me during the descent back into Jewell’s atmosphere. Of course, burning in like a meteor was also a viable option, but I’d already tested the heat shield on the way up, and I didn’t figure it prudent to push my luck, especially with my Intelligence Pod liaison watching my every move.

While I’d been rehearsing my speech, I kept thinking about her shaking her head just outside of the Commander’s eyeshot, essentially telling me not to continue talking so much about being a psion. I did as she’d bid and then opted not to question her on it the moment we were alone.

So then it bothered me.

Meanwhile, she was having the Kinnuki checked over by a surveillance specialist, or so Nizlich had told me. The Commander wanted to come to the surface with us — like myself and Jaamzon, she too had been a fighter jock — but I was already on the schedule; there was no need for her to speak as well, and I needed someone to stay on the ship, someone I could trust in case of an emergency. After all, it would be so like the Zhos to attack while our pants were down around our ankles.

Of course, Jaamzon’s service could have just as easily been held on the ship, but Karneticky and Masa the latter of whom I had yet to meet in person, wanted a big splash. They wanted to invite the public to take a look at Jaamzon’s sacrifice and remember that even in peacetime there is war.

“Damn straight,” Josefeen said.

“What?”

“Uh... you fly damn straight.” She cleared her throat. “I was going to ask why you don’t zigzag a little more. You know, pull some maneuvers like they do in those Kinnuki commercials, but then I remembered one doesn’t zigzag on the way to a memorial service unless you’re drunk or really hate whoever died.”

She tugged at the collar of her full dress uniform.

“Yes,” I said, looking at her fingernails. They were long and shaded purple. I wondered how she managed to keep them intact, and as she turned

231 Naval Public Relations.

towards me halfway, I couldn't help but notice the movement of her body under her uniform. "Usually I ask for a wider lane for maneuvering and evasive action, as well as high speed runs. But, as you say, sober straight flying on the way to a funeral."

A thought struck me, and I called up the service program to check if there would be a missing man overflight. Masa was pretty good. Not only was there a double squadron pass, but he had tapped my fighter crews for the mission.

I sat back and regarded my Intelligence officer as she stared at me, unblinking.

"Not a lot of call for your full dress?" I asked.

"Why do you say that?"

"Standard issue dress uniforms are designed to be slightly uncomfortable. A reminder, if you will, of the gravity of wearing them. Wear them often enough, and you will opt for custom tailoring, along with a choice of fabric that looks identical to standard issue, but so much more comfortable to wear. That neck pull you did is a dead giveaway."

I looked over at her and grinned.

"You think the admirals put up with uncomfortable uniforms all the time? Back when I was a staff officer, the admiral I was assisting had the most nu-tech setup in his uniform, wicking and filtering fabrics, nanoscale temperature exchange, and there was a rumor that the inner layer was leather made from his cloned skin. I was pretty sure that was a story to put the fear in the flag ensigns, but I was never sure."

"At least he was comfortable in his own skin," she said.

I chuckled. "True enough. Myself, I will settle for something a little lower tech, but I do not stint on comfort. Feel in here if you want. The neck is low friction shimmersilk."

I leaned my head to the side, exposing my neck. I was curious if she would take the bait and wondered what I would do if she did. After all, I was giving her the opportunity to touch me, upping the stakes in the flirting game. Perhaps my recent success with Kaz emboldened me. After all, it was safe here, away from prying eyes.

"Shimmersilk, huh?" She gave me a sidelong glance, then, smiling, leaned over, touching my collar. "Oh, this is nice. Very nice." She leaned in further, somehow sliding herself into my lap

while hitting the autopilot. "I'm sorry if I'm being too forward," she said very calmly as she unsnapped her collar and the topmost button of her uniform, "but do you really think I'm going to take it from a man that I don't know how to dress? I've got shimmersilk ultrasheers on right now. Wanna see?"

Ultrasheers? Weren't those pantyhose?

She nodded, undoing the next two buttons and exposing some cleavage. "And they're crotchless. Or is that too much information?"

I raised both hands.

"I surrender. I should have known someone with your immaculate sense of style would be on top of things. I ask forgiveness for my poor, doltish ways. I am after all, merely a captain in the Navy." I held her eye for a beat. "And yes, too much information. It's me giving this eulogy, not you."

"We don't have time, anyway," she said, gripping my collar in both hands. "After the ceremony, you can take me to Silver City or maybe that corpse volcano you flew over.²³² Then we can go get some barbecue. But before any of that can happen, I'm going to need you to do something. It's important you follow my instructions, if you want to serve the Emperor as a captain in the Imperial Navy and not someone who's being institutionalized for having psychotic hallucinations, which is something I can make happen. Not that I want to, of course. I want to work with you. I very much want for the two of us to become a team. But right now we have a big problem. You know what that problem is, don't you?"

Just one problem? Let's see. "I exposed myself to an unknown, active psionic device? Admiral Karneticky is behaving erratically and endangering an alliance with the Stavelots? Someone might be planning an uprising to undermine the local vargr population? I should have kept Nizlich out of the loop? I set myself up with a child of the Great Impregnator? These are just a few of my current problems."

"You poor dear."

"Seriously, after everything that's happened to me since I've arrived, maybe I should be institutionalized. But yes, I would prefer to

²³² See page 164.

remain a captain if that's still an option. Let me add, however, that threats like that are unnecessary, and I think a little beneath you."

"I didn't want you to freak out and hit me."

"I reserve the right to, though when it happens, it'll be in a sparring ring, not because I am freaking out, although I reserve the right to do that too." I took a deep breath. "Great Cleon, you're not going to tell me I had a personality overlay, are you?"

She grinned, still perched on my lap but now straddling me. "Sir, why do you think there were psionic toys in your overhead bin? Did you put them there? No." She shook her head. "Did the prior captain leave them there? That would be awfully forgetful of him, wouldn't it? And what was that bubble thing? By the way, it's called a psi orb. In fact, I'm pretty sure you've seen one before. Haven't you?"

"Uhhhhh..." The memory hit me like a brick to the skull. "*No, Augie! No!*" Aunt Arguaski had yelled, and I cried and cried, not understanding what I'd done wrong. Normally, whenever I'd been yelled at, it was in that stern commanding voice parents reserve for misbehaving children, but this was different. It must have been the first time I'd heard an adult freak out.

Which meant she hadn't planned for me to find it. She was just being untidy. Well, she lived alone, so that was her right. But with small children around, that could have consequences.

"I never really understood what my aunt was trying to get through to me," I said. *How long did Naval Intel know about this? Was it in some file they had on me?* "I am not trying to be difficult here," I said, suddenly feeling rather naked. "Exposure to that thing, the psi orb, unlocked some hidden, possibly suppressed memories."

*Who do you want to be when you grow up? The warrior or the wizard?*²³³

I remembered choosing the warrior over the wizard, and how my great aunt seemed disappointed.

"You don't have to choose," Josefeen said. "You can be both. Just like Olav."

I blinked, for a moment too stunned to respond.

"Okay, I am now officially freaked out. What do you mean, *just like Olav?*"

I knew historically that psions had been more open in Olav's time. He predated the Psionics Suppressions²³⁴ by almost two centuries, but there was no evidence he *was* a psion.

"Except for his ability to dodge enemy fleets with such ease," Josefeen said, leaning into me in a way reminiscent of the dream woman. Her perfume was subtle but so arousing I couldn't help but wonder if it was laced with synthetic sex pheromones.

"Um, I notice you are trying to get physically closer to me."

"Your powers of observation do you credit," she replied, her breasts now mere centimeters from the tip of my nose. "I could hear what you've been thinking about these, by the way. I seem to remember the word *bathykolpian* crossing your mind?²³⁵ If I may, sir, I'd like to take this opportunity to compliment you on your extensive vocabulary."

"Thanks." *Holy Mother of Cleon. She was a psion!*

"Not meaning to break the mood," she said, "but I need to ask you a very important question, and it's important that you answer honestly. How long was it between the time you *discovered* the orb and the time you *told* me about it?"

It had been about two days, but admitting it would pretty squarely put me in violation of Navy Regulations, and her mentioning hearing me think as well as demonstrating it multiple times made me suddenly drop into command mode. After all, what if she were a Zhodani agent?

"Enough," I put my hands against her stomach. "Hands off, Lieutenant. This is not how we are going to be doing things." I pushed, but as she got up, cooperating, or so I thought, she leaned forward again, holding the back of my chair for leverage to lift herself off me, and then I felt it, a sharp pain in my neck, like I'd been stuck with a needle. She had the polymer hypogun in hand as she pulled herself away, the same one that had been in my so-called secret stash.

"I lied, Captain," she said as a wave of disorientation hit me. "I'm not wearing shimmersilk, and I don't go crotchless unless

²³⁴ https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Psionics_Suppressions

²³⁵ See page 24.

²³³ See page 106.

there's a damn good reason, and you aren't. But two days, sir?" *«You know that's unacceptable.»*

The disorientation slowly subsided, and that last sentence she didn't say out loud. She thought it.

«That's right. And no, I'm not a Zhodani Agent. Your psionics were activated for a reason. We've been testing you for a reason. And, yes, I'm the succubus, but I was under orders, because you were taking too long to come to me. You have not proven yourself trustworthy, sir. And we need you to be, because we need you for a mission.»

Cragshabullen! There were extenuating circumstances, and both she and I knew it, but she also had me on the letter of the regs.

"I knew I shouldn't have put off Intel," I muttered. "You are all so twitchy. And I was in Medical the next day. If it was a clean job, they would have picked up the activation and reported it."

«They don't have a psi-detector. And you didn't tell them the whole story, did you?»

She had me, but as I looked at her, I could sense the pique she felt at my rejection. She was not as sexually persuasive as she'd hoped. What did she juice me up with? Darrian psi-booster, no doubt.

«Just for the record, Captain, you never had a chance with me. And you never will.»

It's not like she wasn't trying to give that impression.

«I was just using your weaknesses against you to show how easy it is to prey upon the unwary. For your edification, sir.»

A lie. I was almost certain of it. It was exceedingly weird hearing someone speaking with their mind, prevaricating excuses even inside their own thoughts. Her entire approach had been entirely too ham-handed. No doubt, she was simply unhappy her scheme required this level of intervention. Hell hath no fury.

«The only thing making me angry is that garbage coming out of your brain.»

«Maybe you're just an angry person who's full of her own garbage.»

«You want to see me angry?»

«No, not really.» To be fair, I considered playing her game. Briefly.

"I would blame Karneticky," I said as the downport came into view, its landing platforms caressed by the sun's dying rays. "But for all I know, he's just acting under orders too. Are you responsible for the hold on the fusion barbettes as well?"

It was petty of me, but no one liked being manipulated, and this stank deeply of a long con.

«It was, and you fell for it.»

Smiling, she reached for my leg, but I swatted her hand away. I'd had enough of this person touching me, and I didn't particularly care what she thought of it.

«Ooh, you're pissy when you get angry.»

Another wave of disorientation hit me as we flew over what appeared to be a stadium, tight sections of seats visible beneath its transpex dome. A thin conduit connected it to the starport.

«Psi-booster can cause dizziness. It'll take a little while to adjust.»

I closed my eyes and took a moment.

"Sorry about being ornery," she said, "but I don't particularly like your sort of male."

"What sort is that?"

"The sort that acts like he can have any woman he wants. Yes, you can always bed a woman like Cassiopeia Remshaw, but she's given herself to the eternal chase."

"The eternal chase?"

"Women like her want someone who either doesn't exist or isn't available, and even when they find a good man, they can't bring themselves to trust him because as far as they're concerned, and they're right about this, very few men can be trusted."

"Well, don't blame the cat for jumping if you're dangling the snack. And, oh boy, were you dangling. But now I see it was all for my edification." I smiled.

"Oh, you are so going to get it."

"No, apparently I'm never going to get it, which, by the way, is as it must be, for you are in my chain of command, however tentatively, and so there was never any chance I would let that happen."

"I am relieved, sir, that we are of the same mind. You appear to be past the disorientation. You can open your eyes anytime."

I opened them. We were at rest in a parking bay, similar to the one I'd entered on my way to see the Yard Commander.

How long had we been sitting here? And would I run into the Admiral again and scare him half to death?

«*He's been understandably nervous.*» Josefeen hit the pressure release, and the Kinnuki's doors opened. «*Do you feel steady enough to walk?*»

I got out. The cement felt spongy, or maybe it was my legs, and off in the distance, I could hear what sounded like a thousand little whispers. She reached inside the Kinnuki and grabbed my valise as well as a small case with the Imperial Starburst prominently emblazoned on one side. It was a diplomatic pouch, basically something it was assumed we would be handing to the Countess or some member of the Imperial bureaucracy on Jewell.

«*Admiral Karneticky had a falling out with the Stavelots,*» she thought as we approached a customs checkpoint.

«*I'd heard something about an aargvark incident.*» Kaz had told me about how Karneticky and Amika had first postponed and then canceled their wedding.²³⁶

«*Just about the whole planet knows, at least those who matter, but the real heart of the story is that the admiral froze.*»

“Froze?”

The customs clerk looked at me, his eyebrows squished together.

“It's cold,” I explained. It was, mildly.

He took my visitor authorization card, ran it through a card reader, and handed it back. Meanwhile, my valise went through a scanner, but her diplomatic pouch was spared. She simply put it on a little table to the left of the full body scanner, then picked it up once she was on the other side, the guards only stopping her to scan a little chip embedded at the starburst's center.

«*He froze,*» she picked up the story as we walked toward an escalator. «*When the aargvark struck, Karneticky was right there with a gun, but he froze, and so Amika shielded the Countess with her own body. That's how she got so messed up. And that's the story they're all whispering,*

and it's essentially the truth, as far as I've been able to determine.»

That explained so much. As we stepped on the escalator, my mind swirled with the arguments and implications this tragedy had spawned. Karenticky had failed, publicly, in front of his patron and fiancée. Frozen when he had been expected to act, to protect, and he let the consequences fall on an innocent, even worse, his partner. And then he abandoned her.

If he had any mettle, he'd have accepted the dishonor and retired, but instead he was clinging to his rank. He had been recently promoted after all. Thanks to Jewell's tight media controls, what had happened was not yet generally known, and the Admiral apparently hoped to keep it that way. He wanted to move past this episode, to sweep it under the rug and pretend it never happened. Above all else, he didn't want it to be the thing for which he'd be remembered.

The escalator was wide enough that two people could move along side-by-side, but one side, the right, was apparently reserved as a passing lane, so people who were in a hurry could walk past those who weren't. Since neither Josefeen nor I were familiar with where to go, we stood to the left and paid attention to the signs, Josefeen consulting her wristcom, even though there was no wayfinder to lead the way. With her thus distracted, I tried thinking intentionally, reaching for that window in the back of my mind and turning my focus on her, trying to reach out and explore her mind as she had explored mine. At worst, I'd get snagged by a psi shield, and at best, some little nugget would be revealed. It was time to stop reacting and start acting. So I reached out, the psionic tentacle now extending from my mind into hers like an extra appendage which I never even knew I had.

«*He could become as powerful a psion as was Olav.*»

The words came to me in an unfamiliar voice, one difficult to categorize as either male or female, and there was no image attached to it.

“This way,” she said, nudging my shoulder. “We have to get on the one to the stadium.”

We'd entered some sort of escalator interchange, and I followed her footsteps, changing lanes until we were presumably going in the right direction. All the while, I could feel

²³⁶ See page 138.

my synapses buzzing, scarcely able to believe that whatever I had just done had apparently worked.

As powerful a psion as Olav?

The Psionics Suppressions²³⁷ had apparently created some blind spots in Imperial history, and Olav being a psion must have been one of these. I thought back to my two encounters with enemy psions during the war and remembered the feeling of terror ratcheting up as I threw resources at an enemy I couldn't fully counter or even understand. And now I had this power as well as a handler who was loose in its use and manipulative to boot. This was going to be interesting.

«You're going to need to be trained.» She was looking at me out of the corner of her eye.

“What is it you need me to do?”

«The Zhos don't know you're a psion, so they're going to use one against you to find out what we know and get a heads up on where the Jaqueline is going next. Odds are, they'll try to set up another ambush. Someone was caught on surveillance hanging around your hotel room last night, no doubt expecting you to show up. She'll likely try again, and when she does, you're going to be ready for her, and you're going to get into her head, and eventually, whether it's through this operative, her handler, or someone else, we're going to find out where they're hiding the Vermillion Stance.»

I blinked.

«This had better be some amazing training you have cooked up if you want me to engage Zho agents. Even the Navy gave me a few years to make sure I knew how to fly a fighter. I just had a couple of days to get used to the idea, and I am still freaked out.»

«I didn't know Plankwells got freaked out.»

«Well, this one does.»

I noticed I'd started mind-speaking, or whatever it was called. It was just like thinking out words as if one were saying them. But what was the difference between that and just thinking? *«What's the difference between you hearing me think **at you** versus just hearing me think?»*

«People think in different ways, mostly ideas and images, but sometimes smells, tastes, and

sounds, but the subset of sounds we call words is almost always present. The human brain is a language using machine.»

«So you can hear everything I think? Don't think I haven't noticed you listening to my thoughts. I can't exactly hear you except... not hear... I need a new vocabulary for this.»

«Time for Lesson #1. Can you sense your psionic aperture?»

«Aperture? The window?» I nodded.

«Close it.»

I didn't know how.

«Just do it.»

I imagined reaching my hand out. There was nothing there to close, but I could draw an imaginary curtain over it, and as I did, our connection suddenly snapped. I could feel it, a little *pop* in the back of the mind, barely perceptible, but the energy between us immediately dissipated.

She remained facing the long windows to the right, still looking at me out of the corner of her eye as the escalator belt ushered us forward. Beyond the transpex windows flanking the corridor on either side, Heron bathed in a muted, red glow. The haze was so thick, it veiled the skyscrapers, giving them an almost ghostlike quality. Meanwhile, a tall man — he wore a jacket with a string of letters on the back spelling nothing — jogged by us, using the passing lane. He must have been late for work.

“That's your natural shield,” Josefeen said. *“Now open it again.”*

I reached out with my imaginary hand and, grasping the idea of the curtain over the window, I yanked it forcefully aside.

«Do you read me?» Her voice reverberated off the inner walls of skull.

I slowly nodded as the coming and going belts turned and split in opposite directions. We were now in yet another corridor, but this one had a bend to it, and there were intersecting corridors every so often on the left: *A-1-A-5*, then *A-6-A-10*.

“We're looking for Section H-1,” Josefeen said. *«Now for Lesson #2. See if you can sense me coming in.»*

The bend in the corridor straightened out, half my attention on where we were in the here and now and the other half focused on the open

²³⁷ https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Psionics_Suppressions

window in the back my mind. Then, as we passed B-1-B-5, I felt her finger in the book of my memories, leafing back to my younger self, the version of me she'd discovered during my nap.

«Who's that?»

I reached for the *curtain* but then paused, focusing instead on her *finger* or whatever it was that seemed to be able to leaf through my mind. It was like a tentacle more than a finger, a tentacle of psychic energy, and as I traced it back to the aperture in the back of my mind, my eyes found hers. We must have looked rather odd, two people staring intently at one another on an escalator.

«People will think we're in love.» She smiled. «By the way, sir, if you don't mind me thinking the obvious, that girl Vanista was a Class-A User. My way or the highway, type. I respect it. I may even be it. But one also needs to know when one is being unreasonable. You know what I'm saying?»

«You and others may think whatever you wish. Your opinions on my past and motivations you may keep to yourself, Lieutenant.»

«Ooh, I apparently touched a sore spot.»

I curled imaginary fingers around her psychic tentacle and squeezed, pulling slightly. I wasn't trying to use all my strength, but I wanted to see how she would react. Lessons could go both ways, after all.

«You want to hurt me because she hurt you?»

«I want to see if this hurts because I am being tapped for a mission to infiltrate someone else's trained head. It's not all about you, Lieutenant. It's about seeing the limits of what I have to work with. What are my weapons? What can I do with them? Also, thanks for confirming this hurts.» I released my grip and closed the curtain, her psychic tentacle immediately dissipating.

“That's enough for now,” I said. “The Navy is under scrutiny here.”

“I would normally say ‘Aye aye, sir,’ but this is part of your training.”

My training? For a mission against Zhodani spies?

I drew open the curtain.

«Can you hear me?» Her psychic voice penetrated my mind. «Sir, do you read me?»

«Make up your mind Lieutenant, is it hear or read?»

«Technically, sir, it's read. Hearing is for ears; reading is for minds. But I personally prefer hear, as that is what it feels like.»

«Use the correct language, so I learn this correctly.»

I knew I was being unpleasant, but if Abbonette thought I was going to knuckle under to her demands, well, that wasn't very intelligent, and Intelligence was supposed to be her department.

There were protocols for a junior officer exercising command authority over seniors. This was the Navy, after all. There were protocols for everything, and the precedents for these protocols were written in the unlikely scenarios that occur when real, bloody, life is happening and when everything is in the pot and extraordinary individuals rise to the occasion — last man standing on the bridge of a battle group directing weapons fire because they have the only targeting link, for example, and that was a gunner's mate relaying to a commodore.

Suffice it to say, I had not seen any of these protocols being produced, just some blackmail and unwelcome physical manipulations. Intelligence was good, however, at manufacturing authorization trails, so what she failed to do properly she could later falsify. So I would cooperate, but I didn't have to make it easy.

«Sir, there's a lot for you to learn, so it's important that you keep the aperture open, especially while the psi-enhancer is in effect. And please accept my apologies, sir, for my assertiveness. I overreacted. Psi-enhancers can have psychological side effects, basically contributing to that sort of thing in Type-A folks like us. It's a good thing we're not a couple, or we'd probably kill each other.»

«Don't try to distract me with tempting alternatives.»

I conjured a series of mental images of some of the battle deaths I'd seen, except with her face pasted in. The time we spaced some Zho commandos seemed particularly appropriate. It must have worked, because she wrinkled her nose and swallowed hard.

«Would this be an effective tactic to the unsuspecting?» I couldn't quite suppress a grin.

«It would only inform other telepaths they've been detected, which is not the goal. I need to

teach you to detect them and then control what you give them, but before I can do that, we need to form a durable psychic link.»

Durable psychic link. I could feel my suspicions rising again. If I let her into my head in a durable way, how would I get her out again? But with so much at stake, what choice did I have?

«Fine. I am in your care Lieutenant. Try and make it so I have a shot at getting out the other side of this without a future of sitting and drooling in a cup if you please. How do we form a durable psychic link?»

«We need to psychically embrace. In short, you need to welcome me into your mind.»

Her psychic tentacle once more ventured through the window.

«Imagine kissing me, however difficult that may be.»

«Does all your psychic advice need to be sex-related, or is that just what you default to?»

«Like the psi-enhancer, it's a shortcut.»

«Fine. Even though I feel like you are sticking your hand up my ass to puppet me around.» I let her have that image as well. *«I'll do my best.»*

I then conjured the memory of a pleasant kiss with Vanista and transferred that to the psychic presence of Abbonette. But something wasn't working. I tried a more workable image of attaching a fuel hose to my fighter. Just because she had sex on the brain didn't mean I had to follow suit. After all, I loved flying. And my career was arguably the most stable of my relationships.

«I said a kiss! Don't you dare try sticking your thing into...» "H-1 to H-5," she almost shouted, pointing with one hand while dragging me off the escalator with the other. We managed to get off the belt without stumbling, and soon we were on a smaller conveyor, which ran perpendicular to the first and descended down a long tube with landings every dozen meters or so: *Section H-5*, then *Section H-4*, then *Section H-3*.

«We are going to try this again.» She tapped my shoulder. *«And no tongue or hose or anything else, or I'll smack your naughty brain into next week!»*

A Brief Note on Psionics in Traveller:

Anyone who has played Traveller for any length of time should be able to tell that I'm going off the reservation in this latest chapter in terms of the way psionics is usually handled. Normally, in Traveller, it's a lot harder for two telepaths to communicate telepathically. In order to have a telepathic conversation, such as Gus and Josefeen are doing, they'd end up burning through their psionic strength points in very little time. Plus, the conversation would likely be garbled, as the accuracy would be far from perfect. I'm dispensing with all that via the use of this mysterious Darrian Psi Enhancer I introduced. Likewise, there's no such thing in Traveller as a Psi Orb. I made it up because I wanted to enhance the player's sense of wonder, which I feel is a vital component of science fiction.

Chapter 35

Caduceus

«Look, this might be easy for you,» I thought the words in my head, «but regardless of what you think you know about me, I am not an easy guy.»

«Define easy,» Josefeen silently shot back.

I wondered what the psychic image of nonplussed looked like from the other side. No way was I falling into that trap. «How many psions have you trained this way?»

«I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you.»

The escalator flattened out and finally deposited us at a large portal with a sign that said *Section H-1* in both Anglic and Vilani. Fortunately, I knew which was which, or I might have been confused, as the Vilani *H* looked like the Anglic *I*, whereas their *I* looked like an *L*, their *L* looked like a *Z*, and their *Z* looked like a coathanger. A security officer checked our visitor authorizations and let us pass, and I could soon see why. These were the front row seats. Fortunately, the air was breathable, as the entire stadium was capped by a huge transpex dome, and there was still enough natural light streaming down that the huge lamps positioned along its rim had not yet been switched on.

“Captain Plankwell,” someone called. “This way, sir.”

A master-at-arms had recognized me, and we were ushered into yet another corridor around the side of the stage.

“Second door on the left, sir. The admiral is waiting for you.”

Lt. Abbonette pushed me up against the side of the corridor as soon as we were alone again.

«Easy? You're calling me some cheap piece of low-life filth like I'm doing all this for kicks? What makes you think I even have a choice?»

“Lieut...”

Then she kissed me with a raw urgency that shot straight to my loins.

«Open wide.»

I tried to cooperate, even going so far as to kiss her back, this time picturing myself as a child kissing my Great Aunt, but Aunt Arguaski never kissed me like this. My mental image of her

smiling face transformed into the succubus, and this time I could clearly see it was Josefeen.

«I'm a woman, Gus. What do you think is going on in my heart? Don't even bother to answer that. I might as well be asking a blind man to describe the sunset.»

«Look, we are off on the wrong foot in so many ways. I will try and be mindful of what you are trying to do. But I don't trust you, and relationships built on wet sand are bound to wash away at the first tide.»

«We're out of time. Stop pretending I'm someone else! Just look inside of me, and let me look inside of you. It's that easy.»

She was a beautiful woman, I had to admit, but I'd never before been so relentlessly pursued. Indeed, I'd never really been pursued at all, and as she kissed me again, I focused on kissing her back, wondering if psionics had gotten involved with the pleasure cults I had heard about in school and if that was the real reason they were forced out of the public eye. Were the Zhodani a bunch of hedonists? It had never really occurred to me. It was a little humbling, realizing that there was this vast other way of being that I had never even imagined.

I reached for where I thought the curtain might be hiding in order to draw it around Abbonette's psychic appendage, wondering if that would help with the whole process, but she coiled her psychic snake around mine until the two became one. All the while we were locked in a kiss, a real kiss, not just in our minds but with actual lips. And suddenly I could see inside of her, beyond her surface thoughts, which projected as the sound of speech consciously imagined. «Open wide!» Down below, I could peer into another part of her mind, and even feel what she felt.

I could see myself talking to her at the Intel briefing, telling her “I will see about making a house call in the near future.”²³⁸ For your sake, the sooner the better. Later, she got a notification from some authority figure: “He found the orb.”

“That didn't take long.”

Then she was listening to some audio feed. It was my own voice: “Something happened to me last night that I am not sure how to explain.” I'd been speaking to Dr. Willin. Intel had sickbay

²³⁸ See page 83.

under surveillance. "I had some extraordinary... uh, dreams, I guess you could call them."²³⁹

Then I went down to the surface. *He's hiding it. He's going to fail. Oh, well. Another one bites the dust.*

She read the apology I'd written, telling her I'd need to reschedule the visit to the Intel Pod due to admiral override. She dictated a quick response: "Admiral override? Sounds like work. Take your time and don't worry about Intel. I'll be here whenever you're ready. And remember to get some R&R while you're down the well. I hear it's good for the soul."²⁴⁰

But she wasn't as nonchalant about it as she'd pretended to be.

"Requesting permission to go down there and see if this can be salvaged."

"Permission denied."

The whole point of the test, after all, was to see if I could be trusted. If I didn't come to them of my own volition, then the answer was clearly no.

"Can we at least keep an eye on him?"

They tapped my communications and learned where I was meeting Kaz, and they even tapped her phone, listening in when her mother called.²⁴¹

"Be careful. Navy Captains can't be trusted. Where are you?"

"We're at the Starwinds."

"The hotel?"

"The ISC."

"Oh, that membership place."

"Yes, the membership place."

"And he's there with you right now?"

"Yes, he's right here."

"Doing what?"

"We're eating fungus."

"Fungus?"

"Rhylanori fungus."

Later, she got backdoor access to the main computer at my hotel to see when I'd show up and spotted a woman hanging around my room through one of their security cameras.

Who are you?

She sent a pair of agents down to snatch her, but by the time they showed up, she was gone.

"Pass the image to IBIS and the HPSS as a person of interest."

I could feel her irritation. I was already asleep, of course, but she didn't know that, and so she worried. She wondered if maybe the Zhos had tracked me to Grand Central Towers, so she sent one of the agents there, and he reported me leaving shortly after sunrise.

"He spent the night with Miss Remshaw," she informed her supervisor. "I asked him to come in for a full briefing, and what does he do? He goes down to the surface and immediately starts chasing tail."

"Well, you did tell him to get some R&R."

"He's probably using his psi on that poor woman."

"That poor woman is a predator in her own right. Don't fear for her. Fear for him."

So he likes predators, huh? Okay. I'm going to file that away.

Once I'd come back to the ship and settled down for a nap, she'd taken the opportunity to rifle through my mind. Where was my heart? She wanted to know. Was I some degenerate case like Captain James²⁴², or was there some part of me that was salvageable?

Please don't be some broken piece of woman-hating garbage.

She delved into my subconscious, finding Vanista ensconced like a princess in some impenetrable tower even after she asked me to leave the Navy on the eve of war. Of course, I couldn't break my oath of service, but she insisted there was wiggle room. Her family could pull strings. They could get me assigned to shore duty at Mora until my term ran out, and then I could move into the merchant fleets after the war or stay in the Navy if that was my decision.

"There will be no disgrace," she'd insisted, but I knew better than that. Everyone I served with would look at me differently. My reputation would follow suit. Staying in the Navy would not have been an option, not if I ever wanted to make captain.

"No," I'd told Vanista, shaking my head.

"I don't want to be a Navy widow." She was on the verge of tears. She'd had a long separation from a prior boyfriend that ended with him

²³⁹ See page 112.

²⁴⁰ See page 130.

²⁴¹ See page 148.

²⁴² See page 149.

cheating. She could do weeks apart, months even, but not a year.

"We can start a family, Gus. We can go to Mora, have a baby, and wait out the war."

"No." I shook my head. "I am not dodging my duty."

Josefeen was enthralled. Now able to finally see the irreconcilability of our conflict as well as imagine the thunderous ticking of Vanista's biological clock, she forgot all about the one built into my gravbed.

<Beep> <Beep> <Beep> The alarm jolted us both awake. She knew she'd been caught. *Just a dream, sweetheart. Nothing worth remembering, much less mentioning.*

But I had gone straight to Dr. Willin who turned me over to Dr. Pugh.

"Captain to Lt. Abbonette. Report to Pugh's office, urgent."²⁴³

Cleon's *Crap!* "On my way."

In the spinal transport tube, she asked me about the dream woman, the succubus. "You said she was *particularly voluptuous?*"

"Yes, Lieutenant. Somewhat larger than your own presentation. That's a purely subjective impression, you understand."²⁴⁴

She'd smiled inside. Whereas another woman might have taken it as sexual harassment, she for some reason felt validated as well as mildly amused. But then I surprised her.

"I am sorry to have delayed our briefing. I feel if I had made different choices, this whole situation might not have occurred."

You have no idea, Captain. You have no idea.

Of course, it was unusual for a Captain to apologize to a Lieutenant, but I'd so hit the nail on its head that she couldn't believe I'd uttered those words, and so she remained quiet, not knowing how to reply. She was, in effect, flabbergasted, but in a good way. It was essentially the opposite of what she'd expected from me. And so when I showed her and Nizlich the now not-so-secret stash and told them I was experiencing telepathic episodes, she stopped me cold.

«I decided I had to save you. So I broke cover.»

²⁴³ See page 203.

²⁴⁴ See page 206.

I drew back from the kiss, but the psychic bond stayed in place. All my feelings of mistrust, the paranoia, the fear of being marked, were fading or at least being shunted aside in favor of the truth of what I'd just witnessed. My eyes searched Josefeen's, and I marveled at their depths.

"I take back everything I thought about the effectiveness of this training, Lieutenant."

The feeling of clarity was intoxicating. I could see how she used her talents through her own memories. There were certain areas she'd closed, areas where I wanted to know more, but I didn't press. There was no need, as what she'd given me was enough.

«Thank you for not giving up.»

She nodded. *«We have to be careful. Durable psychic bonds are not without risk, so this will only be for a little while, long enough, I hope, to show you what it is to be a psion.»*

I could feel my own mind continue making revisions, incorporating new information, updating my mental landscape. I understood that I had been off center in a battlefield, that I had been fighting against my new circumstances, trying to get to a point of understanding and acceptance. But like one of those low-tech black boxes, a good solid jolt of percussive maintenance had settled everything into place.

I stood back and pulled my uniform into order, and started mentally cladding myself in the armor of a Navy Captain in the public view. I looked at her and could somehow see myself looking at her through her own eyes.

"We'll continue this after?"

But I immediately knew the answer. Our minds were linked. And I suddenly realized what she had in that diplomatic case, the one she'd just brought through customs. It contained the psi orb. She had it, in part, because if we were psionically attacked, she wanted its power as a defensive bulwark, but mostly she just wanted to show me how much power a properly equipped psion could potentially wield. She wanted to blow my mind.

«When we go in there, no matter what you hear them think, stay cool. A lot of people think a lot of bad stuff, and you just have to keep smiling.»

My inner self grinned. Smiling awkwardly was my specialty. How many times had I wanted to

curse and rage but held it all in like a balloon on the verge of popping? My entire career sometimes felt like one long exercise in self-restraint. The way I'd dealt with the Countess and her disparaging remarks about men, even while she was being guarded by them, was but a single case in point. If I could get through that and countless other episodes, surely I could get through this. I nodded to Josefeen and squared up. I had a plan, and I was going into battle.

We entered a room with green walls, purple couches, and what looked like a well-stocked liquor cabinet complete with an autoserve, basically a robotic bartender. Admiral Karneticky, Captain Masa, and Canon Forklinbrass were all there, the first two engaged in conversation about the Countess and Olav — though I couldn't hear what they were saying, I somehow just knew — whereas the latter stood off to the side, pretending to listen to the first two going back and forth, but I could somehow sense his real attention was focused on the cabinet's selection of intoxicants, and he was growing thirsty.

I approached Captain Masa, carefully angling my approach so that I would not sneak up on and startle the Admiral. The last thing I needed was for him to have a heart attack. Then I'd have to give two eulogies instead of one. Predictably, however, he looked down at his wristcom just as I entered his field of view.

Where in Cleon's hairy armpit is that damn Captain?

Damn Captain? And after all I've done for you?

"Put me through to Captain Plankwell."

Masa couldn't see me, as I was approaching from behind him, but the Canon noticed me as I got within a few meters.

"Admiral?" he said.

"Just a moment, Your Grace."

As my wristcom beeped, I couldn't help but sigh. Well, so much for the cautious approach. Three quick steps put me in front of the Admiral and I ripped off a crisp salute.

"Yes, Admiral?"

Masa turned around, startled, and Karneticky looked up, his eyes bulging from their sockets. The Admiral's mind briefly shot forth a cacophony of images and sounds, essentially white noise, like some electronic device on the

fritz, but he managed to navigate his shock with a neutral expression despite the beeping noise still coming from my wrist.

"Belay that!" he finally said, a bit too loudly, into his wristcom.

"Sir?"

"Disconnect!"

I dropped my salute to tap the *answer* button on my wristcom.

"Priority call from Admiral Karneticky."

"Disconnect it. I'm in front of him."

"Aye aye, sir."

Both our wristcoms clicked, Karneticky glaring at me as though I were somehow at fault. *Third time in a bloody row! How does he do it?*

"Reporting for duty, sir," I said, blinking innocently. In truth, I had no idea how I was doing it. It was the Universe's fault. It probably thought it was being funny.²⁴⁵

"Uh... I... uh...." The admiral ran a hand through his hair. "Have you met Captain Masa yet?"

Captain Masa, amused, extended his hand, and I shook it.

"We've crossed paths. My compliments, Captain." I remembered him from the committee meeting²⁴⁶ and was appreciative of the fact that he didn't throw me under the bus, as it had been members of my crew who burned down that nightclub. Masa was competent, thoughtful and on top of his stuff, unlike some other officers I'd come across lately.

«I heard that.»

I stepped aside a little so that Josefeen was evident. "My aide of the day, Lieutenant Abbonette." *«I was thinking about someone else.»*

«You had better have been thinking about someone else.»

She saluted the Admiral and presumably Captain Masa, and Masa returned her salute and shook her hand as the Admiral surveyed the topography of her chest. *That Lucky Dog.* Canon Forklinbrass, meanwhile, looked from me to Josefeen and back again.

"Your Grace," both she and I said in unison.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ Yes, indeed.

²⁴⁶ See page 186.

²⁴⁷ As though of one mind.

"I am pleased to meet you, Lieutenant," the Canon said, "and to see you again, Captain, but the circumstances... not so pleasing. I am sorry for your loss."

"On behalf of my crew, I thank you for your presence here."

Some deep memory moved me, and I bowed to the Canon, my hands clasped to my chest. I held the bow for a full count of ten.

One... two...

Oh, for Cleon's sake! The admiral's voice rang in my head. *What now? Has he gone batty?*

"No, Captain. Please," the canon said.

Masa, meanwhile, though remaining silent, emanated both curiosity and amusement.

This was an old form of respect given when the honoree was deemed an important ally and given when there was some doubt about the strength of other allegiances present. Masa might pick up on it, but I was fairly sure the Admiral didn't, both judging from how he performed during the apology as well as listening to his thoughts just now. They were spinning out from his mind so carelessly that I didn't even have to look at him in order to sense them.

He cleared his throat, thinking: *I've heard of senior moments, but this is getting ridiculous* as three, four, and five ticked by.

Abbonette would pick up the meaning from the link, which left the Canon, who I was pretty sure understood the level of respect he was being offered. I'd learned about this expression of respect during my cadet days when I needed to show up petty aristocrats who didn't know the forms as thoroughly as they should have.

"Captain," the Admiral said, "are you feeling quite alright? Should we summon a doctor?"

Six... seven...

"Sir," Masa said, "Captain Plankwell is expressing *Kalan Sishame*."

Eight... nine...

"Ah, I see." *Kalan Sishame? Never heard of it.* He nodded knowingly. "We do it a little bit differently where I come from."

Ten.

I straightened from the bow and smiled.

"I am unworthy of this honor you've bestowed," the Canon said, wincing.

"With all due respect, Your Grace, it is mine to give and mine to decide. A companionable word

to a stranger lost, a gift of fortitude and wisdom offered; to a man such as myself, and the crew I represent, and the Navy I serve, these are welcome indeed to we who sail the void."

"Yes, but..."

"Your Grace," Captain Masa interjected, "it is not simply to you the Navy offers respect but to all you represent."

"You place a great burden upon me," Canon Forklinbrass said.

"You placed it upon yourself when you became a man of the cloth," Masa gently replied.

"Indeed," the Canon said, remembering how he'd been trying to avoid burden rather than embrace it.

I winked with a bit of a smile and then turned to Masa. "Captain, if we could review the timeline so I know where I am to be and how long I have to get ready?"

"I'm afraid there's a fly in the ointment, but it could prove in the end to be to our advantage."

Karneticky nodded. "The Countess has requested we include the new Olav as a part of this ceremony. She wants us to allow him to speak."

"And not in a pre-recorded statement," Masa said, "but live."

"Is he ready?" Karneticky asked.

"If he is, this could be a major public relations coup for the Navy." Masa smiled.

"Or a PR disaster, if he isn't," the Admiral said, crossing his arms.

Great Cleon's hairy armpit, will I never be free of the simulation?

«Mmmph!»

"It was in fine form when I last left it with the Countess," I said, ignoring Josefeen's mental snigger. "I cannot say what influence she has had upon it, but her household was growing fond of it, last I saw."

"Fond?" Masa inquired, clearly wanting more details.

"I am not one to gossip about the behavior of nobles in their private lives, but..." — I leaned in conspiratorially — "...do you recall the case of the declaration of union with the search agent?"

The case, now a few years old, had been one of the few news events to race around the sector.

A noted TNS²⁴⁸ reporter and vidcaster had declared in public that he was forming a marriage union with his custom designed search agent software. Not only did he claim the agent was better than most people, but he'd researched all the applicable Imperial laws. However, upon return to his homeworld, he was apprehended and charged under planetary law (a law that had been passed just prior to his return). They summarily dissolved the union and petitioned the Imperium to recognize the dissolution, ultimately claiming some sort of inheritance issue. There was some debate in the Sector Moot, but the issue quieted down once the reporter was discovered to have died in a grav ski accident.

I arched an eyebrow and nodded very slightly. To say more would be inappropriate.

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" Karneticky asked with a wrinkled nose and a grimace. He was picturing Amika and Olav engaged in some soft porn and cuddling.

I very carefully turned to the Admiral and gave him the blankest look I could muster.

«Uch! Josefeen, how do I screen THAT out?»

«Your admiral has a most vivid imagination.»

The faint shoulder shrug was the best I could do under the circumstances. I wasn't going to feed any more innuendo into that mind. I mean it was bad enough that he probably remembered Amika naked, but I was sure that Olav was not equipped like... that.

«I am beginning to take your meaning about what other people think.»

«Just keep smiling.»

I schooled my neutral face, trying to smile as non-awkwardly as possible.

"Holy Cleon on a stick," Karneticky slowly intoned, taking my silence as confirmation.

"I don't suppose the Countess has given any indication of why she wants to present Olav at this event?" I asked.

"Planetary morale," Masa replied. "And she's not wrong. If the simulation were to prove cooperative, its benefit could be immense."

"Would it be possible to add it to the end of the program? Spin it as the capstone so that we observe all the forms? That way, we have paid proper deference. If it succeeds, it's a triumph,

and if it fails, well, we did everything including offering an opportunity for a local noble to pay their respects, however poorly."

We should make it generally known that it speaks at the behest of the Countess, Masa thought with a slight nod.

Karneticky, meanwhile, appeared internally deadlocked, his lips pressed together in a slight grimace. *Can't afford to offend the Countess. Not again. But what if it reverts to its old self?* "Captain Plankwell," he finally said.

"Sir."

"You may convey our acceptance to the Countess as well as your idea for Olav to... uh... to be the capstone, talking at the end," or *wherever else she prefers*. "But find out what he intends to say, if you can. And if there's some problem, see that you correct it." *CYA accomplished!*

Oh, thank you, Universe, Masa smiled. *So much could go wrong, best not to volunteer. Safer to let Plankwell light the dumpster fire, then clean up the mess after it's over.*

Josefeen wondered if I should ask the Admiral to direct Captain Masa to assist. «*A scapegoat would be handy if he turns out to be right,*» her voice crackled between my neurons.

«*Nope, too many captains around and we will start swinging di... uh... interfering with each other.*»

I tried mightily to suppress that particular image from my imagination, but Josefeen's full-throated laughter rumbling through my brain proved I was unsuccessful. I glanced over, expecting to see at least a smirk on her lips, but she was the very image of an attentive aide. How she managed that, I had no idea.

«*Practice. Lots of practice.*»

"Captain," the Admiral said, glaring at me, "did you hear..."

"Aye aye, sir. Captain Masa, is there a private room I could comm the Countess from? I will see if there's an opportunity to talk to Olav beforehand as well."

"Of course. Follow me."

«*Not that I want to duck out on you, but...*» Did I want Josefeen to come with me or stay here and observe? She somehow conveyed the question all at once, without words, like some telepathic hieroglyph. «*We should be able to*

248 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Traveller_News_Service

retain our psychic bond either way, and if you order me to stay, you'll get to experience what it's like being in two places simultaneously.»

«Two places at once? So many times I could have used that in the past.»

“Lieutenant, remain here to represent us in the rest of the preparation, if you would. Comm me if anything urgent arises.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

As I followed Captain Masa down a corridor, around a corner, and into an elevator, I remained aware of the Admiral and Canon and, of course, Josefeen, who smiled shyly, as though nervous. The Canon, noticing, nodded warmly but then got distracted by the liquor cabinet.

“Would you like a drink?” he asked her.

“Uh... that's very kind of you, Your Holiness, but I'm on duty, so I really shouldn't.”

“Oh, well... let me know when you change your mind.” He ambled off in what was more or less the right direction, amused by the honorific *Your Holiness*.

By now we were in the elevator, descending, various sublevels going by, but in my mind's eye Josefeen remained keenly aware of the Admiral's admiration, though not for any traits of hers that weren't readily apparent.

“Subterranean parking,” Masa said by way of explanation. *«Captain Obvious»* careened through my consciousness.

Admiral Karneticky, meanwhile, looked at his wristcom, thumbing through his contacts, wondering who he should bother next, and specifically trying not to look at the gorgeous lieutenant right in front of him: *Is that a regulation hairdo?* Josefeen, however, was a woman of wiles and bent forward at her waist rather than her knees in a show of inspecting her shoes or perhaps the floor's color pattern. Aside from giving him a good look at the intricacies of her hairdo, it was a golden opportunity for him to sneak a rather lingering peek at her other notable assets hanging below, and, of course, she knew he did so and after a solid moment looked up swiftly and met his gaze. His eyes went wide as saucers, the realization that he'd been caught apparent, but he could still play it off, and so he smiled and approached, keeping his gaze focused on her eyes rather than her chest.

“We're going all the way down to VIP parking.”

The elevator stopped, its doors opening, as *«You want to see how easily men are manipulated by their hormones?»* bubbled its way through my brainwaves.

“Hello there,” he said to her. “I don't believe we've yet been properly introduced. I'm Fleet Admiral Bilem Geriol Karneticky.”

Chapter 36

The Sofa and the Rainbow

While Captain Masa and I exited the elevator into a VIP parking area below the stadium, some distance above us in the green room behind the stage, Karneticky and Josefeen were introducing themselves to one another, the Admiral distracted by her cleavage to the brink of leering. I felt a vague sense of nausea but wasn't sure if it came from me or Josefeen. In any case, I needed to school my composure, as her idea of training me to be in two minds at once was at least in part to demonstrate her wiles on a superior officer, no doubt an object lesson for me on multiple levels.

«You got that right.»

Meanwhile, two guards approached Captain Masa and I, their rifles at the ready.

“Imperial Navy,” Masa said, whipping out his ID.

“So what do you think of your new commanding officer?” the Admiral asked.

“Captain Plankwell? Hmm... now that's an interesting question?” *«Should I tell him the truth, or would you prefer I make something up?»*

«The truth, of course. There's enough innuendo floating around, and I'm curious what you and he will say about me.»

I kept my physical attention on Masa and the guards and tried to settle my telepathic link with Josefeen into the back of my mind, aware of what was going on with her but not putting on the main screen, as it were. This being in two places at once felt very much like running a fighter squadron from the front. I could feel my reflexes coming into play as I sorted sensations and prioritized my attention. If I thought of the link as the squad feed and my own eyes as my main screen, it might help, at least until the next new thing I had to learn in a hurry came along.

The guard scanned Masa's ID with a device he had on his belt, and its little green light momentarily flashed.

“Your residency permit,” he said, handing the card back and then holding out his hand for mine.

“He's visiting,” Masa said.

“Then your VAC.”

“Huh?” I had no idea what a VAC was or if I even had one.

“Visitor Authorization Card.”

“Do you want the truth, or is this just small talk?” Josefeen asked of the Admiral as I dug into a pocket and handed the guard my card.

Nobody else was there to hear, except for the Canon, but he was too preoccupied with the contents of the liquor cabinet to comment. He opened it and brought out two glasses, glancing at Josefeen. He sensed that something about her question was a bit off, but not being in the military, he couldn't comprehend the full extent of it.

Hence, it was only myself and the Admiral who raised our eyebrows in surprise, for lieutenants are not, with capital letters, they ARE NOT allowed to talk that way to admirals. If it ever happens, it only happens once, and then they get stuck with some unsavory and possibly hazardous duty, probably after being demoted. In short, her manner with him was skirting the line to where he could say something sharp if he wished and then follow through with an idle comment to me sometime later that he found her overly familiar. While there weren't exactly regulations against that sort of thing, there was Navy tradition, and she was flouting it. Hence, probably due to whatever expression was on my face, the guard looked at me a bit longer than necessary, thinking me a bit odd, and then he scanned my card.

“Small talk? No,” the Admiral said. “I despise small talk. Tell me the truth, of course.”

This time the scanner made an angry buzz, and instead of a green light, there were little numbers, 1252, flashing in red. He showed it to the other guard, who said simply, “He's illegal.”

“Well, the truth is complicated,” she said. *«Ooh. The Captain's illegal.»*

“Stay here,” the first guard said to a face that was, no doubt, looking increasingly zoned out. Then he turned and walked off, still holding my card, while the other one remained facing Masa and I, his rifle still at the ready. Whether due to my telepathy or just something about his expression, I got the distinct impression he didn't like Navy guys and that our rank meant nothing to him.

“Look,” Josefeen said, “let's you and I make a deal, okay? I'll tell you what I think about Gus, and then you tell me what *you* think about him. Is

that fair? Or am I being too familiar with you, sir?" She flashed him her best smile, one that was vaguely suggestive of good things to come.

"Uh, no," Karneticky said, folding his arms, not quite sure how to respond. And then something very strange happened. A stray thought flashed through his mind, something about how he was using me to rip off the fleet next door. Whatever the other details, it involved a lot of money changing hands. I couldn't believe it, but there it was, like rust or a weed.

«*Catch that, Lieutenant?*»

«*Yessir.*»

"So the two of you are already on a first name basis?" the Admiral asked.

"Oh, yes," Josefeen replied, nodding. "Although, when he gets agitated, he calls me *Lieutenant*, but that's to be expected. He is, actually, better than most, I would say, at least insofar as he's willing to learn."

"Learn about the Jaqueline?"

"His new assignment," she said, nodding. "In my experience, a willingness to learn is everything."

I rolled my eyes so hard they telepathically clinked in the back of my head.

"It requires a spirit of humility," the Canon said, warming something up in the autoserve. Of course, he could have just asked it to mix the drink for him. It was a robotic bartender, after all. But instead he utilized it as one might play a musical instrument, deciding for himself exactly what needed to be done and in what precise order.

"You look like you're having fun," Josefeen said with a grin.

"I'm finally in my element, but don't let me interrupt."

"There must be some bureaucratic mistake," Masa said after a long and awkward pause, but Guard #2 made no response.

"I guess the real question," Josefeen said, turning back to the Admiral, "is, 'How honest can I be with you?' I mean, there's a lot to say about Captain Plankwell. I could write volumes²⁴⁹ and still barely scratch the surface."

"Oh?" *Volumes?* "I didn't realize he was that deep." *Though his pockets certainly are.*

"Everyone is deep in their own way," the Canon said as I made a mental note to contact the Naval Office of Auditing and Budget Reconciliation.

"Is this conversation confidential?" Josefeen asked. "Can I be assured of absolute discretion?"

"Most certainly." *Not!* Karneticky nodded emphatically, considering that she either had some wicked dirt on me or that this curvy lieutenant might actually be crazy. Either way, he was intrigued.

"What about you?" she asked the Canon.

"I'm not even listening," he protested, "and what little I do hear I soon forget, one of the benefits of old age."

"You know what?" Josefeen smirked. "Let's just forget this whole conversation. Why would I want to tell you all about *that*?"

"About what?" Karneticky asked.

"What are we talking about again?" the Canon asked.

"Your Holiness," Josefeen said, "Could I change my mind and trouble you for a drink?"

"No trouble at all. What would you like?"

"Just make me one of whatever you're having."

"Are you quite sure? What I'm having will knock you on your tush."

"I assure you, I can handle it," she said, rolling her eyes. «*I hope you don't mind me getting buzzed, Captain.*»

The first guard reappeared, the dour look on his face conveying there was some bad news.

"Plankwell is not under my command," Admiral Karneticky said in a low voice, leaning in toward Josefeen. "But, if there's some problem, I could convey a message to Admiral Vasilyev on behalf of an anonymous officer, if you would like."

«*I should tell him what a womanizer you are.*»

There was a chuckle in there somewhere, so I was pretty sure she was teasing.

«*Admiral Letch is already convinced I have something going on with Nizlich, or wishes he did. What the hell do they get up to out here on the frontier?*»

"The thing to understand about Captain Plankwell," Josefeen said, "about Gus, is that he's... well, he's... he's just one of those types of guys, y'know?"

249 Thirty-six chapters, at least.

“What type?”

«Yes, *what type?*» I wanted to know.

“One of *those* types,” she said, squinting her eyes. “It’s hard to explain.”

«*You had better mean that I am an upright image of an ideal Navy officer who is convinced he is the Emperor’s gift to all the little people he has been made captain over; Lieutenant!*» I included a mental image of *Captain Pureheart*, a character initially made famous by a children’s animated holoshow dating back to the early second century, which was attempting to glorify the Pacification Campaigns against the Lancians²⁵⁰. The scriptwriters had the unenviable task of portraying Percy Pureheart as the good guy while he was cleansing rebel worlds of their populations via orbital bombardment. There was a public outcry against the show, but the memory of this fictional hero had been kept alive by anti-Imperial propagandists ever since. In short, I was trying to throw her off balance, but I was pretty sure I didn’t have the imagination to achieve that. Little did I know that Canon Forklinbrass was about to do it for me.

“I hope you’re thirsty,” he said, bringing over two tall shots of what looked like muddy water.

“That was quick,” Josefeen said, accepting a glass that was warm to the touch. Whatever was inside emitted a pungent fragrance. “What is this?”

“A holy sacrament.”

“A holy sacrament?”

“The holiest of holies,” he said, “save for the great uniter, which gathers us here today.”

“You misused your Visitor Authorization,” the guard said while all this was going on.

“He misused it? How?” Masa asked as the Canon raised his cup for a toast.

“Double entry,” the guard said.

“That’s hot,” Josefeen replied.

“Double entry?” Masa asked.

“It is a bit warm,” Forklinbrass said as the guard started explaining the details of different types of visitor authorizations and how I apparently had the wrong one because of something I did or didn’t say at my initial entry into Jewel. “Beware the bitterness,” the Canon

added. “I did what I could to subdue it, but wisdom is often bitter.”

“Wisdom?” Josefeen raised her cup, wondering what was in it, but all she could get from his mind was determined trepidation, as if he was looking upon this drink as a sort of imperative, something to be feared almost as much as it was to be relished.

“To all we do not know,” the Canon said, “and cannot understand.” He put the rim of his glass to his lips, closed his eyes, tilted his head back, and drank it all down like a college student on summer break.

Josefeen put her glass to her lips as well but then said, “You must be trippin’ if you think I’m gonna drink this.”

The Admiral and Canon both stared, slack-jawed.

“Oh, I’m just playin’.” And then she drank it in one go, slamming it like a champ, and for a moment it was like bitter and sweet were having a war inside our mouths. It was all very disorienting and ultimately left the tongue feeling battered and abused, but observing the etiquette of alcohol, she swallowed it all down, whatever it was, wondering all the while if this was really such a good idea. The mixologist was a man of the cloth, after all. He wouldn’t poison her, would he?

“Bravo,” the Admiral said. “I’d have one as well, but I’m already wise enough. In any case, hallucinogenic psychedelics aren’t really my thing.”

“Halluncinowhat?” Josefeen asked, suddenly worried.

«*Oh, yeah. I forgot to mention, he’s from the Sodality of the Silver Chalice.*» I telepathically voiced to Josefeen as the guard in front of Masa and I continued talking.

«*Meaning?*»

«*They embrace the Doctrine of Kaleidoscopic Communion.*»

«*Kaleidowhat?*»

«*Briggs said they get high as a spiritual practice.*»²⁵¹

«*Oh....*» The bitterness still clung to her taste buds, and then she felt a wave of nausea pass through her so strong it made us both queasy.

250 See *The Third Imperium* (2021), pg. 76, right column.

251 See page 66.

«Wait. You mention this now?!» “Your Holiness, what in Cleon’s name was that?”

“What was what?”

“What I just drank,” she said as the room slowly began to spin.

“It’s hard to explain,” he replied as the walls undulated ever so slightly.

“You are a straight-up drug dealer,” she said. “How do you get away with this?”

“Religious exemption.” He smiled. “Now it’s time to pray. Let us be seated.”

He guided her gently to a purple couch, the green walls undulating a little bit less slightly with each step.

“You have a choice to make,” he said. “You can clear your mind in anticipation of the mysterious wisdom that will soon be flowing through it, or you can focus on an intention, preferably a good one, a wish or a dream, but it must not be selfish. You have been warned.”

Meanwhile, the guard kept talking to me, telling me all sorts of important stuff. “So you see, Captain, you’re going to have to fill out a DS-160 and a DS-158.”

“A what and a what?”

“A DS-160 and a DS-158. Like I said...”

“Admiral,” Canon Forklinbrass said, sitting down, “as our designated *soberite*, would you please bring us those two glasses on the bar.”

“I’m an admiral, not a waiter.”

“Please. Unless you want to see an old man fall and break his leg.”

“Oh, very well.”

“He has to fill out a form?” Masa asked.

“Two forms.”

“Send them to me, and my staff will fill out whatever paperwork you need.”

“No, that’s not how this works. The Captain has to fill them out himself, and we’ll need to detain him until the applications are approved.”

“Detain me?!” The guard suddenly had my full attention. “You’re going to detain me?”

«Busted!»

“You must calm the waters of your consciousness,” the Canon told her. He could see she was snickering about something. “Focus on breathing.”

“Can I wish for a *Get Out of Jail* card?” Josefeen asked.

“For who?”

“None of your business!”

“Until Immigration and Visitation issues a corrected authorization card...” The guard began to re-explain how my particular visitor authorization didn’t provide for multiple entries through different ports. The upshot was that I could have flown down to the naval base and entered through either of the customs checkpoints along its outskirts, but because we went through customs at the starport, there was now some sort of problem. Basically, we violated some rule nobody told us about. Either that or one arm of their bureaucracy created a little snafu that only it had the ability to solve, and so I’d have to sit in detention until it got around to solving it, which could take...

“How long is this going to take?”

“However long it takes. Now please come with me.”

The bureaucracy of many planets tired me out sometimes, and to be honest, Naval bureaucracy was just as bad. I sometimes wondered if the reason the bureaucrats made things extra complicated and opaque was just so they could feel important. After all, if they couldn’t take the time to use a tracking system to update my status and whereabouts, well, I had little time for them as well. Of course, I understood at some level it was a security and control issue. I had seen evidence enough of that on this world already. But just who did they think was providing security for their entire planet?

Masa stepped in between myself and the guard. “We’re officers of the Imperial Navy.”

“Step to the side,” the guard told him, “or I’ll be forced to arrest you both.”

“Arrest us both? Who do you think is providing security for your entire planet?!”

«Whoa!» Josefeen’s voice echoed in my head.

“Get on your knees, hands in the air. Now!” *That’s one.*

“I demand to speak with your supervisor!” Masa spat back.

“Both of you on your knees!” *That’s two.* Why was he counting it in his head? It had to do with some rule on the use of force.

By this point they both had their rifles pointed at us. This was escalating way too fast.

“I understand you’re doing your job here, but can’t we resolve this?” I asked. I tried to reach

out telepathically to see what I could read in their minds, but that, of course, required I ignore the weird thoughts that were coming from Josefeen, like the couch in which she and the Canon were seated suddenly lifting off the floor like some gravcar and the green walls dissipating into a vast emerald field. Despite it all, however, she somehow kept her focus on what was real.

«Sir, do you see what you just did?»

«What?»

«You might not just be a telepath. You may be a manipulator.»

«A manipulator?»

“Last time! Get on your knees, hands in the air! I’m not saying it again!” *That’s three.* I somehow sensed they were now permitted to use force, including lethal force, whatever it would take to get us to comply.

I raised my hands to shoulder level, but I would not kneel.

“Plankwell to Jaqueline!” I yelled at my wristcom. “Marines to my position!”

A bolt of electricity sizzled through my entire body, and I crumpled.

“I’ll have your badges when th...!” Masa voice trailed off as every centimeter of my flesh felt like it was burning.

Whoever these locals were, they’d soon be receiving a lesson in threatening the Navy. True, I might die in the process, but my marines would retrieve my body, and then there’d be hell to pay.

“Sir,” Josefeen said. “Are you okay, sir?” I found myself right next to her, like some disembodied consciousness, not sitting with her on the sofa, but floating off to one side.

“I’m fine,” Karneticky said.

“No, not you.”

«I got tased.»

«Tased!?»

“Well, I’m the only *Sir* here. By the way, I think you’re supposed to drink this,” the Admiral said, handing her a glass. It looked like vodka. At least, it was clear like vodka.

“Oh, hell no.”

«Oh, hell no indeed.»

“It’s water,” the Canon told her. “Swish it around before you swallow.”

“I’m not doing anything you tell me to do, you old kook.” In Josefeen’s imagination, we were now up in the air, the couch floating over a green

landscape of bushy trees and hilly pastures as far as the eye could see while little florescent clouds swirled hypnotically. Admiral Karneticky, meanwhile, hovered nearby, but he was not the same as before. He had fangs, bat wings, and a long forked tail, and he seemed to be enjoying her confusion.

“What in the roots of Cleon’s hairy perineum did you give me?” she muttered.

I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you, the patterns in the clouds seemed to answer in her own voice.

The Canon placed his hand gently over hers. “Though the ends seldom justify the means, and an eye for an eye is patently barbaric, the universe, amused by irony, has been known to take occasional liberties.”

Deep inside I was chuckling to myself, pleased she was on the receiving end of some unexpected mind-altering substance. Of course, I was fully convinced of her loyalty and of the genuine need she had to do to me what she did, but, nonetheless, she was tripping balls²⁵², and it was somewhat hilarious to watch. Indeed, I was almost laughing out loud when I felt handcuffs click over my wrists, reminding me where my body was.

“I want a *Get Out of Jail* card,” Josefeen said. “For a friend.”

“What friend is this?” Karneticky asked.

“The Captain.”

“Captain Plankwell? Is he in some sort of trouble?”

“Not as much as you’re going to be in.”

As they stared deeply into each other’s eyes, we both realized he’d seen the Canon on the prowl for new parishioners several times before, and so he knew how this game was played. The reason he permitted it, even on Navy personnel, was that he could learn all sorts of interesting tidbits if he asked the right question at the right moment, as a drugged mind was less guarded. But this answer of hers about himself being in trouble struck a nerve, and so Karneticky worried she might know something about what he’d done.

Momentarily in his mind’s eye, he was sitting down with two people, a bushy-bearded man in

252 <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=tripping%20balls>

an IISS²⁵³ uniform and a young blonde dressed in business attire.

“I’m in trouble?”

Josefeen smiled at this bat-winged devil as kaleidoscopic rivers of color, flowing with the hues of iridescent hummingbirds and the phosphorescent glow of magical butterflies, pulsated though the ethereal vapors.

“How am I in trouble, Lieutenant?”

His words echoed in her head several times over, the moment flowing backwards and forwards like a winding river of meandering currents. Whatever the scam was, it had to do with the Exploration Pod. That’s why the IISS guy was in his thoughts.

“Don’t worry about Bim,” he’d said, smiling. “He’ll sign whatever we want, so long as he’s guaranteed to muster out with a Type-S²⁵⁴.”

“But what about the chief engineer’s assessment?” the woman asked.

He shrugged. “We’ll overrule it.”²⁵⁵

“You can do that?”

“So long as Plankwell doesn’t stick his nose into it,” the Admiral said. “But don’t worry. I’ll keep him busy.”

*Kaz tried to warn me.*²⁵⁶

“Kaz,” Josefeen murmured, her reality becoming like a tapestry woven of symbol and metaphor, images of civilizations risen and fallen, glimpses of love and of loss, her entire life but a single thread in the grand design.

“Kaz?” The Admiral asked. “You mean Kaz Remshaw?”

“After my performance at the Commerce Committee, they decided my services are no longer required,” Kaz’s voice ricocheted through my mind from somewhere up ahead. *«What? What the absolute what?»*

Josefeen, however, was somewhat preoccupied. A part of me was still with her, but it felt like her mind was being sucked into a black hole, and though I tried to perceive what she was perceiving, it was impossible to hold on. She was soon gone, vanishing into another dimension.

253 [https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/](https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Imperial_Interstellar_Scout_Service)

[Imperial Interstellar Scout Service](https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Imperial_Interstellar_Scout_Service)

254 [https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Type S class Scout/](https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Type_S_class_Scout/Courier)
[Courier](https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Type_S_class_Scout/Courier)

255 See page 156.

256 See page 140.

The Admiral, no longer able to solicit any sort of response, retreated to the far side of the room and used his wristcom to reach out to someone in Naval Intelligence. Josefeen couldn’t hear what he said and would have been oblivious to it even were he shouting into her ear, but somehow, with our psionic link still established to some part of her mind, I could sense he was asking about Josefeen. Who was she, and what was her connection to Kaz Remshaw?

Interested at the mention of Kaz, I floated over to him. The voice on the other end of the line told him Josefeen was an administrative aide assigned to the Jaqueline. I couldn’t tell if that was a lie or simply a misconception based on some cover identity Josefeen had created for herself. Whichever the case, the person Karneticky was talking to found no link between Josefeen and Kaz, except that they both attended my reception, which the Admiral already knew, however, they did discover that someone in Naval Intelligence had recently made database inquiries with respect to Kaz’s personal phone, and this turned up the call between Kaz and her Mom where they were discussing me.²⁵⁷ But, instead of assuming this was Josefeen’s doing, the Admiral assumed it was mine. Nonetheless, he couldn’t help but worry that she knew something.

“Get me every bit of video surveillance we have on Captain Plankwell as well as every bit we’ve got on this administrative aide of his.” His wristcom buzzed angrily with a priority call. *What now?* “I’ve got to go. Let me know when you’ve got it ready.” He hit a button, switching lines, and his eyes bugged out when someone told him what was happening down in VIP Parking.

257 See page 148.

Chapter 37

Section 678

An acrid stench filled my nostrils, and I reflexively blinked.

“Are you okay, sir?”

A Marine with an INS Jaqueline patch on his shoulder leaned over me. He had some sort of scanner in one hand, and in the other was a small red tube of standard issue respiratory stimulant; i.e., smelling salts. Needless to say, my wrists and those of Captain Masa were no longer cuffed, but as for the two guards who’d arrested us, they were now prone and cuffed to each other, hands to feet, which looked rather uncomfortable, not to mention a bit kinky.

“Our perimeter is secure, Captain,” Force Commander Fa’Linto said from off to my left, “but the locals are starting to get rambunctious.” He was in full battle dress²⁵⁸ with a built-in FGMP²⁵⁹.

“Come out with your hands up!” a loudspeaker blared somewhere off in the distance. “This is your last warning!”

“I don’t want to have to kill them all, sir, but if that’s your wish, just give the order.”

I looked around, trying to shake the fog from my mind and see if my link with Josefeen was still intact. «*You there?*» Several Marines were standing around us in their coats and slacks, their military salad bars prominently displayed, but a few others were, like their commander, dressed to kill, their powered armor giving no hint of their ranks or decorations.

“Sir?”

“Negative,” I replied, shaking my head. No killing, not for this. “We’re not dead, and at least

some of them are just following orders. Status report. And where’s our ride out?”

“I’m working on the ride.”

“Oh? How much of a mess did you make coming in, Commander?”

He tilted his head slightly. “Hardly any, sir. Thanks to Captain Masa, we were already on site.”

I turned to Masa. He shrugged. “I thought it might be appropriate to include some of your Marines in the ceremony,” he explained.

“In battle dress?”

“That was my idea, sir,” Fa’Linto said. “In any case, the only mess we made was scaring a few bystanders and...” — he gestured to the cuffed guards — “this.” *As for any political mess... not my problem.*

That last part, albeit unspoken, was typical Marine “I’m not paid to worry about politics” logic, and he was, of course, correct. He was paid to follow orders, and that’s exactly what he did, but there would

be political fallout, and as the one who called for help, that fallout would most certainly fall on me.

Well, at least I didn’t have to explain holes in the local architecture from a hot combat drop. That was something. Unless, of course, we made some holes on the way out of here.

“Is that FGMP fully charged?” I asked.

“No, but it’s got enough juice to waste anyone who gets in our way.” How he got it through customs, I didn’t even want to know.

I began issuing commands over my wristcom, telling the Jackie to put me in touch with the local forces using whatever Navy override was applicable for the situation. The voice on the other end of the line sounded familiar, and I could, for a brief moment, picture Spacehand Blodder panicking, her fingers dashing over the comm station controls as she tried to figure out who to call.



²⁵⁸ https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Battle_Dress

²⁵⁹ https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Fusion_Weapon

Imperial policy was to let worlds govern themselves, but they were all part of the Imperium, and the Navy had broad rights to intervene when situations arose that threatened Imperial supremacy. And I was fairly sure tasing a uniformed captain over a visa irregularity violated that general rule. But, of course, the devil was always in the details, and I didn't know the specifics of every worlds' articles of membership.

During all this, the air began to stink, and Masa looked up at the ventilation ducts.

"They're piping in air from outside," he said.

I'd left my filter mask in the Kinnuki. "What the hell kind of hospitality is this?"

"Hospitality designed to put us in a hospital, I'm guessing."

«Josefeen, are you there?»

"Sir," my wristcom chirped, "I have a Lieutenant Muuna of the HPSS on the line."

"Lieutenant Muuna. This is Captain Plankwell. It seems we have a situation."

"Indeed, Captain, it seems we do," a woman's voice replied. Something about her tone told me this would not be easy, so I decided to hit her with my trump card.

"Pursuant to Interplanetary Code, Section 678, I hereby order you to stand down your forces and cease offensive operations. The surrounding area out to one kilometer is hereby placed under Imperial Military Jurisdiction on the basis of offenses done to a serving officer of the Imperial Navy, to wit the assault by planetary security officers to serving officers. I declare such actions interdicted, until resolved to the satisfaction of a Navy tribunal that said actions were not an incipient attack on the sovereignty of the Imperium."²⁶⁰

"Captain, with all due respect, we both know you don't have authority to invoke Section 678. You're not even a member of the local fleet. If Admiral Karneticky wants to play that game, fine.

260 Conrad came up with "Section 678" on the fly, and though I'd never heard of it or anything like it, it sounded to me like something that would probably exist. Nonetheless, I doubted Captain Plankwell would have the authority to invoke it given the reasons outlined in the following paragraph. For more on this, see the TML discussions at <https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/22711150/> & <https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/23838110/> & <https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/23897398/>

We'll stand down. But until then, you need to release your hostages or we're coming in to get them."

Hostages?

"You'll find that the Navy does not share that attitude. I am in full command of my vessel in detached operations. I have all the authorization I need to prosecute this, being the assaulted officer in question. I have detained your officers. They are not *hostages*. You can come on in and get them. Send a medic with two unarmed officers. I have transportation inbound. It will not be detained or harassed. Any further action against myself or any Navy personnel will be construed as an act of rebellion and responded to as such by the forces at my command. I don't know who decided to let this get out of hand, but I will be the one to end it."

I decided not to mention the exterior air coming in. Fa'Linto cocked his head at me, and I nodded, the unspoken question answered. If I died or anything happened that they considered a hostile action, the leash was off. "Respond in kind, Commander. The Navy might still need this as an operations base, and it costs to put a planet under military rule." But then, that too was something the Navy was used to doing.

"We're sending in a team as per your instructions, Captain. Tell your people."

"I have. And Lieutenant Muuna, please believe me when I say I do not wish this to escalate further. I am on the surface to mourn the passing of Navy personnel that died defending the Imperium. Both Captain Masa and myself were complying with unreasonable demands from your personnel when force was applied. That's when we stopped being polite guests. I can imagine that you and I are no strangers to violence, but do not for one moment think I am unwilling to employ it. Jewell has assaulted the Navy, and on our honor, it shall not pass."

She cut the connection. Perhaps she didn't have anything to say in response. Or maybe her only job was to get the guards to safety. Either way, we'd need transport out of here.

"Jaqueline, you are ordered to route retrieval assets to my position. Also, contact local authorities and inform them that Section 678 has been invoked, and establish an emergency alert channel so that we can update them as needed."

“Aye aye, sir,” Blodder replied.

It was a little heavy-handed but maybe called for given the circumstances. Section 678 was standard to all membership treaties that the Imperium used to relate to worlds that claimed Imperial allegiance. It was most often used when local situations grew out of control and Imperial interests were damaged. It was the pretext clause that anyone that allowed harm to come to Imperial interests did not have the wishes of the Imperium foremost in their hearts. Imperial law on the application of 678 was pretty solid, and if I considered myself and Captain Masa as interests (which we were), then injury had been done. The only interesting wrinkle was that I had survived the injury to invoke 678. That was usually done from orbit after the obliteration of the interests in question had been recorded.

A bulky gravcar with *HPSS* emblazoned on its side floated down from the ceiling shaft at the far end of the garage. Then its doors opened and out came two people, one of them clearly a medic. The other was a young woman, no firearm, but she wore a helmet and flak vest.

“Captain Plankwell?”

From her voice, I could tell she was the *HPSS* Lieutenant I’d just been talking with. She glanced down at the two guards who were still on the cement, their wrists cuffed to each others’ ankles, then put out her hand for a shake, though I sensed annoyance over how my Marines had bound her comrades.

“Lieutenant.” I shook the hand offered. A firm grip. “Commander²⁶¹, release our detainees into

the Lieutenant’s custody. We will be retaining the weapons as evidence.”

His soldiers moved quickly to comply, uncuffing the two guards, and as they stood up without assistance, it became apparent they’d suffered no injuries save perhaps to their pride.

Thanks be to Cleon, Lt. Muuna thought to herself, though so loudly I could hear the words in my head.

“Lieutenant, I appreciate your professionalism,” I told her. “We have a full record of the entire interaction my Marines had in quelling the assault. We will, of course, share this at the tribunal.”

Tribunal?

“We have also taken a full biometric assay to confirm the identities of these officers,” I continued. Both of these things were standard procedure in operations. The Navy liked to know its enemies. “I will be maintaining Imperial Military control over this entire area until the conclusion of the memorial, and then I will be returning to my ship. I perfectly understand if Jewell decides to not invite me back to the surface. I doubt I will desire to return. In any case, Jewell civilian forces are granted the right to operate in the interdiction area during the period of military control. Force Commander Fa’Linto here will be the liaison officer if anything is required.”

Fa’Linto, smiling grimly, waved his FGMP in our general direction, prompting wrinkles to form along the young woman’s forehead.

I found myself liking my Marine Force Commander all the more and idly wondered if this had reached the Countess yet. The way things were going, it looked like our next interaction would involve a lot less deference on my part. Likewise with the Admiral. I was done being a toady.

Lt. Muuna was either a telepath or she could read the expression on my face, as rather than argue with me, she took the two guards and left without another word. To be fair, she might have questioned my sanity. Invoking Section 678 was arguably beyond my authority, since I wasn’t the

qualify as a battalion, which would in turn qualify him to be promoted to Lt. Colonel. So, needless to say, impressing Captain Plankwell is a good way for him to ultimately achieve that goal.

261 There is no rank of Commander in the Imperial Marines. This is a reference to La’Finto’s position as the Force Commander of the Marines stationed on the *INS Jaqueline*. The book on *Element Cruisers* suggests he is actually a Marine Captain but he is not referred to as such in order to avoid confusion, however, that seems to assume there’s only one company of Marines on board. However, the *INS Jaqueline* has its own Marine barracks plus the Marine pod, and in Chapter 4, Fa’Linto mentioned there were *three* Marine companies onboard and that he wanted to squeeze in a *fourth*. This, in my opinion, would comport with him actually being a Major, which itself comports with the classic edition of *Mercenary*, which indicates that Force Commanders are Majors. One reason he might want to squeeze in that fourth company is that the *Jaqueline*’s carried force would then

senior Navy officer on the planet. But I was the senior Navy officer from my fleet, and it was my fleet (and, more specifically, my person) that had been physically attacked. Regardless, it wasn't her place to tell me no. She'd no doubt let her superiors address the issue with mine, and a complaint would be sent to Admiral Vasilyev, by which point with any luck I'd be long gone. Speaking of people long gone...

«Josefeen, are you alive?»

But there was still no response. Our psychic bond had apparently been severed courtesy of the Canon's holy sacrament. I could only hope she hadn't OD'd.

"Do you still want to reach out to the Countess?" Captain Masa asked.

"Um, no, I don't think that will be necessary. How far off schedule has this incident thrown us?"

He glanced at his wristcom. "We've still got over fourteen deplars... uh... about an hour and a half for you spacers."

"You're a spacer too," I replied.

"Yes, but I'm assigned to a base," he said, brushing himself off with his hands until his fingers located the two small holes in his uniform where the taser's barbs had penetrated. "Great Cleon, I can't believe that happened. I knew there was some anti-Navy sentiment among some of the population, but even in the HPSS? They literally stunned us over what? A technical problem over what port you're allowed to enter? It's obscene what this planet is turning into. I promise you, Captain, I am going to deal with this."

"I intend to deal with it myself," I said.

Technically, since I had capped the area with an Imperial interdiction, everyone had to apply for permission to enter the zone of control. Nonetheless, I didn't have the manpower situated to achieve that. As far as I knew, the HPSS was still doing their job. But at this point, who really knew? Regardless, I suspected the Countess would be contacting me, or at least her staff would be. Hence, there was no reason for me to try to contact her.

I tapped my wristcom.

"Lt. Abbonette, report in. We are changing our plans and returning to the staging area."

No response. Either Josefeen was still flying the psychedelic skies or something terrible had happened.

I tapped it again.

"Jaqueline, orders. This area surrounding me out to one kilometer is under 678 Interdiction. Please assemble a tribunal, Commander Nizlich to preside. Coordinate with Jewell Control to reroute airspace traffic around the interdiction zone. Begin recalling all shore leave personnel outside the interdicted area, and tell those inside this area that they are to turn on their watchcom video recorders, maintain tactical awareness and remain on high vigilance before, during, and after the ceremony. Coordinate with Force Commander Fa'Linto to begin assembling an evidentiary timeline and exhibits. Request additional resources from Jewell, and inform them of the proceedings against their officers. Move to General Operations, Condition 2."

"Aye aye, sir," Blodder replied.

General Operations put the Jaqueline back in an operational stance. Condition 2 indicated ongoing operations. Mostly it was to shore up my use of Section 678 as a response to having Navy personnel under threat.

Of course, I realized I'd overstepped by using the presumption of rebellion to justify my order, and it was time to start walking it back. Something was off about that one officer, though, and I had a lot of leeway in investigating the circumstances leading to the incident.

I turned to Masa. "Not how I expected today to go." I looked down to where my own uniform was similarly punctured. "This was brand new."

"I'll talk to the Admiral," he said. "With his approval, the 678 will stick, and then we'll nail those bastards to a wall. By the way," he added, "invoking it was an act of genius, the sort of move Olav himself would have made."

Masa, albeit a senior captain, saluted me, the junior one, and though surprised, I nodded and returned his salute. Sudden exhaustion flooded me as the adrenaline began to recede.

"Thank you, for everything."

I gestured for him to lead the way back to the elevator.

"Commander Fa'Linto, can you task us with a bodyguard? Preferably in armor, and no, not you. You are to clean up the scene and take a transport

to stationkeeping overwatch.²⁶² Lt. Abbonette hasn't reported in and I am mildly worried."

"Aye aye, sir," he replied.

Masa pushed the button for the elevator, and when the doors opened, Admiral Karneticky was standing there holding a small case with the Imperial Starburst prominently emblazoned on one side. Was that Josefeen's diplomatic pouch?

Oh shit, he thought as he looked at me, but quickly recovered.

"What in Cleon's bunghole is going on?!"

"Thank you, Admiral, for securing our dispatches," I said, reaching out and taking the case from him. It was obvious he didn't want to relinquish it, but he let go.

"I had no choice but to take it," he explained. "Your Lieutenant decided to partake in a religious sacrament that rendered her quite insensible, and I couldn't just leave this there unguarded."

"Where is she?"

"Physically?" The elevator doors started to close, but Masa stopped them.

"Physically, she's in the green room sitting next to the Canon, but mentally... oh, mentally only Cleon knows where she is, and perhaps not even he. You see," he said as he stepped out of the elevator, Masa and I following, "the Canon's faith requires the use of — oh, how shall I put this? — it requires the ingestion of substances of a mind-altering nature. As for your Lieutenant, I'd keep her on a short leash if I were you. Now tell me what's going on down here. What's this I hear about our people having some sort of altercation with the HPSS?"

"They attacked us," Masa said, pointing out the two tiny holes in his uniform. "It was completely unprovoked, and Captain Plankwell invoked Section 678."

"What?" Karneticky turned to me, his mouth falling open.

262 Stationkeeping overwatch positions a vehicle where it has clear sensor views and the ability to keep watch over a designated area, as opposed to a patrol overwatch, where the vehicle follows a path. Overwatch also implies authorized reaction to threats, e.g. sniper counterfire. Technically Jaqueline is overwatching all of Heron, but by putting himself into a station overwatch position, Fa'Linto would be able to respond more quickly to any military threats.

"Relations with the locals have indeed fallen so low that I was forced to take such a stance," I said, fingering my own uniform holes.

"What did they attack you with? Toothpicks?"

"Stun guns," Masa replied.

I stopped rubbing the holes in my uniform and straightened my stance.

"I have empaneled a tribunal, begun collecting evidence, and have informed HPSS that for the time being, we are in charge of this area. An HPSS Lieutenant Muuna seemed doubtful, but I assured her I was well within my rights. I shall, of course, keep your office informed of progress. The interdict will continue until the tribunal resolves the charges of assault on Navy personnel. Unless, of course, new information comes to light."

"Major," the Admiral said to Fa'Linto who was probably awaiting transport. "Come here for a moment, will you?"

Fa'Linto glanced toward me, and I nodded. "This is my Marine Force Commander, Sandy Fa'Linto."

"What happened?" Karneticky asked.

The Marine briefly explained how they were summoned to their Captain, and how already being onsite and equipped for combat enabled them to reach their target in a matter of minutes. "The two HPSS officers had both of them stunned and cuffed. Their weapons were not at the ready. We took them by surprise. They never even got off a shot."

"Are you aware we are outside the extrality line?" Karneticky asked.

"Yessir, but I was called to rescue my Captain."

"And you achieved that, Major, but you also attacked local law enforcement outside the extrality line. That is Imperial intervention. At this point, we have one of two scenarios. Either the local government is in rebellion, in which case the action is justified, or it is not, in which case..." — he paused to sigh — "...it's mutiny against the proper legal authority."²⁶³

"They attacked us," Masa said.

"Stay level-headed, Captain. Is the local government in rebellion? Is it?" Karneticky looked at me.

263 Thanks to Ian Whitchurch:

<https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/23856890/>

“Local authorities were in rebellion the moment their officers shot us. We, as active Navy officers, are subject to local authority as our courtesy to them, not as their requirement to us. When I was here on shore leave, yes, I submitted to all their laws, as did my crew. The tribunal is for the local authority to prove that they are not in rebellion to my satisfaction and to provide reasons why I should not commit to corrective action.”

“Corrective action? If anyone is to take any corrective action on behalf of the Navy, it will be me, not you!”

I took one step closer, extending a telepathic tendril as I replied.

“I am not at all convinced that there is not a pattern of resistance to the Navy here, and I believe that as the wounded party, *I* am the one that needs to be convinced otherwise.”

“So you intend to put the government on trial in your capacity as a visiting captain on detached patrol, completely bypassing the commanding officer of the garrison fleet? Who outranks you by a considerable margin, lest you forget. Are you perfectly mad?”

I didn’t need telepathy to sense his anger.

“I intend the local government to answer for its two agents who used violence against Navy officers, using my authority as an independent captain and in the absence of action from the local garrison. I am well within the regs on this; it is *you* who is failing to act.”

“You are a newly minted captain!” Karneticky sputtered, his jowls quivering in rage. “You’re still wet behind the ears, and you’re lecturing me, a fleet admiral, and you know next to nothing of Jewell! You know nothing of its politics. Have you bothered to look at the local Status of Forces Agreement? I’m guessing the answer’s no from that blank look on your face.”

“Do not mistake my deference to you as a dereliction in my duty, sir,” I said, lowering my voice. “I have apologized to the local nobles to save face for you. But someone thought that it was all right to put a serving Navy officer in detention for a bureaucratic mistake. I will have answers, and by the dark, you should want them as well, as your captain was also shot, and *he was in compliance*.”

“He’s right, sir,” Masa said. “If we were a pair of drunks causing some sort of incident, I might let it slide, but over this...? The locals have forgotten what we do for them and how much power we can bring to bear against them should they forget to treat us accordingly. If not for us, Jewell would be in the hands of the Zhodani. We must not let them forget that.”

As Masa spoke, I let a little bit of my fury bleed into that telepathic tendril, which I then extended into the Admiral’s mind, and somewhere in there I could see a woman, a beautiful woman, being horribly maimed by some beast while he stood by, practically pissing himself in terror. He flinched, as though a little psychic grenade had exploded somewhere deep in his brain.

“Any fight between us and the local government would likely get kicked up to the Countess,” he said, gritting his teeth. “She’d refer it to her magisterial court²⁶⁴, of course, but she could easily put her thumb on the scale.”

I shrugged. “If we’re lucky, she’ll realize her subjects overreached, and she’ll then take steps to settle things down. But if we’re unlucky, then I will have to root out treason and rebellion, force the local Imperials to reswear their oaths, and call for a local Moot to place this matter for judgment. Arms in the hands of the local authority have been raised against us. This is not going to go away any time soon.”

“It would be prudent to talk to her first,” Karneticky said, “to gauge the temperature. Show her your evidence, and see what she says. If it was as you said, completely unprovoked, then we should have no trouble spanking an apology out of the HPSS.”

“An apology won’t cut it,” Masa said. “I want their badges.”

“We’ll have them. But we cannot try civilians in a Navy tribunal without a declaration of martial law, and I am not going to support one without seeing this evidence first, and if you try to go around me, Captain,” he said, now looking at me, “if you ignore my authority and invoke 678 yourself, then you are on your own.”

²⁶⁴ See my article in A&E #538 or see “538vas - Traveling Imperial Magistrates (re-updated version).pdf” at <https://mega.nz/folder/hGYliCKK#a0fr1dDhy3no6Ey5xNPukQ>

Everything you want to accomplish can be accomplished behind closed doors, but if you bring it to a head openly, calling for a military tribunal.... Captain Masa, you of all people should be aware of the potential political repercussions.”

Masa opened his mouth but then closed it again. I could tell I was beginning to lose him.

“I have already called for a tribunal on my authority under 678,” I said. “With the current interdict in place and maintained by the Jaqueline, I already control this area and have limited the area of control voluntarily. Everyone knows that we could expand it as we wish. We are not trying anyone; we are assembling the evidence as you say, but we need the leverage in order for the locals to remember their oaths and their duty as citizens and turn over evidence related to the two offenders. You know that I could grab it at my will with the comm gear we have. I do not believe the locals are in rebellion. It may very well be that a couple of HPSS decided to get one back on the Navy for whatever reason. But I have seen how the Countess conducts her business, and in the short time I have been associated with her, she values image over everything.”

Karneticky rubbed a hand over his face, clearly beside himself.

“Consider this image,” I continued. “Captain Plankwell, handpicked by the Countess to serve as escort to her daughter, and who recently performed an official apology to the nobles of Jewell over the matter of an insubordinate AI representing the Navy...” — I raised my eyebrows to make sure he got the point that I’d recently covered his ass — “...was today tased by members of the HPSS while on the way to consult with the Countess over a matter of protocol.”

“After which he invoked a section of the Interplanetary Code reserved for worlds in rebellion,” Karneticky said, again gritting his

teeth. “The Countess will have kittens²⁶⁵... and then she’ll dump them on me.”

“Of course she’ll prefer to handle this behind closed doors. If you are worried about political repercussions, I have already handed you the excuse you need to disavow me. Send a report to Vasilyev, outraged about my conduct. You can even leak it to the media.”

“Oh, I will. I will distance myself so far from you, it’ll be like we’re in separate galaxies.”

I grinned. He was a bit funny when he got angry.

“I will be out of here in any case,” I said, “and you can do all the repair work you want, using me as a scapegoat. But if you are not acting on this due to political repercussions, you can grudgingly

go along with me, admit that I am in the right according to regs, and be sad to have to preside over such matters, and let me get to the truth of the matter. I, in turn, applaud your support of a delicate situation, and once again, I will be leaving the area. This is the Navy making the point: we take care of our own.”

“You *are* mad.”

“No, sir, he’s brilliant,”

Masa said. “Think of it. With any luck, we can get those idiot bureaucrats to drop visa requirements for Imperial military personnel. I’m sure General Dakhir would be in favor of this as well. To make a big stink is not only sometimes justified, but it could be to our benefit if we play our cards right.”

“It’s a big *if*,” the Admiral said. “I’d prefer to discuss it with the Countess first, and given what just happened in the miltown, I doubt this is the right time to press our luck.”

“Captain Plankwell just offered to take the heat if this fails,” Masa replied. “What better opportunity will we ever have?”

“I have already set the table, sir. You need to decide if you are going to kick it over or take a seat and see what gets served.”

265 Connptions. She’ll be in high dudgeon. Oh, you get the point.



Chapter 38

We're All Just Roleplaying

"Masa, is it better for me to contact the Countess via the Jaqueline?"

"You can use our direct channel from the Admiral's Kinnuki."

"No," Karneticky objected. "You won't be using my channel to convey the invocation of Section 678. That would indicate my support. Contact her however you like, Plankwell, but leave me out of it."

"Aye aye, sir," I said, punching the call button for the elevator. "Gentlemen, I think we need to retire to the green room. My marines need to get moving, and frankly, discussing this where I can still smell the outside air is bad for everyone involved."

"I'll catch up to you," Karneticky said as the elevator doors opened. "Captain Masa, accompany Plankwell and see to it he doesn't drag us into his mess."

"Aye aye, sir."

One of Major Fa'Linto's battle armored marines followed Masa and I into the elevator while the Admiral headed deeper into VIP parking, probably looking for his Kinnuki. Either he was going somewhere or he just didn't want to answer questions about how Josefeen got drugged while he stood there watching it all go down.

It was stupid of her to tell the Admiral he was in trouble. That must have been why he snatched her diplomatic case. Fortunately, there appeared to be some sort of electronic lock just beneath the handle. He'd probably tried opening it. If he'd made it to the base, he would have had one of his people figure out how, and then who knows what might have happened? It was a disaster narrowly avoided.

"The Admiral will come over to our side if the Countess is willing to do so," Masa said. "So you'll need to talk to her." The elevator doors opened again and we headed back toward the green room, the armored marine following at a discreet distance.

"I will channel through my comm and the Jaqueline, but I half expect the Countess to be calling me before we have a chance to sit down."

"Once the media gets wind of this, you'll be inundated with interview requests. If you like, I can steer you toward friendly venues."

"I guess I'll have to say something, or they will all start making it up wholesale. I appreciate the support."

Wheels were in motion. The tribunal would begin assembling evidence. The interdiction made sure that my crew under its cover were secured, legally in any case. I began arranging in my head the standings I would employ. The Admiral would only come around if it looked like I was winning, so I needed to start assembling a response to the report that would surely be heading towards Vasilyev on the next dispatch courier. Well, I needed more time on the Jackie. In the meantime, this ceremony still had to go forward because NavInt expected me to bag a Zho infiltrator.

Hmmm. If the infiltrator was already in the area, I had them under interdiction. *No.* Mass checking of IDs would be a massive tip-off, but I had assets to seize suspects if they could be identified. I knew that Abbonette wanted a covert operation, but she had apparently taken herself out of the equation. I would definitely be writing that up in my classified after-action report.

My watch beeped. Priority message from Josefeen: *Somebody took the orb.*

She looked up from her wristcom as I entered the room, the couch cushions all over the floor like she'd been frantically looking for something. The Canon, meanwhile, was back at the liquor cabinet, already contemplating his next intoxicant.

I held up the diplomatic case.

"Admiral Karneticky was kind enough to secure our dispatches while you were occupied."

«*Are you okay?*»

«*I saw her, Sir. I saw Lt. Jaamzon.*»

«*OK. Wow. All right. Are you still high?*»

As she winced and glanced toward the Canon, frowning, I extended a psionic tendril into her mind. Our bond had been broken, but I'd been in her head long enough to have a sense of the basic layout, and so it only took me a moment before I was confronted with Jaamzon's voice: "*Tell the Captain, thank you.*"

«*Wow. OK. We will unpack that later. We have a crisis in progress.*»

I turned and checked the nameplate of the marine guarding me and then tapped my comm.

"Jaqueline, add Corporal Hoskins to my detail, full comm access and list as active bodyguard. Any requests from the HPSS or civilian authorities I need to know about?"

"Sir, I've got a Ms. Locos of the HDTC who insists on speaking with you about the interdiction."

"HDTC? Traffic Control?"

"Heron Downport Traffic Control," Blodder said.

"I can't imagine what they would want." I smiled thinly as I could almost hear Blodder's brain trying to figure out how to respond to command sarcasm. "Never mind. She can insist all she wants, but the Code is pretty clear. Route her to whoever got assigned to zone security. If she insists on escalating, tell her I am unavailable at the moment and will get back to her as time allows. Has there been any comms from the Countess or the rest of the nobility?"

"No, sir, but I can whitelist them if you'd like."

"Do not whitelist. They can have priority access, but notify me before connecting. Also, secure a channel to the Countess's staff, and let them know that Captain Plankwell is asking for a consultation. Be sure you are logging this for the evidentiary record."

"Aye aye, sir."

I did not have the personal standing nor the connections for a direct call to the Countess, so I started the normal channels of going through her staff. It would be interesting to see how far I got.

"I don't suppose I could interest anyone in a drink?" the Canon asked.

"No!" Josefeen replied a bit too loudly.

I wanted a drink, but the optics would be bad. My wristcom beeped.

"Sir, I have a Guri Maakhiriin on the line."

"Hello, Gus," Guri said. "My sources tell me you just invoked Section 678 for the kilometer around Heron Stadium. If this is some sort of publicity stunt..."

"Pardon me a moment." I paused the call and opened a separate channel back to the ship. "Blodder, no one gets directly connected to me unless I give the say-so."

"Sorry, sir."

"You can notify me who is waiting at five minute intervals, but no direct connections. I will finish this call, however."

"Aye aye, sir."

I took a deep breath and reconnected to Guri.

"Captain Maakhiriin, your sources are correct. As to why you would think the imposition of an Imperial Interdict a stunt, I cannot help you there. I have a request in process for an audience with the Countess. Any way you could expedite that?"

"Not unless you explain to me what this is all about."

"Be advised that this conversation is being recorded for the Evidentiary Tribunal. Are you, in your role as military attache, refusing to expedite a request from the Imperial Navy to inform the planetary nobility that they may be harboring revolutionaries as the prevailing reason behind a 678 interdict?"

I waited for Guri. He really had no standing not to expedite my request. Colonial naval attaches did not overrule active duty Imperial Captains. Everyone thought I was overreacting, but the sheer panic of trying to get me to stand down or explain myself said to me there was something else going on that would not easily withstand scrutiny. Yes, it was irregular, and yes, people were having a rough time wrapping their heads around it, but this was the first time in my entire career that I had taken fire from supposedly friendly forces for what amounted to a clerical error. I had the right to invoke it, and with either the Admiral's or the Countess's support, I'd have the right to prosecute it. Karneticky had refused, which meant the Countess was essentially my last shot at getting this properly redressed.

"Revolutionaries, you say? I'll convey your concerns to the Countess and get back to you with what she expects of you."

There was a click followed by silence.

"Sir, I think he hung-up," Blodder said.

Indeed, he had. An image flashed to mind of a dramatization I'd seen some years ago, a captain bringing his battleship into the atmosphere of a world to intimidate the planetary government into surrender.

«*Oh, dear Cleon.*» Josefeen frowned. «*I do hope you're not serious.*»

"Remember, Blodder, no more direct connections. Screen whoever is asking for

contact, and I'll let you know who to pass through. I will check in again in five minutes."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Lieutenant Abbonette. Who's our best PR person on the ship?"

"Sir, with all due respect to the crew, the best PR person on the planet is standing right next to you."

"That's very kind of you to say," Masa said. "Captain, how may I be of service?"

"I need something to broadcast to people being turned away from the interdict to keep things calm, and we need to get our view out before whoever kicked off shooting officers takes the heavy silence from the Navy as something sinister. Well, more sinister."

"*Sinister.*" He smiled. "I rather like the sound of that word. Perhaps you should bring the Jaqueline down to a thousand meters to underscore the seriousness of their offense."

«*What are you doing to that poor man's brain?*»

«*Me? I'm not doing anything.*» "I think that is a touch too heavy, considering the circumstances. Perhaps something more along the lines of 'We apologize for the routing inconvenience and hope to resume normal operations shortly. We appreciate your patience.'"

"Ah... kill them with a kindness so false it's dripping with sarcasm." Masa grinned, puffing out his chest. "I like the way you think, Captain Plankwell. It's downright devious."

«*You must be doing something.*» Josefeen's voice echoed in the back of my mind as Masa sat down on one of the purple couches and punched some buttons on his wristcom. «*He repeated your thoughts as if they were his own.*»

Indeed he had, just as he'd started shouting at the guards what I'd merely been thinking. Apparently, I was some kind of psionic influencer. As if I didn't have enough to worry about.

«*Any ideas, Lieutenant?*»

«*Try pulling the curtain.*»

Closing my eyes, I withdrew my consciousness into that ethereal realm within my mind wherein the secrets of psionic perception and communication unfold. Slowly drawing the veil of what I now took to be my natural shield, I sought the elusive thread of this *influencer*

connection which I apparently emanated, trying to discern its form and its point of attachment. Meanwhile, a deep crimson hue enveloped me, intensifying as the protective barrier tightened. Could this somehow be the elusive link? With delicate effort, I endeavored to discern its shape, probing for its tether and assessing its susceptibility to manipulation.

I could see him, Captain Masa, as a younger man, coming to Jewell and learning its ways.

"The media is controlled ultimately by the Department of Information Approval and Dissemination," Karneticky's predecessor, Admiral Mtume, once told him. "They supervise essentially all media on Jewell."

"What about the Countess?" Masa asked.

"She represents Imperial interests, of course. Anything to do with the Imperium, she gets her way. Goes straight to the subcommittees and twists arms until she gets whatever she wants. In return, she defers to the PAA when it comes to local matters."

"The PAA?"

"The Planetary Administrative Authority. They're the push-back, but when push comes to shove, they tend to let the Countess have her way, although there's a bit of mutual back rubbing, which is what ultimately sustains the relationship, I suppose."

"Back rubbing?"

"Bribery. Since the focus of the local media is almost entirely on local affairs, the PAA controls who gets on DIAD's board... the aforementioned Department of Information Approval and Dissemination. They hire and fire the directors of every meaningful local outlet and sieve through the collected output of the interstellar news agencies, selecting stories for public consumption. The Countess, of course, can veto anything having to do with the Imperium, which, of course, encompasses those pieces of journalism potentially affecting Imperial interests, but she does not control the subnet²⁶⁶. That's where DIAD holds essentially absolute sway. But not forever," he added, somewhat cryptically, but then went on about how the Navy injected stories into the local news cycle.

²⁶⁶ Jewell's subnet was mentioned in Chapters 20 & 26 as being something like the Internet, full of alternative voices and perspectives.

Somewhere during this talk, a peculiar memory was triggered. It was something I would have skipped past, as there was no need to know why he'd broken up with his upper school girlfriend, but this one was tagged with a seven-digit alphanumeric. It was a Vilani alphanumeric, to be more precise, and it was sitting there on the memory's dust jacket, so to speak, like something scrawled in red and underlined twice for good measure.

"Don't you want your life to be about something more than just following orders?" she'd asked.

Masa grew up in a conservative home. She was from a broken one. They'd met at a gravskating rink called the Labyrinth. A few weeks later, she was pregnant. By then, he already knew they were wrong for each other. She was an Ine Givar²⁶⁷ sympathizer, unwilling to recognize them as the Zhodani-financed terrorist organization they obviously were. The rest of her politics followed suit. He liked her energy but not her opinions. But it didn't matter. She was headed for college with a full scholarship. They'd soon each be in very different worlds, and they both knew it. So when she said, "I tested positive," he was fairly sure he'd turned a pale shade of green.

She had to put together some number of credits to pay for a private abortion, unless they wanted their parents to find out. They never discussed whether or not to do it. It was just assumed. He told her he'd pay for half and drive her to the appointment. This was how they would handle it so they could both continue to go about their lives with minimal interruption.

"Maybe I'll join the Ine Givar," she'd said on the day they parted ways. He was pretty sure it was a joke, her way of sticking a fork in him so he wouldn't forget her too soon.

"We'll be enemies if you do," he'd replied.

They kissed goodbye one last time, then left in opposite directions, and like some love-struck idiot, he'd wept bitterly all the way home.

"Are you quite sure none of you are drinking?" Canon Forklinbrass asked with a bottle in one hand and a shot glass in the other. "Because he looks like maybe he's already had one too many. No offense."

²⁶⁷ https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Ine_Givar

Captain Masa was on the couch, asleep. Sometime during that deep dive into his brain, which I hadn't even planned, he must have passed out. Either that or I'd somehow killed him.

I closed my eyes and rubbed my forehead where a headache was developing.

Please don't be dead, I thought toward the reclining body on the couch and was rewarded with a small snore.

"Canon, as usual, your gift of insight is spot on."

I lowered myself onto the couch next to the slumbering Masa and looked to Abbonette.

"Not going exactly to plan."

Masa's eyes opened quite suddenly, and he let out a little burp.

"Wha...?" he burbled, then wiped his mouth. "I had the most atrocious dream. We'd been tased by the police, and then you declared martial law." He grinned. "Oh, and here's the best part. I'd started the whole thing by yelling at them and then egged you on, and there was this flying baby — actually, it looked more like a flying fetus — and it was telling me to grow up. What do you think it..." His voice trailed off as his fingers found the little taser holes in his uniform. "Oh... oh dear."

"I'm pretty sure the flying fetus part was a dream," I said. "As for the rest... I did very much appreciate your support when you were yelling at the police."

His nostrils flared and he looked away, eyes bulging.

"Oh Cleon's flaming cornhole," he whispered. "How could I be so stupid? How could I have been so cleonfelchingly stupid?" He thumbed the screen of his wristcom. "Search all channels for Section 678, rank by most recent, go."

Since he was busy with his wristcom, I figured I'd use mine to check upstairs.

"Plankwell to Jaqueline. Status report."

"CO requests status report," Blodder said.

"Uh... status operational, sir." It was Marshalsea's voice. He was obviously the present Officer of the Watch. "We are at General Operations, Condition 2 as per your orders."

"Are there any important messages?"

"Cmdr. Wang wants clarification as to Blue and Green Squadrons' flyby. Is it canceled due to the declaration of Section 678?"

"No. Inform Commander Wang that we are continuing with the ceremony unless otherwise directed by planetary authorities."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Sir," Blodder said, "we're receiving a lot of messages from various locals wanting to know how long the interdiction will be in effect."

"Refer all the local inquiries to the office of the Countess, as they have not seen fit to contact us with a means to resolve the issue." That might light a fire under Guri, who I imagined was probably enjoying all of this immensely. "In fact, you can use that language in the referral."

"Aye aye, sir. Also, the HPSS says they don't have sufficient personnel to enforce the interdiction. The Imperial Army garrison has offered to send troops to quell active resistance, but they're asking why we're declaring martial law and not Admiral Karneticky."

"Kindly thank the Army for their offer of assistance but decline. We will handle this ourselves. Note the instances that the HPSS say they can't enforce and have a Marine fire team on standby drop. Observe and record for the evidentiary tribunal. Failure of the HPSS to fulfill their commitments is useful to our case, as they are apparently learning to shoot Navy officers but not keep their house in order. Plankwell out."

I turned back to the Canon. "How likely is the Countess to push this to the limit?"

He looked dazed for a moment, but then arched an eyebrow and stroked his chin. "Let me give you a little hint about life, son. Everybody's just making it up as they go along. Even canons and countesses. We're all just roleplaying who we imagine ourselves to be."

That was probably the most accurate thing anyone had said to me all day, and I couldn't help but smile a little and nod toward the Canon.

"Very right, Sir. Very right indeed."

I looked over to where Masa was furiously scanning his newsfeed. Josefeen, meanwhile, still had a somewhat dreamy look on her face, and I momentarily contemplated dropping my natural psi-shield and compelling some cooperation, but more than anything, what I really wanted was a drink.

I glanced toward the liquor cabinet. *No. Bad idea.*

"You look like you could use a drink," Forklinbrass said, "preferably a stiff one."

"Canon, given your predilections, I think I need to stay focused." I gestured to the dreamy lieutenant. "I mean, really? Did you have to take out my aide? I kind of need some assistance here."

"Oh, she's perfectly fine. You're fine," he said to her, "right?"

"Too fine for you, old man."

"There," he nodded, "she's fine. I mean, she's warped and arrogant and more than a little jaded, but other than that she's fine."

She looked at me with eyes wide and nostrils flaring, but, of course, I couldn't hear whatever she was no doubt telepathically shouting, because my curtain was still drawn. Perhaps it was that relative quiet that allowed the Canon's earlier words to slowly sink in.

I was stirring up a big nest of players by invoking Imperial authority. We act and react as we imagine ourselves to be. If I were the Countess, it would be a long pull to come to a captain to explain the actions of an agency she may barely pay attention to. Judging from that committee I sat in on, she wanted results that she agreed with. How might I go about getting her to want what I wanted?

"Masa, can you get me a direct access override to the Countess? There should be something in the local comm-protocols in case of invasion or a surprise visit from the Emperor."

"Oh dear Cleon, are you perfectly insane?"

"I guess it worked," Josefeen said, making a motion of drawing a curtain in front of her face.

"Huh?" Masa asked.

"Would you like a drink?" the Canon asked him.

"I expect I'll be needing one soon," he said, turning back to his wristcom. "Only the admiral has a direct line." Then he made the sort of face one makes when some light bulb switches on inside the brain, but of course, I had no idea what that was all about, as my curtain was still drawn.

"I'll make you something soothing... or would you prefer numbing?"

"I don't care. All I want is for this day to start over again."

"I know exactly what you need," the Canon said, heading back toward the liquor cabinet.

Josefeen, meanwhile, made that pulling motion in front of her face again, only this time in the opposite direction, and all while glaring at me. I shot back with my best *superior officer stink-eye* but drew open the curtain.

“Canon,” I said, “I appreciate the ecumenical outreach, but I need my companions to be functional. Maybe after the ceremony?”

“Oh... functional, you say? Well, that rather limits the possibilities.”

«Sir, do you read me?»

«Yes, Lieutenant.»

«Finally! With all due respect, sir, you need to learn this stuff ASAP, and I can't teach with you all hunkered down.»

“Emergency call,” Blodder’s voice chirped from my wristcom. <Click> “Sir, gravcar violating our perimeter.” It was the gruff voice of Major Fa’Linto. “Requesting permission to open fire.”

“Negative. Do we have an ID?”

“Hold your fire! No, sir.” *What’s the point of being here if we can’t shoot?!*

I couldn’t help but blink, as though I was pretty sure I’d heard that last part with my mind rather than my ears, it gave me an unvarnished picture of the major’s thought process.

“Track and let them know they’ve been targeted. Blodder, is there anything else?”

“Yessir, we just received a message from the Imperial Palace warning us of the impending arrival of the Olav Robot and asking us to allow it through the interdiction zone.”

Olav Robot?

Chapter 39 **Chasing the Orb**

They furnished the AI with a physical body? The Countess was up to something. Either that or Agidda was behind it.

“Acknowledge Imperial Palace and permit transit. I assume they sent a vehicle identifier. Route them to my location.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

I looked over to Masa. “Know anything about an autonomous vehicle for the Olav AI?”

He shook his head. “I assumed they’d just bring a holo-projector.”

“Apparently not.”

No doubt, the Olav robot was in the aircar that violated the interdiction zone. If I’d given Major Fa’Linto permission to engage, I’d have been in significant trouble. Perhaps it was merely my suspicious mind, but the whole thing felt like someone had made a very big play for some kind of embarrassing photo-op: the twisted remains of an aircar with the figure of Olav Plankwell scorched by plasma fire.

The message to the public would have been crystal clear. This newly minted Imperial captain who had declared martial law had a heavy trigger finger. I’d have been painted as being out of control, and the Countess would have likely extended an invitation to Admiral Karneticky to arrest and detain this rogue captain for crimes against the Imperium. Sadly for whoever was behind this and to the frustration of my Marines, they underestimated me. I wasn’t about to put holes in the city skyline, regardless of my invocation of Section 678.

But who exactly was behind this?

I opened my mental curtain as wide as I could, but no answers came, so I looked toward Abbonette. My Intel Lieutenant wasn’t doing much in the way of continuing my training. It was time to prod the beast.

«Lieutenant, how strong am I that I caught some thoughts from the other end of a comm line?»

«Sir, this psi-enhancer is no joke. I swear I saw a ghost.»

«Shake it off. We’re on the clock!»

«Sir, there might still be time — if we can do it quickly, before the psi-enhancer wears off — to re-initiate our durable psychic link.»

«If I have to kiss you again, you better teach me how to do memory wipes next.»

«However distasteful this might be for you, sir, trust me when I say it is no less distasteful for me.»

I recalled how it felt getting dream-molested. If she'd truly found it so distasteful, she'd hid it rather well.

«Do what you need to do, and if we need to be in physical contact, do me a favor and look like you're about to be sick. I'll need a reason to care about you that looks at least somewhat rational to the rest of the people in the room.»

"I feel woozy," Josefeen announced, staggering toward me like a drunk woman with an overfull bladder. "I do believe I'm going to faint." «If you don't catch me, I'll hurt you in ways you can't even imagine!» Then she fake-fainted in my general direction.

It was all very dramatic and some of the worst acting I'd ever had the misfortune to witness. Nonetheless, I dashed forward, catching my falling Lieutenant. Would she carry out her threat if I'd refused? I was tempted to let her hit the floor just to find out, but my reflexes kicked in. I was apparently too finely-honed an officer to let a someone fall to the floor when they could be caught, and so her bathykolpian physique once more filled my arms, and I slowly laid her down on the floor, putting my face close to hers, as though to check if she was breathing. With her eyes closed, we couldn't communicate telepathically, so I opened one of her eyelids with my thumb.

«You better not puke on me,» I warned. «This is a new uniform, and it already has holes in it.»

«Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. And then open wide like before.»

Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation? She wanted me to kiss her again? While pretending to do mouth-to-mouth?

Masa grimaced, casting his stern gaze upon the Canon. "You killed her!"

"No! No!" Forklinbrass suddenly looked like he might need a change of trousers. "Does she have a weak heart? Let me hit her with something. Where's my kit?"

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll save her." *Oh, the things I do for the Emperor.*

Situating my body so as to screen most of what was going on, I leaned down and kissed her, firmly and with intention, and although I assiduously avoided any appearance of impropriety, a memory from my night with Kaz flashed to mind, a memory of us coupling.

«No!» Josefeen's psychic voice, green and fury-tinged, shot through my brain.

Mindful of the potential vengeance of Intelligence officers, I promptly banished the image.

«Yes, yes. Sorry. I'm just a man, after all.»

«See into me, Gus, and let me see into you.»

"There it is," the Canon said. "This should do the trick."

"No need," I said. "Thanks be to Cleon, she's still breathing." Which meant she wouldn't need anymore mouth-to-mouth. "Let me just make sure."

I went in again, kissing her once more but this time trying to open my mind to hers. We'd managed it before. Where were those psychic tendrils?

"Mmm..."

Her lips, pressed upon mine, parted slightly, and in came her tongue. *Her tongue?!* I thought she said no tongue!

"That doesn't look like any CPR I ever saw," Masa mumbled.

"Holy shmoley," the Canon agreed. I could picture them both staring, bug-eyed.

This wasn't going to work. Either I had to try a lot harder and with an audience, which didn't help, or we needed to give up or figure out something else.

Then it hit me. *The psionic globe.* If that couldn't give me a boost, nothing would. Where was that damn diplomatic case? I spotted it resting on the floor where I'd absentmindedly set it down to fiddle with my wristcom.

"Give me that," I said.

Masa fetched it and handed it over.

"Sirs, do you mind giving the lieutenant a little privacy?" I dragged every last scrap of authority I had into that request. "She has a condition."

"What sort of condition?" Masa asked.

"It's classified."

"Classified?"

“I mean, it’s confidential. Sorry, I got a briefing on it but never really expected it to, you know, happen.”

“Come, Captain Masa,” the Canon said, heading back to the bar. “I’ll make you some coffee, and we can give these two... ah... a little space.”

I was afraid he was going to say lovebirds or something equally ridiculous, but he’d stopped himself, and Captain Masa politely followed. That only left Corporal Hoskins.

“Sir, would you like me to get her a medic?”

“No, I’ve got this. Keep watch down that corridor, and let me know if someone is coming.”

“Yessir.”

The electronic lock beneath the handle consisted of four buttons marked 1 through 4 with a little LCD display. Lacking the code, I leaned into Josefeen and again thumbed open one of her eyelids.

«*What’s the code for the globe?*» I asked.

«*The psi orb? In the diplomatic case?*»

«*Yeah.*»

«*One two three four.*»

«*One two three four? What kind of code is that?*»

«*One I can remember.*»

«*I cannot believe you used a sequential code.*»

«*It stopped the Admiral, didn’t it?*»

I let go of her eyelid, entered the code, and opened the case. As promised, the little black pouch rested within like some miniature slumbering dragon, one that I was about to reawaken.

Here goes nothing.

Bracing myself, I trepidatiously slipped my hand inside the pouch but felt nothing.

Is it even in here?

My fingers searched frantically.

No! The pouch was empty. That meant the Admiral had it.

As I pulled my hand free, the psi came out alongside my wrist and began rapidly floating off to the left.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁸ This was the result of some bad dice rolls on my part.

I’d told Conrad that Gus felt nothing in the bag and he questioned whether it was even there. Instead of removing his hand gently, however, he assumed it wasn’t there and removed it normally, which led me to roll dice to see whether it came out slow or quick. I

Oh no!!

I turned toward it, knee-bumping the side of Josefeen’s head in my haste. Her muted “Ow” made me wince, and I almost fell over. Having missed the chance to dive for it, I got up and attempted to corral the escaped item. The problem was this thing was *really* slippery as evidenced by what just happened. There was no guarantee I’d be able to grab hold of it with one hand. It was more like a persistent soap bubble than a rubber ball. That must be why I didn’t feel it inside the bag. I might have had my hand on it and not even known it. And now, thanks to my abject stupidity, it was floating out where anyone could see it if they were to merely turn their head.

The thought made my heart skip, my mouth suddenly dry with fear, as if I were caught with this damn thing there would be consequences. Either I’d have to bullshit masterfully — beyond masterfully — or my career would be over. I’d lose my captaincy and probably my freedom. I’d lose everything, I realized, as I came within arm’s reach.

I tried clasping my hands around it when it suddenly changed trajectory. It must have hit an air current from one of the vents. Either that or it changed course of its own will, as it was now headed toward the liquor cabinet, where the Canon and Captain Masa were engaged in conversation.²⁶⁹

can’t remember exactly how bad this roll was, but it was bad enough to get this little episode rolling.

²⁶⁹ Using the d6 as a luck die, I yet again rolled terribly, this time a 1 cascaded by a 2 (to see what I mean by cascading luck rolls, see the beginning of my comments to Lee Gold in A&E #363), so while this wasn’t the absolute worst thing that could have happened, it was basically right next door. It might be worth noting that I’ve nearly always been a terrible roller of dice. I’ve been lucky in other ways, so I’m content with the arrangement, but being a generally terrible roller may be one of the reasons I decided GMing was more fun than playing. Indeed, I’m going to hazard an opinion that terrible rollers make better GMs, because players don’t like it when their characters die, and it’s easier to defeat the monsters when the GM is always rolling garbage, but in a case like this where I’m rolling for the PC, being rolling-impaired was just making everything more ridiculous than it already was. You can judge for yourselves whether that’s a good thing for the story. For Gus, not so much.

Masa was angled toward me a bit more than the Canon, and so he was the first to notice my approach in his peripheral vision.

“Do you see that?” I pointed at the orb. “Don’t touch it!”

His mouth fell open as his gaze locked on the psionic orb, and the Canon turned as well.

Time to dance like my ass was on fire. Hiding it was now out of the question. My best bet was to misdirect.

“Why’s there a soap bubble in here?” Masa asked.

The Canon looked momentarily dazed as I groped for words. “Uh... well...”

“It’s a metaphor for life’s beauty,” Forklinbrass finally replied, “as well as its impermanence and fragility.”

“Ah, yes.” Masa nodded. “A brilliant idea, Captain. I wish I’d thought of bringing a bubble machine. Although, I don’t know if it’s really appropriate for this sort of service.”

I was a little too busy to send out a psychic tendril, but apparently all I had to do was to wonder what Masa was thinking, and quite instantly the image of soap bubbles floating over a class of college graduates flashed to mind. He’d been giving a speech, extolling the virtues and benefits of military service, and the bubbles seemed emblematic of the endless possibilities of youth.

“Wait,” he said. “What about the Lieutenant?”

“I’m fine,” Josefeen said as the orb changed course yet again, this time heading toward the corridor where she and I first entered.

Oh no you don’t. But then I stopped. Last time I’d held it, it had, in effect, stung me.

I darted back to Josefeen and grabbed its pouch, turning it inside out over my hand. She was already getting up, having apparently given up on waiting for me to pretend to save her.

«*You don’t need that. What in Cleon’s name are you doing?*» her voice rang in my head as our eyes momentarily locked.

«*Improvising!*»

Then I was off to the races, down the corridor to the spot where we’d established our durable psychic link, which, thanks to the Canon, turned out not to be quite so durable. As soon as I caught up to the damn thing, I reached out to grab it, but



it must have gotten caught in another air current, and it did a sharp reversal, heading back toward the green room. I spun around, fully intent upon doing whatever was necessary to catch it, but Josefeen was now standing at the room’s entrance, effectively blocking its path. She closed the door behind her as the orb floated between us, zigzagging back and forth as though caught in a vortex of shifting airflows.

«*Drop the bag and reach out to it with your mind.*» Josefeen’s voice reverberated along the inner walls of my skull.

With my mind? «Easier said than done.»

«*It thinks we’re playing a game. Have it come to you.*»

It thinks we’re playing a game? «It thinks?!»

It was zigzagging back and forth because it was trying to decide which way to go. Because it thought this was some sort of game, like tag or whatever.

Dropping the bag, I put out my hand, open-palmed, and focused on my memory of holding it. That had happened twice, once in my quarters aboard the Jaqueline, but there was also another time long ago. I was about two years old, a chubby, little tantrum-thrower, and I was snooping around in the strange house of this woman into whose care I’d been unceremoniously bestowed.²⁷⁰

Fortunately, it didn’t take her too long to figure out two-year-olds were easily bribed, and so the gifts began. Needless to say, I was in my glory. But, of course, too much is never enough, and so I began exploring her home as she talked to someone on her wristcom. Even at two, I already knew what wristcoms were, and more to the point, I knew people bigger than myself were easily distracted by them, so I took that as my cue, as there was one room in particular she didn’t like me going into.

Indeed, the door wouldn’t open now when I approached. That confirmed I wasn’t supposed to go in. She must have done something to make it stop working, which, of course, made me angry.

“Gah!” I kicked the door, imaging in my fevered optimism that it would explode open, like

²⁷⁰ See Chapter 13 in A&E #561.

in cartoons. Instead, it merely opened, but that was good enough for me.

I walked in — stumbled might be more accurate, considering I was two — and there, in front of me, was a particular cabinet to which I felt inexplicably drawn. I went to it. There was no handle. I slammed my fist. “Gah!”

It opened.

A little bag sat inside. It was tied by a drawstring.

Working out the mechanics of drawstrings was apparently not my forte. Knots, in particular, were an unpleasant thing to behold. Never had a two-year-old been angrier at a piece of string.

“Rahr!”

My fingers, seemingly of their own volition, grasped two pieces of the string and pulled in opposite directions, pulling one through the other, and then, again without thinking, I grabbed another part of the string and pulled, and the whole bag fell open.

There it was, the orb, floating right in front of me.

I put out my hand. It gently brushed the palm. Glassy but not glass. Slick but without residue. It made my whole hand tingle.

And then it bit.

Something had cracked open in the back of my mind, and two-year-old me saw Zenna, my sister, yet unborn. I saw her fiery death in space. And I saw Vanista, a mere fraction of a moment yet to be lived.

“No Augie, No!”²⁷¹

The orb sat in my outstretched hand, which tingled all the way from the center of my palm to the tips of my fingers. I’d successfully called it.

He’s a natural, Josefeen was thinking.

“You know, I don’t want to be the first to say this,” Masa whispered to the Canon, “but I think something weird is going on.”

“What do you mean?”

How I was able to hear them, I had no idea. They were both in the other room, sitting at the bar, drinks in hand. Indeed, how could I even see them?

“Plankwell... chasing a soap bubble around... while his lieutenant faints and then gets back up

again like nothing happened. None of this seems odd to you?”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” the Canon replied.

“It’s probably a hallucination.”

“It all happened before I started drinking. And I thought you said this was coffee.”

“It’s my coffee. It’s probably distorting your sense of time.”

Masa looked at him, saucer-eyed.

“Don’t worry. You’ll be fine,” the Canon said.

“But now it’s time to pray. You may ask something of the universe, if you wish, but I would caution you not to ask for anything for yourself. Asking personal favors can work out badly, as the universe, it turns out, has a... a somewhat wry sense of humor.”

During all this, Josefeen approached one slow step at a time, but my attention was not on her. I was focused on the orb.

What is it?

Inexplicably, a deep sense of happiness welled up within me. The sheer fact such a thing as this existed and that I was holding it, now for a third time, was making me euphoric. At least, my heart was thumping, a steady drumbeat amid the chaos.

I fought to keep my command mask on lest Lt. Abbonette have further cause for worry. However, I couldn’t help but smile as an errant thought, that I could just kiss them all, flitted maniacally across my brain.

«*Are you ready to do this again?*» she asked. We were now face-to-face, her lips mere centimeters from mine. «*Are you ready to open wide, Captain?*»

I lifted my free hand and brought it gently to the back of her head, drawing her close, as the orb, still sitting in my other hand, began pulsing as if it contained an actual beating heart. Its pulse, oddly enough, kept time with the thumping in my own chest, and as I held Josefeen, or to be more accurate, as we held each other, I could feel her heart pulsing to the same clock.

I opened my mental curtain wide, fully accepting her and offering myself, all my insecurities, my achievements, my total sense of self. It was so much easier establishing the link this way, with the orb breaking down all my inhibitions and allowing me to revel in the freedom of being who I was, fully.

²⁷¹ See page 106.

We are coming together as one, we thought in unison.

I knew, quite suddenly, how she liked to be held, even the way she'd been cradled as a baby by her fathers. Yes, two men, both psions, were her genetic fathers.²⁷² They'd served at the naval garrison on Karin²⁷³. Josefeen was a genetic blend, a sort of reverse gender clone paid for by the Navy in a program it was running in order to breed even more powerful psions. These men as well as others in their polycule²⁷⁴ trained her from an early age to explore her psionic talents, and later she attended a secluded and very secret school on Iderati²⁷⁵ called Irasdur Parga Eduba, also known as the Brookhaven Psionic Academy.

A parade of images cascaded through my mind. Josefeen at different ages, each with different emotional nuance. I saw her as a child, as a teenager, as a young woman, and as she was now.

Is he calling me old?

She was old. She looked only around thirty, but she was far older than myself. She'd been on anagathics²⁷⁶, longevity drugs, for decades, plying her trade as a honey pot for IBIS and later as an instructor at Brookhaven. Anagathics belonged to Intel. Even the nobles did not partake, at least in modern times. Through her mind, I could sense the reason: the nobles were not really in charge. Intel was the true master. They, whoever they were, placed her aboard the Jaqueline to test and train neo-psions, people who had the gift but didn't yet know it. Neos like myself were

particularly valuable to Intel, because there was virtually no way the Zhodani could know about their potential, a potential that could be awakened by these psi orbs and then used along the borders and into the neutral zone.

That's the reason I was being activated, because although the Zhos knew we had psions, they didn't know Captain Plankwell was one.

So it was true. Josefeen's controller, who she'd never met in person, but who was apparently aboard my ship, wanted the location of the Vermillion Stance, the ship that Intel believed had attacked us.²⁷⁷ The only question was whether the Zhodani had an asset on Jewell who knew its location. I suddenly remembered that Zhodani Navy officer I'd caught staring at me at my reception like he was trying to read my mind through whatever psi-suppression field Maz had erected.²⁷⁸ The stolen cruiser had to have some sort of base, and it was probably close by, given that it was clearly operating in this neck of the woods.

That's why I'd been activated. None of this would have happened otherwise. But they were always going to activate me eventually. So there had always been a psi orb in my future, which explained why one now rested in the palm of my hand.

Several had been discovered at various archaeological sites in and around the Imperium. Josefeen had been told they predated Humaniti. "Toys of the Ancients," a teacher once told her. "Some call them the Eyes of God." The one in my hand continued pulsing in time with our beating hearts.

Holding one, at least by a psion, presented an abundance of opportunities. How I knew this, I could only surmise was due to our psychic link. Josefeen stared into my eyes as if she was trying to communicate, but instead of sending words back and forth, we were in each other's memories.

I could feel her poking around in the database that was my brain, trying to work out what I thought of her. Most important to her was my long-term reaction to our little squabble aboard the Kinnuki. She'd stuck me with the psi-enhancer without so much as a friendly warning.

272 Conrad suggested that Josefeen have two fathers. See <https://groups.google.com/g/plankwell-pbem-s1/c/zmK3WRnuGI0/m/8jhgV-86AAAj>

273 [https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Karin_\(world\)](https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Karin_(world))

274 Conrad suggested that Josefeen had been raised in a polycule (<https://www.dictionary.com/e/gender-sexuality/polycule/>). I asked the TML about this idea (<https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/24628140/>), raising the question of non-monogamous familial units in the Imperium, and I ultimately chose Karin as her birthworld, because it places her within the Enterprise (https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Enterprise_Federation) Federation's cultural zone, which apparently encourages "footloose and free polyamory", and also, the Naval Garrison on Karin makes use of secret psionic police. So all the pieces sort of fit.

275 [https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Iderati_\(world\)](https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Iderati_(world))

276 <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Anagathic> and see my article on Anagathics in A&E #521.

277 See page 7.

278 See page 29.

And then there was her laughing her head off while I was being arrested.

It was the damn psi-enhancer. It lowered our inhibitions, and our inner jerks came out. Was that why I declared martial law? The look in Josefeen's eyes told me that we could crush the Countess, or the Admiral, or even the government of Jewell, if Intel gave its assent. Her boss, the one on my ship who she'd never seen, could do almost anything.

Hello, my new friend. Now that you're receiving this message, you've found the ability to enter deeply. You can do this by establishing a psychic link and then using the orb to probe the mind of your subject, as you are doing now. I am placing Josefeen under your command, and you may reach me through her. Let her teach you, and contact Khourzkhoug Kanrrae when you are ready for further training.

It was in that same, gender-neutral voice I'd heard while probing Josefeen's mind earlier.²⁷⁹ She, meanwhile, was oblivious to the message she'd just delivered. She was still searching through my recent memories, relieved that our psychic link and the access it gave me to her point of view had mellowed my impression of her, which had soured in the Kinnuki. She was further pleased that I found her conviction and willingness to get the job done using any and all tools available to her, even if I happened to be one of those tools, very attractive. But she also knew that although there was a certain physical attraction between us, I didn't consider her my type.

Until a man gets with me, they don't know nothin' about what type is their type. I can ride like a succubus from Hell.

Indeed, she had, and it was not difficult to realize that she was ready to devour me whole. It was nothing special about me, per se. She'd done it to other men. She'd called me a manipulator, but she was far worse. But thanks to her supervisor, I had the upper hand.

I am placing Josefeen under your command.

Just like that, she found it. I was in charge, not her. That solved a big problem, as the one thing I'd resented about her was her expectation of my subservience.

«I can't believe that fool put you in charge.»

I'd had no choice but to accept the situation, just as now she had no choice. I could follow her lead if I wanted to, or I could ignore it. It was up to me.

«Just because I got wasted on the job, now I'm being demoted? Don't think this isn't your fault. You could have warned me about that Deacon of Drugs back there.»

People were talking in the other room. It was near enough, I could sense each one of them like I was in there with them, but it was now seven instead of two, and one of them wasn't human.

It wasn't even alive.

²⁷⁹ See page 213.

Chapter 40

Louche Canon

I wasn't really *seeing* the people back in the green room, at least not in the usual sense of the word. An echo of a memory from Josefeen's training fluttered across my consciousness like a moth flirting with a candle's flame. It was of one of her instructors describing the science behind psionic clairvoyance, and he kept talking about the local probability matrix. It was quantum in nature, which was somehow mathematically useful to know for those who worked at the technology end of psionics. The upshot was that I was accessing senses that, although they had natural counterparts, were not tied to my eyes or ears, nor indeed to anyone's. Instead, my consciousness was like a fly on the wall, and I could maneuver with my thoughts, effectively zooming in to 'see' things, although I was not really 'seeing' them. It was more that I was simply made aware of them in as much detail as I wished and in ways that went well beyond mere sensory perception.

Beyond the door were six people and one robot, the Olav robot. Amika stood beside it. She'd accompanied the robot, officially at the request of the Countess but actually at her own insistence, because she wanted to make General Dakhir jealous. Of course, she understood her designs to be far-fetched given that Olav was not an actual person and had no real status beyond the collective memory of those who still revered his name. Beside her stood my old shipmate, Guri Maakhiriin, who was accompanying her as her escort and guard, and then there was Ensign Florence. Her job was to monitor Olav with remote firmly in hand, pause button at the ready, watching for any sign of malfunction.

If I'd let the Major fire on that gravcar, I would have very likely killed them all. That would have been messy.

"He left?" Amika asked, referring to me.

"Toward the stage," Captain Masa said, not quite sure if this wasn't all some elaborate hallucination. He'd seen the faceless Stavelot a number of times while she and the Admiral were courting. Of course, she wasn't faceless back then. She was beautiful, but in a weathered sort of

way, not at all the high society type, which was the Admiral's usual preference. Karneticky once mentioned that she could use some makeup. Masa disagreed but said nothing. It was generally best to say nothing to or about nobles as well as those adjacent to them, so when she'd said hello to him in passing, he'd merely smiled and nodded. Now, however, he decided what his wish would be.

"When will you be getting your new face?" he asked her.

"Excuse me?" A spike of irritation fired within her brain. *What did he mean by that? Does he mean I looked terrible? Like a robot, perhaps? Well, what did it matter to him or anyone else?!* It was all so fast, and these were not even thoughts so much as emotions tinged by insecurity.

"I heard you've ordered one," he went on, oblivious to the fact he'd offended her. "Will it be like your old face or something different?"

Her mind locked up for a moment, but then she understood he didn't mean any harm. With the cup in his hand and Canon Regimath Forklinbrass standing next to him, it was obvious to her the poor man had been drugged. *Oh, Reggie, you're incorrigible.*

"It'll be... exactly the same as before," she lied.

"Oh, good," Masa said and smiled. "I hope it comes soon so you can be back to your old self. It must have been a nightmare, all that you've gone through."

"It has been," she said, nodding. I could sense her reply even before she gave it. I could even sense the speech center of her brain activating what remained of the muscles in her throat, which in turn activated the electronic voice box that had been installed where her mouth used to be. But most of all, I could sense some part of her, deep inside her mind, lighting up at his "*Oh, good.*" It was the kindest thing any human had said to her in what seemed like a long while. It was only then that she remembered passing by him a few times and saying hello, and how he would always smile and nod but say nothing in return, and then she'd wonder if she needed a breath mint.

"Would anyone like a drink?" the Canon asked.

"Don't tempt me," Amika said, "and no offense, but I would never accept a drink from

you, Reggie. Perhaps we should see what's going on outside?"

In the back of his mind, the Canon was thinking about the Eye of God he'd seen me chasing. He'd recognized it for what it was, but he also knew it to be associated with psionics, which he well understood to be verboten, yet he was still moved by the inordinate degree of respect I'd shown him earlier when I expressed *Kalan Sishame*²⁸⁰. Though his religion was lax in many regards, he sternly believed in the repayment of kindnesses, and so he was determined that whatever was going on, he would help me, convinced that this was the will of the Universe.

"Wait," he said as Amika started for the door.

"Wait? Why?"

"Ah..." the Canon turned toward Captain Masa, his mind drawing a momentary blank.

"There's something weird going on," Masa said.

I stepped away from Josefeen, breaking physical contact, but that hardly seemed to matter at this point. Our psionic connection was intense, so much stronger than before. The psi orb, Eye of God, or whatever it was stopped pulsing, but it stayed in my hand, its pouch still at my feet. I bent down, picked the pouch off the floor, and carefully slipped it back where it belonged. «*This is only for a little while,*» I reassured it before tightening the drawstring, though I was unsure it would understand.

The diplomatic case was nowhere to be seen. Josefeen had obviously left it in the green room.

«*Hide this.*» I locked eyes with her as I handed her the pouch. «*You back from tripping?*»

She nodded as the door to the green room opened, Amika standing there with Guri and what looked like a robot with the helmeted head of Olav.

"Well, hello again," Amika said. "What's this I hear about a bubble machine?"

"Bubble machine?" I tried to make as bland and confused an expression as my face was capable of forming. "I'm sorry, milady. Someone must have misspoke. There are no bubble machines here." «*Lieutenant, what did you call my knack for influencing people?*»

«*Manipulation.*»

"I told you it was a hallucination," the Canon said, somewhat manipulatively for a holy man. "My apologies, Captain," he added from somewhere behind Amika. "I couldn't resist a little chemical evangelism."

"Dear Cleon!" Masa exclaimed as Josefeen and I re-entered the green room. He tossed to the sink the little bit of remaining coffee still in his cup. "You're a menace!"

"Tell me about it." Josefeen said.

"Nobody's perfect," the Canon replied. "So would anyone else like a drink?"

"Perhaps later, Your Grace," I said. "Right now it's time to get this show on the road."

I took a good hard look at the Olav robot. It appeared that someone had slapped a small 3-D monitor on the chassis of some law enforcement model. Instead of a glass top, however, the monitor was encased in a helmet, so that one could only see its face from the front, which was, needless to say, projected. And though it looked back at me, its gaze was just a little bit off-center, being fractionally high and to the left. Nonetheless, it offered me a slight bow, one that in court posture was at just the right angle to denote respect for a teacher.

Ensign Florence gave me a quick nod as well, and slightly bemused, I nodded to both her and to the Olav robot in acknowledgment. I could imagine she in particular might be a little uncomfortable in the company she was keeping. Poor Ensign. She'd just have to get used to it.

"I communicated your request to the Countess's Chief of Staff," Guri said. "As for now, if you could provide me with any evidence in support of the accusations you've made, I will certainly pass it on."

He was telling me the truth, but he was leaving out a few important things. He'd already seen the video of the arrest. He and the Chief of Staff had discussed it, and Guri said some disparaging things about me, things that would no doubt be relayed to the Countess. "That blowhard has relied on family name and connections to get out of every scrape he's ever gotten himself into, but Karneticky isn't his admiral and doesn't want to touch this mess."

I looked at Guri and fingered the holes the stunner had made in my uniform.

²⁸⁰ See page 221.

"Evidence will be provided once the Evidentiary Board has ruled on the materials we are collecting."

Evidentiary Board? "Excellent," he said. *Before it was an Evidentiary Tribunal.*

"We are very sorry about what happened with the HPSS," Amika added.

"I very much appreciate that, milady. It is the very first piece of courtesy I have received from your family."

She'd been sitting to the side, listening to my prior conversation with Guri as it had transpired, this being the one where I'd asked him to expedite an audience with the Countess. She actually called Helena and talked to her about what was going on shortly after he'd hung up on me, but Guri told the Countess that Admiral Karneticky wasn't going to back me up. Guri was sure I'd stepped into a big pile of poo with the interdiction and was determined to make the most of it, but Amika was sympathetic. The HPSS had been particularly heavy-handed ever since the recent protests over a Vargr they'd killed while in custody, and this latest episode only confirmed her opinion of them. The Countess, however, didn't want to get directly involved. She didn't want to antagonize the police, nor did she want to be viewed as not being supportive of a Plankwell.

I gestured at Olav. "This seems a little thrown together. Do you really feel, or should I say, does the Countess feel this is an appropriate showing at a memorial ceremony for our fallen comrades?"

"It is merely a request," Amika replied, "yours to grant or deny as you see fit, Captain, though I talked to Mr. Agidda, and he approved the idea personally."

I reached out with my psychic tentacle and felt for Amika's thoughts. I was getting used to her mask, and I hoped my new senses would give me a fuller image of the woman who chose to call attention to her wounds rather than hide them. In my mind, I saw her talking to a doctor of reconstructive and cosmetic surgery.

"There are two major options," she was told.

Oh good. A fork in the road.

Either they could fix her up with a series of procedures that would hopefully leave her fully restored or she could select the dynamic mask option, which was much more expensive and

higher tech. There were significant pros and cons, but the big advantage of dynamic masks was that she'd be able to look like nearly anyone.

Of course, a dynamask was the sort of high-tech gadget that was beyond the reach of most people. And the procedure would render her face mostly insensitive to touch. She'd be able to smile, frown, and so forth regardless of the face she wore. But they'd have to cut and splice her facial nerves into the synthetic nerves of a configurable facial mount, which would have to be installed first, and since biological-to-electronic interfaces were often a bit twitchy, it was generally best to dial back the sensitivity. But once the facial mount was accepted by the body's immune system and the underlying tissue fully healed, she'd be able to walk around in the guise of random strangers or even people she knew. Most importantly, and the reason the Countess was so supportive, was that Amika would then be able to stand in for Helena at public events the Countess didn't want to attend. Because they were so close, the Countess trusted Amika to do this and to do it competently. And with her configurable voicebox, she'd be able to sound like Helena in the event she had to speak.

Amika had gone ahead with the operation and had already gone back halfway through the healing process for an adjustment. Very soon, however, she'd be visited by doctors who would do a final re-tweak. She already had several masks she was itching to apply, different ones for different skin tones and hair styles. She even bought one to make her look Darrian. Why? She had no idea. Maybe she just wanted to look smart.

"In any case," she continued, "don't be fooled by Olav's visual focus seeming a little off-center. The crowd won't notice — they'll be too far away — nor will people watching on their viewies. They'll see Olav in the flesh, or at least a computer-generated version. In any case, he's quite the silvertongue, if you'll give him a chance."

"Ouch," Olav said.

"What?" she asked.

"Back in my day, calling someone a silvertongue was akin to calling them a liar."

"Oh, well, maybe you are. How would I know?"

I couldn't read his mind, but Olav gritted his holographic teeth and made a little smile, the sort one might make when feeling unjustly attacked, albeit in a playful manner. They'd been flirting, I suddenly realized, and she rather fancied him on a personal level, even though any sort of future with a robot was, of course, completely out of the question. In any case, over the last few years and for reasons she couldn't consciously identify, she'd only found herself attracted to uniformed men, specifically those of rank. It felt weird and perhaps even a little unseemly, as though the business of mating had suddenly become transactional, but her neuropsychiatrist assured her it was all perfectly natural.

I considered the matter of robot-human relations a moment further but quickly shook it off. Not really my concern. The part about men in uniform and Darrians, however...

«Josefeen, what does it look like when someone is under a compulsion?» I didn't need to refer to Amika and these odd desires she'd apparently noticed. Josefeen and I were now linked in a way that whatever crossed the awareness of one of us, everything from thoughts to perceptions to even our respective emotional states, was observable by the other. Indeed, two sensory feeds and two trains of thought, albeit intertwined, was a bit overwhelming. I was sure it was making us both look a little spacy, which was fine for her, as she had the Canon's evangelism as an excuse, but for me it wasn't such a great look.

In any case, I could sense her own curiosity right alongside mine. We were like two knights on a chessboard, a powerful combination, so long as we acted in concert. The upshot was that these compulsions of Amika looked to Josefeen like possible manipulation.

«It's worth a deeper look,» she thought as she put the orb's pouch back in the diplomatic case, the Canon's gaze following her every move. «He knows too much. I don't suppose you'd let me euthanize him?»

I thought about the many people I'd killed over the course of the war, and Josefeen had her fair share of clandestine kills as well. Neither of us were strangers to violence in pursuit of Imperial objectives, and so I considered her suggestion seriously rather than simply waiving it off.

«He knows,» I replied, looking toward the Canon, «but so far he is aiding us or at least not interfering.» The Canon looked toward me, noticing my gaze, but instead of looking away, I locked my gaze onto his eyes and reached into his mind, trying to perceive the shape of his memories and learn what he knew of the orb.

Regimath had cleared many hurdles to get accepted as a Shepherd of the Order of the Silver Chalice. Given the nature of their mission, they were perpetually blessed with an abundance of applicants. Hence, they were able to be selective, so part of the process of becoming ordained involved a series of examinations regarding the history and philosophy behind spirituality through altered states of consciousness as well as the rampant hedonism often associated with such endeavors.

Although these Deacons of Drugs, as they were sometimes called, ostensibly had the best job in the universe, they were a stoic lot, generally known for the seriousness of their meditations. So when, on the final day of his examinations, they asked him why he'd first decided to join the order, he was tempted to talk about spirituality and his deep commitment to truth-seeking. But then, looking at them all, he realized he couldn't lie.

«When I began,» he said, «all I wanted was a job where I could be stoned all day.»

«Since then, what have you learned?» one asked.

Again, he was tempted to regurgitate the subject matter of his examinations, but the essential truth at the bottom of it all was dishearteningly simple.

«What I learned is that I know nothing. Nor does anyone else. We sometimes think we know things, and what we think, if we think it enough, becomes what we believe, but belief and knowledge are two different things.»

«What do you believe?»

«I believe in the unanswerable, in the Divine Mystery, but like a snail pondering the machinations of human beings... I'm sorry if this is the wrong answer, but it's all I've got. The enlightenment we seek is fleeting. Our minds are too small to contain it. That is why we must practice humility, above all else.»

One of them pulled out the *Eye of God*, one who hadn't spoken, and he simply nodded, and that's how Regimath Forklinbrass had been accepted. He'd learned later only that it was some sort of lie detector.

"But what is it? Where does it come from? And what is it called?"

"They call it the Eye of God."

"Of God?"

"An old name for the Universe back in the days of religious personification."

It was to be touched only by a select few, the Supreme Stoners, who, it was said, had delved so deeply into the Divine Mystery that they had essentially blinded themselves to the physical world. Now that he was semi-retired, it was the Canon's hope that he would one day find his way to this path, although it would mean giving up what little was left of his mind.

In his heart of hearts, he simply wanted to touch the orb to see if it would enlighten him, and if that meant he would become a borderline invalid, like the other Supremes, so be it. If it meant his death, so much the better. Whichever the case, whether I allowed him this privilege or not, he was determined that the honor I bestowed upon him would be repaid. The universe had brought us together, which in itself was a gift, and he would not spit at this.

I held his gaze a moment longer and then gave him a quick wink and a grin before turning toward Captain Masa.

«He's not interfering yet,» Josefeen agreed, *«but my concern is that at some point this louché Canon is going to become a loose cannon.»*

«Perhaps so, but not yet, and he might still be useful as a plausible excuse for the other actions we might be taking. We might use him to slip a drink to the Zhos, if it comes to that.»

«That's rather devious, sir.» I was pretty sure she meant it as a compliment.

"Captain Masa," I said, "I would really like to conclude our participation in the ceremony and attend to the issue of the Interdiction from the more controlled confines of the Jaqueline."

"Of course," Masa said. "Your Holiness, would you please come with me?"

"Now?" the Canon asked. "I'm not under arrest, am I?"

"No... no... you're going to give the invocation."

"Oh."

Masa led him into the corridor I'd told Corporal Hoskins to guard, and Hoskins stood to the side to let them pass. The rest of us followed, and soon we all turned a corner, went through a door, and found ourselves in a backstage area.

"How are we doing?" Captain Masa asked a lieutenant, who turned from what looked like a security monitor. It displayed a matrix of video feeds showing the various escalator portals situated at even intervals along the stadium's circumference. People continued to come in, many of them Navy personnel, but there were also what looked like members of the general public, most of them dressed in black.

"The interdiction slowed down seating," he said, glancing toward me.

"Captain Plankwell, Lieutenant Agu."

"Sir," the Lieutenant said, saluting. I could sense he'd recently talked to Major Fa'Linto, arranging the details and timing of the presentation of the honor guard, and as they'd talked, he'd asked if the Major knew anything about the interdiction.

"Yeah. The locals put a hand on the Navy, and they got it slapped. If I'm not mistaken in my assessment of this Captain, they'll get it slapped worse and maybe even cut off, if they ever try it again."

Legally, such matters were ultimately adjudicated by the reigning noble, in this case the Countess, but Fa'Linto was apparently not one to be burdened by legal processes, particularly with respect to a world on which he was not actually stationed. Agu, on the other hand, had to watch himself, though he was of the opinion that the locals should not touch the Navy unless it involved a bunch of dogfaces burning down a nightclub, so he simply nodded, taking it onboard that I was not the sort of man who gladly suffered fools.

Except for Josefeen.

«I heard that,» she retorted, thinking that while this was all very interesting, it wasn't getting us any closer to what was going on with Amika. Meanwhile, Guri approached me. He'd just gotten a message from the Countess's Chief of Staff.

"The Countess hereby directs you to drop the interdiction," he said. "Your dispute with the HPSS, if you wish to continue it, will be put before the County Magisterial Court for expedited adjudication." *Where I hope you go down in flames.*

His words were loud enough to grab the attention of everyone backstage, which meant all eyes were now on me.

"It pleases me to hear and obey the noble Countess. I will have our Evidentiary Board contact the County Magisterial Court for details of the adjudication."

I then spoke into my wristcom: "Jaqueline, this is the Captain. Cease Interdiction operations immediately. Remain in geosynchronous orbit. Divert groundside forces to my location for additional security. Liaise with Major Fa'Linto for force allocation, and coordinate with Captain Masa and Lieutenant Agu for operational direction. Corporal Hoskins is to remain as my personal bodyguard until Major Fa'Linto designates a replacement or my return to the Jaqueline. Interdiction Evidentiary Board is to continue evidence gathering and is to liaise with Guri Maakhiriin as the Countess's representative and to contact the County Magisterial Court for expedited adjudication."

Finally! I had been mildly concerned that my earlier slip about the Board versus Tribunal had given away the game, but this really was my plan from the beginning. Acknowledging the position of the Navy moved things forward. I was pretty sure we would find something while investigating the HPSS. It obviously wasn't an outright rebellion, but there was something going on, and I wanted to find out what it was.

I smiled at Guri. "Anything else?"

He wanted to take a swing at me just to wipe the smile off my face, but of course he couldn't, least of all here, surrounded by witnesses. His struggle not to ball his hand into a fist only made me smile wider. He finally turned, pinched his lips together, and walked away, the very epitome of self-control.

«I have to hand it to you, sir. You really have an effect on people.»

«He brought it on himself, both back then and now.»

I squinted at my wristcom, wondering how much time I had to rehearse my speech. There was a mini-slate in my valise, but I'd forgotten it in the green room, not that there wasn't time to go back and grab it. I needed to make sure I was still shipshape. Given all the mental stimulation I was receiving, plus my re-acquaintanceship with the psi orb, plus being stunned, plus the psychic bond with Josefeen, I was nearly certain I wouldn't be able to remember even half of it, and I was generally terrible at offhand speechifying.

"Lt. Agu, I don't suppose there's a holoprompter I could use?"

"Of course, sir."

Thank Cleon for small favors.

He showed me how to load the speech into the holoprompter from my wristcom, and as I transferred the file, I couldn't help but wonder how else I might be able to extend my own mental abilities. I tried reaching into my own memories for the last time I'd looked at my speech. Given the psi-enhancer as well as the energies of the psi orb still in my system, could I pull it up simply from memory? I closed my eyes and tried to envision it in front of me, but all I could see was a brief glimpse of me giving the speech, my psychic tendril moving over the audience like an arc of energy, penetrating their minds as the blurry shape of a person sat along the edge of the stage, watching.

«You mentioned seeing a ghost, Josefeen. Did it look like this?»

«Not exactly.»

I shared my memory of my prior visions, trying to hide the Nizlich shower nudes and focusing instead on the ghostly entity I'd assumed to be Jaamzon.

«Oh, my oh my!» Josefeen's mental snickering was grating.

«Just focus on Jaamzon, please.»

I suddenly realized Josefeen was embarrassed over her report of having seen a ghost. She'd been flying high at the time. That, of course, called the whole episode into question, and as she'd slowly come back down to reality, she'd wondered to herself why she'd even mentioned it. *He must think I'm crazy and stupid,* she'd thought. Now, however, seeing me embarrassed was an amusing and very welcome relief, although she was also still coming to terms with

the apparent scope of my abilities. *He's a poly-psi for sure.*

«*What's a poly-psi?*»

«*Multiple psionic talents, just like Olav hault-Plankwell.*» *Telepathy and manipulation, clairvoyance, clairaudience, and what's this? Precog?* She wasn't sure the mental image of me giving a speech was an example of precognition. I was about to give a speech, so it could simply be my imagination preparing for what was obviously about to happen, although that psychic tendril moving over the audience spoke to my major power, which I had accidentally demonstrated on Masa. Had I imagined it as well?

With half an ear on the crowd noises, I looked over Agu's shoulders at the security monitors. It never hurt to update my situational awareness, and as people continued to enter from the escalators, Agu turned to Masa.

"Sir, do we start on time or wait for the latecomers?"

"We're the Navy," Masa said. "We stay on schedule. Your Holiness," he said, turning toward the Canon. "Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"To give the invocation."

"Invocation?"

"For the remembrance of a fallen soldier." *What was her name? Oh, yes. "Lt. Jaamzon."*

The Canon fumbled around in his pockets, finding only a silver flask with the words *Liquid Courage* neatly engraved. He rubbed his chin and consequently noticed some writing on the palm of his hand.

"Ah!" He squinted. "I found it!"

"Congratulations," Masa said, wondering if putting the old codger in front of an assembly of this size constituted elder abuse. Or, considering the potential feelings of the audience, a crime against humanity? Of course, at this point it was too late to find another priest, and, in any case, Forklinbrass had never let the Navy down before, at least not in front of such a large audience.

Such a large audience.

«*Josefeen, how sure are we that the Zhos would try and interfere with me here?*»

She was hoping they would, though she doubted they'd be that stupid. More likely it would be the Ine Givar or one of their ilk, a terrorist group supported by the Zhodani but not

actually composed of them. «*If they interfere, sir, we'll catch them.*» Indeed, that's what she was hoping, and I was apparently the bait.

Chapter 41

In Memorium

“Lt. Agu, can you show me the dignitary section?”

“Right here,” he tapped one of the squares on the security monitor, and it expanded to fill the entire screen.

I consciously pulled in my psychic tendrils, remembering how I’d heard the Major’s thoughts through my wristcom. I didn’t want any possible agents noticing me.

«*They won’t get very far unless they’ve got one of these.*» Josefeen glanced down at the diplomatic case and imagined the playful psi orb currently residing within.

«*Always assume the enemy is at least as well equipped as you are, Lieutenant.*»

«*I don’t doubt the Zhodani have them, sir, but would they risk one by bringing it here?*»

«*You did.*»

That’s different, she was thinking. This was home turf. And I paused, reflecting on the long length of her career.

«*My apologies, Josefeen. It’s hard to turn off the instruction component of being a captain.*»

I dipped into her memories to see what a shielded mind looked like, and what the difference was between natural and artificial shielding, and also if there was any way around or through. Put simply, a shielded mind was essentially impenetrable, but it didn’t *look* any different than any other sort of mind, and this was true whether the shielding was natural or artificial. But if there was zone shielding, no psions would be active. It just hurt too much.

«*IBIS is here supporting us,*» Josefeen’s voice echoed in my head. «*They’re going to put out a psionic scream.*» It was a form of zone shielding, but rather than being little pricks of pain and distraction, it was like a firecracker in one’s ear, essentially a form of attack. «*At some point during all this, I’m going to tell you to shield your mind for just a few seconds. It may be during your speech. Either way, if we see anyone faint or even flinch, we’ll know they’re a psion and probably in league with the Zhodani.*»

But she doubted the Zhos would be dumb enough to send anyone. This was too much of an

Imperial-controlled venue for them to risk assets unless they believed the stakes were high enough to warrant an operation. They wanted to get into my head — they’d already proven that — but to try to do it here would be reckless. They’d only do it if I was out in public, seemingly unguarded, as I’d been on my date with Kaz. But they’d had no foreknowledge of my movements that night. I’d been playing it all by ear. All they could have done was stick an operative on the subway and wait for me, but they didn’t even know I’d be taking it.

“Heavenly Pilot and Lord on High,” the Canon’s voice echoed over the loudspeakers, the crowd suddenly falling still. “Yours are the starry squadrons of space and sky.” His hands were cupped, his elbows bent. “Lead us who remember our fallen comrade in longing for your welcoming wings.” He peered into this cup formed by his hands. “Guide us in grief as we recall the faith and courage of the fallen.” *Soar/Warmth* he read off the surface of one palm. “Set us to soar with your warmth at our back.” Once upon a time he’d had this memorized. “Let us rise in eternity with you, Pilot Divine.” But his memory had long been slipping away. His whole mind had been.

“We are, each of us, of the Universe,” the Canon said. “We are stardust.” My wristcom beeped. “Indeed, but for the death of stars, we don’t exist.”

“Plankwell here.”

“Stars have died that we might live.”

“Priority call, Lt. Cmdr. Wang,” Blodder said.

“A countless multitude have died that the Universe might know itself.”

“Sorry to bother you, sir,” Lydia Wang said, “but in light of what went down between you and the locals, I’d like to offer you the services of Blue and Green Squadrons to give the stadium some percussion.”

I didn’t need telepathy to realize what she had in mind. *Percussion* was pilot-speak for a sonic boom. She was offering to hit the stadium, and Heron more generally, with a quick series of them on their flyby, a salute to Lt. Jaamzon but also a way to rattle Heron’s windows and remind them who’s boss. But like any career-minded officer, she didn’t want to do it without my authorization.

As the Canon went on about stars, death, and the Universe, I tilted my head toward Josefeen.

«I'm going to have the wing do a percussive flyby. Tell IBIS to coordinate the scream with the flyby.»

Tell IBIS? They didn't like being subordinate to the Navy, but this was a Navy ceremony, so they'd do as we requested so long as it didn't conflict with their own goals. But they'd want to know why. *«What is it you have in mind, sir?»*

«Misdirection.» “Wing Leader,” I said, “you are go for flyby on Captain Masa's mark. Blodder, route the lead fighter's range to target data to my wristcom.”

“Aye aye, sir,” both women responded simultaneously.

«Misdirection?» Josefeen frowned.

«Coordinating the scream with the sonic booms will provide a rational story, albeit an erroneous one, in case anyone faints. IBIS can go in with a team of medics and carry them out, claiming they had a heart attack. The media may blame the Navy, but the public will be none the wiser.»

Heart attacks due to sonic booms were exceedingly rare, but they *could* happen. I had once caught a week of administrative punishment for a percussive flyby during a unit review, but it was for creative misinterpretation of orders rather than the actual percussion. In this situation, my argument, if it came to that, would be that I *wasn't* indulging in pettiness. No, I was supporting an officer with initiative. Vasilyev might slap my wrist when I got back, but given that Intel would surely back me up, informing him it was all part of a larger mission, I'd have all the cover I could possibly need to prevent the punishment from going any further.

Josefeen nodded, somewhat impressed. *He's smarter than he looks.* As she wandered off to make the necessary arrangements, I didn't know whether to feel complimented or insulted.

“Captain Masa, am I up after Regimath?”

“Not exactly. I was planning the invocation first, then the Imperial Anthem, then you, then the presentation of the Honor Guard, then our robot friend over here, and finally the testimonials, but if you'd like to change the order, just say so.”

Although Masa would present the AI as speaking at the behest of the Countess, he didn't know what Olav would say, and so he was

somewhat worried about slotting it in as the capstone.

“When's the flyby supposed to happen?” I asked him.

“During the honor guard portion.”

I nodded. The meticulous, coordinated movements of honor guards were a beautiful thing to behold, but they took time to do their thing. This provided a large time window for the flyby, which due to the uncertainties with respect to the squadrons' ETA was necessary. If they'd practiced the run a few times, they would have been able to time it down to the second, but this ceremony was a one-off, so they'd show up whenever they'd show up. Now that I had their distance fed into my wristcom, however, I could use the flyby to complement my speech, though I'd have to time it perfectly on my end. The idea was tempting, but trying to keep track of their distance while simultaneously giving a speech sounded like a little too much to take on. With everything else going on, I didn't need yet another distraction.

“Let's get me up on stage for the anthem so I can lead right into my speech,” I said, and then added, almost as afterthought, “You can give the flyby the go signal once I start talking.”

“Very well,” Masa said with a nod.

It was in my nature as a fighter pilot to throw caution to the wind. Why stop now? I looked over to where Amika and Ensign Florence were waiting with Olav.

“Make sure Amika is right up there with Olav. We are now in the making-nice-with-local-nobility phase of operations, but if Olav goes off on the Imperium, we are going to shut it down hard. I will revoke my apology to the Countess if this bot tries something funny.”

The advantage of the court apology I'd used to settle things with the Countess earlier, as well as their acceptance of it, established a clear link of obligation. I had claimed the mantle of the Plankwells to couch my apology, staking my position within the Navy as well as my personal honor as collateral. All of which I was justified in doing. Just as I was technically justified in imposing an interdiction.

I had all these powers, but for the most part manners, courtesy and custom indicated they be used sparingly. But there was plenty of precedent

for their use should I determine the need. The percussion would be the smallest reminder of this.

Should this new edition of Olav malfunction, however, and particularly if it should do so offensively, besmirching myself or the Imperium, the revocation of my apology would demand an apology from the Countess, which would result in a rather extensive internal investigation to find out what exactly went wrong, during which time the palace would probably cease to acknowledge me, insulting me further. Given the Plankwell fervor on this world, I doubted Helena wanted to be put in such a position.

Of course, there was always the chance of a duel challenge to settle things expeditiously, but as the challenged party, I would have choice of weapons. My eyes narrowed, and I was sure my smile had turned into some kind of predatory grin. I had always wanted to claim a battlecruiser as my weapon of choice.

"I don't know if heaven exists," the Canon confessed to the crowd, "just as I don't know that ghosts are real. But I have felt a presence today. What it is, I cannot say. I know only that I am given to believe, because strange things have happened in my life, and so I know enough to know that I know I don't know everything."

«What is that weird, little man talking about?» Josefeen wandered back into view. *«And what's got you grinning? Oh, plotting mass murder, are we? Why am I not surprised?»*

She was amused by my wanting to bring a battlecruiser to a duel.

«I'd be a pretty sad combat commander if I wasn't considering all the different ways things might play out. In any case, it's not murder if it's a duel. They'd have every right to requisition a champion, and we could treat it as an exercise.»

The truth was, I just wanted to see the look on their faces, and while this whole chain of events might seem rather unlikely, it was certainly not impossible given how the previous Olav AI had behaved.

I sensed Josefeen delving into my memories, looking over my initial conversation with Olav²⁸¹ as well as the brief argument between Aggida and Zeenye²⁸², which I had witnessed.

281 See Chapter 8.

282 See page 166.

"I see we have a marching band for the anthem," I said to Masa, watching the security monitor as a column of drummers, trumpeters, and so forth formed in one of the entryways just outside the audience's field of view. "Which version are you using?"

"Sorrowing, I assume, but I leave all that to the Parade Commander."

The original Imperial Anthem, or Emperor's Anthem as it was also known, was a Sylean arrangement played when Cleon the Great first took the throne. It had several variations: Triumphant, Sorrowing, Hymnal and Celebratory; and the various Imperial domains each had their own versions. Typically, a combination of Hymnal and Sorrowing was used to mark occasions of remembrance.

"Could we end on Anthem Triumphant?" I asked. This version had been used many times at the end of the war to mark both the losses we endured but the victory those losses gained us. It was time for me to start placing my markers on the board. Every world was their own, but all lay in the sweep of the Imperium and the shadow of the Navy.

Love and fear, I mused. It always came down to love and fear.

Masa pressed a few buttons on his wristcom. "Irkhi, I don't suppose you could finish with the Triumphant variation?"

"That's awfully short notice, but will do, Captain."

"Thank you." Masa smiled, closing the connection. "He's a good chap."

"Death," the Canon said, "is everyone's ultimate destiny, and when you get to be my age, perhaps you'll begin to welcome it. But when life is taken from one so young, one who still has life to live, that's when it seems like injustice. But there's a reason for all such things, and all that seems obvious to us does not always remain so when subjected to closer scrutiny.

"We say that death exists because we see it with our own eyes, but what do we not see? What lies beyond the curtain? For it is written we are remembered into being, and while that is inarguably true for one of us who will be speaking on this stage, perhaps it is also true for the rest of us in a way that is simply beyond our imagination.

“To some this is but a fairy tale, akin to the personification of the divine mystery. There’s a sort of personality transfer common in many organized religions, whereby the divine conveniently assumes the morals and customs of its worshipers. Ultimately, belief can become weaponized. Instead of being a conduit for dialogue, it can be used as a wedge for division and war. Through such misuse, the unknowable is sometimes misrepresented in extreme detail and with absolute certainty, and a promise is often made, the promise of an eternal and usually paradisaal afterlife. This promise is two-edged; it can give hope and courage in the face of certain death, but it can also manipulate people into doing evil in the hopes of sating selfish desires in the imagined hereafter.”

I’d heard of such religions, ones built on frustration and hatred rather than peace and love.

“So I will not claim with certainty that Lt. Jaamzon is with us, here and now, and that she is watching from the edge of this stage. I do not know this to be true. I will only say what I believe, which is that she lived her life well. She lived as she wanted to live, as her inner light told her to live, and she died as she wanted to die, knowing the risks and accepting them. In this, I have faith.”

No sooner had the Canon turned away from the crowd than the first ranks of the band emerged from the entryway, their instruments gleaming as they erupted into a symphony of brass and percussion that echoed against the concrete walls. Everyone immediately stood, save for those too old or disabled, some placing a hand above their heart, the preamble to the Imperial Anthem filling the air, a potent reminder of our unity and our strength.

Nonetheless, I experienced the creeping sensation of *déjà vu*, a coldness climbing up my spine that was caused by listening to Regimath talk about a ghost perched on the edge of the stage.

“Lieutenant, give me a wide view of the stage.”

Lt. Agu brought up a camera feed that showed the entire stage. But there was no ghost sitting there, at least none I could see. Why was Jaamzon still here, *if* she was here, and why in the blazing plasma had Regimath been so damn specific?

“Are you ready?” Masa asked.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Time to get this done.”

I took a deep breath and straightened my uniform. This was going to be worse than the time I gave the Plankwell Commemorative Lecture to visiting dignitaries in prep school. Well, maybe not that bad. At Masa’s go gesture, I pulled myself to attention and marched out.

“In case you need a dose of gumption,” the Canon said, holding out his flask to me as we passed each other backstage.

I shook my head and let the flask, and Regimath, pass me by, and a few seconds later, as I walked onto the stage, I could see that directly behind it, attached to the back wall and rising to nearly to the stadium’s transpex dome, was a gigantic video screen, displaying a close-up of me walking on stage. It was, to say the least, disconcerting to see myself magnified what seemed like a thousand times, and so it was impossible not to become aware of the audience’s attention focusing upon me like a magnifying glass. With my mind going blank, I had to will myself to take the final steps to the small lectern at center stage.

As soon as I moved into place, however, the holoprompter came into focus, its cameras and projectors locking onto my eyes. Its heads-up display spread across my vision a moment later. It was the same sort of tech we used in fighters to maintain situational awareness, but this one was a few grades more primitive.

Focus.

Muster halls on ships and briefing rooms were always small, and while some of my official speeches had been piped to screens across a ship or possibly even a squadron, it was nothing like looking at thousands of people right in front of me. I tried not to think about how many people across the world were paying attention to me now.

The stadium contained a field of artificial green ground cover surrounded by two tiers of seating. While not full, there were a lot more people than I’d ever imagined.

I breathed deeply, trying to settle my nerves, and a vague discomfort in my nethers suddenly made me wish I’d visited the fresher before taking to the stage. My peripheral vision caught

some movement, a camera drone moving into position.

Below the stage were other musicians equipped with drums, flutes, and stringed instruments of all kinds as well as a gong. The latter hung from a frame and looked to be about two meters across, its player, shirtless, holding three mallets in each hand. An Imperial Navy yellow headband held his hair back, and a kilt-like wrap, also bound with a yellow belt, fell to his knees. He flexed his arms as though warming up, as the marching column concluded the preamble and fell momentarily silent. Then a shrill flute wailed the Call to Muster, the traditional opening, post-preambolic, to the Imperial Anthem. It was the signal for all military personnel within earshot to rise to attention and turn to face the music, as it were.

The susurrations of people standing moved through the space, then faded away as all waited in silence. Then the deep resonance of the gong led into the first part of the Anthem, where all the instruments intoned to sound a single note. This gave each musician an idea of how all the other instruments sounded. Many twiddled with their instruments momentarily, checking the volume levels and so forth. I'd studied it in Imperial Culture class, but I was about as musical as a brick, so the details went mostly over my head. I did love listening to the anthem, though.

It was always performed live during Imperial ceremonies of any kind.²⁸³ The music stood in for the Emperor and ensured that the ceremony was a living event taking place in the moment. The more cynical noted that it served as an excellent cryptography and security marker, creating a unique cipher for the records.

283 I asked Conrad to supply some text describing the anthem, and he included a lot more detail than I'd envisioned. Out-of-character, he wrote, "The part about the Ministry of Culture developing musicians to be able to play the Anthem anywhere in the Imperium, and the requirement of live music for Imperial proceedings grew from thinking about the book *Ninefox Gambit* by Yoon Ha Lee and the measures that their Empire took to remain relevant (imposition of a calendar of observances that powered quantum technologies). Also, patronage of the arts is always good for long term social engineering." Some of the text Conrad provided was separated into an essay immediately following this chapter.

The Sorrowful Anthem, an arrangement that slowed the tempo and used lower registers to convey solemnity, began to play as a slow march joined the swirling growl of the gong. I slowly ran my gaze along the edge of the stage, but if Jaamzon's spirit were sitting there, she was doing so invisibly.

The bright sharp note of a brass wind-horn marked the modal change to Triumphant. The beat and tempo grew. Triumphant Mode, the first of the official modes, had been added to the canon, when Emperor Artemsus launched the final fleets of the Sylean Pacification Campaigns.

The music shifted from the stage musicians to the marching corps, due I suppose to my last minute change in the order of things, but the gong player continued, more than making up for the bigger crescendos. Towards the end, some of the other musicians had found their place and joined back in. Apt symbolism, I thought, as I tried to use eye-motion prompts to bring the Distance to Target display onto the holoprompter. It wasn't working, so I increased the font size on my wristcom.

The VIP section, judging from the uniforms present, was filled largely with crew members from the Jaqueline's fighter pod. They must have been given seating priority by Masa, but there were also other uniformed Navy as well as some civilians. The only person I recognized, however, was Spooky. She was looking directly at me, her eyes dark and somber as I peered into her mind.

"So why did you join up?" one of the pilots had asked Jaamzon. This was in the mess hall. Jaamzon was the newbie Lieutenant, and one of the senior pilots decided to grill her in front of the rest of the squadron. "Let me guess," he said. "The call to adventure."

"Yeah, something like that," Jaamzon answered, stabbing at a macaroni noodle with her fork.

"Where are you from?"

"Olympia."

"Olympia?"

"It's on the border with the Sword Worlds."

"Did you guys get hit during the war?"

"Oh, hell no. They totally ignored us. They wanted Arba for some reason."

"What's at Arba?"

"Nothing. Minerals, probably. I don't know."

"So then why'd you join? Life sucks on Olympia?"

"No, it's fine," Jaamzon said. "I mean, the air's too thin to breathe, and there's stuff in it, so you wouldn't want to breathe it anyway, but other than that, it's great. We got fish."

"You like fish?"

"Yeah, I guess. On Olympia, you either eat fish or you starve, so not liking fish isn't really an option."

"So is that why you joined? Because you couldn't take any more fish?"

"I told you, I'm fine with fish."

"Then why'd you join?"

She looked around the table, and everyone looked back.

"I joined because I believe in the Imperium."

"You don't have to say that here. This isn't the academy."

"I'm serious," she said. "Think about it. Think about what we have. We can go anywhere. Just get on a ship and go and apply to become a citizen of whatever world we want to be on. You think the Zhos have that? The Imperium, for all its flaws, is very much worth defending, and anyone who can't see that, in my opinion, is blind. No offense."

"Why would I be offended?" he asked her.

"I know it's cool to be jaded and cynical, but people who don't appreciate what they have are the biggest idiots in the universe, and if you won't rise to defend the Imperium, then you aren't worth a speck of spit."

"All of us defend the Imperium every single day."

"I'm not talking about you guys. Anyone who gets in one of those cockpits, as far as I'm concerned, has paid their dues, and that's why I joined..., to pay my dues."

"Damn straight," Spooky said.

"And what about afterward?" someone else asked. "No plans to muster out and go back home? Or do you want to keep flying until you die?"

"When I die, I want it to be with my boots on, and I want it to be for a reason."

Spooky blinked, and I came back to the present, as the band played the anthem's conclusion. It was the call and response to the health of the Emperor. Heralded by the same

high-pitched flute, the most senior non-commissioned officer called out "Salutem et vitan imperatore," and the assembled masses responded in kind, "Salutem et vitan imperatore." The Sylean government had used the pre-Anglic phrase since the days of the Rule of Man, replacing the more formal Vilani invocation to the health of the Empire that took a good three minutes to enunciate.

Now the whole stadium fell quiet. It was time.

"Gather your senses, what follows is true," I began. "Gather your fellows, feel close to you."

These were the first lines of *Gather Your*, a famous but unfinished poem that had been committed to the operational journal of a young marine centuries ago. His dataslate was recovered following the destruction of his evacuation shuttle. The Marines released video footage from the battle along with a clip of him carrying a wounded squad mate and another showing him writing the poem in the moments preceding his death. Through these video clips, the poem had achieved a certain poignancy, all thanks to a last gasp missile that made it through the shuttle's point defense.

"And you to them, are bound by ties. As tight as alliance, as siblings. Ever stronger for you are bound by choice. By action shared, what none other...." And that's where it ended. Sergeant Duwan Lestova never got the chance to finish. He'd died mid-verse.

"Gather my fellows," I said, "for we are here to witness. Once again, we were called to duty. Once again, we answered the call, and once again, not all of us returned."

"Honored comrades, honored citizens, we gather here to witness the service of Lieutenant Thanatika Jaamzon, called to the service of the Imperium, to the service of Emperor Strephon, and who paid the ultimate price for her duty. The Navy stands ever ready, ever prepared, to meet the challenge that enemies of the Imperium bring to bear. Out in the deep black of the void between the stars and worlds, we wait, we watch and we strike."

"Lt. Jaamzon was a child of Olympia. She was given unto the care of the Navy, and to the Navy she gave her all. While she served, she was an example to all. Beloved by her crewmates, she gathered unto her friends and allies tightly. Far

from home, in the deepest dark, she stood to the defense of her crew and paid the ultimate price.”

I had let a little formal Court Galanglic into my words. Something was helping me with this speech. I don't know if I was picking up on all the emotions around me, but I was standing before the biggest group of people I had ever addressed, and I was declaring my love of the Navy and my beliefs. The past few days had been exhausting, and I didn't care anymore what anyone thought. Jaamzon had died in the service that I loved, and it was my duty to honor that sacrifice.

“Blessed are they who mourn, for the universe heeds the heart that is broken. These are the words for you, her friends, her crew, and all who have lost in the service of the Imperium. For Jaamzon, I say, Safe skies pilot; may you find your way home.”

From the rate of the countdown on my wristcom, I estimated about half a minute to go. Fortunately, I was done honoring our lost. Now it was time to stick it to our enemies.

“Know this...,” I said. “The Navy watches...” I started dragging out the pauses between phrases, as I listened for the sound of the incoming fighters. “The Navy waits, and we do not forget. The Navy does not forgive a slight to our honor...”

Although I couldn't see them, I could hear the hiss of their fusion engines throttled way back. Flying this slowly in the atmosphere with a space superiority fighter was not easy. Higher use of the fusion drive tended to ignite the atmosphere, so they were coming in on grav-assist and using the fusion drives for effect.

“...and I say to you, we will have vengeance for our dead.”

«Pull your curtain, sir. Shut it and hold it tight.»

I did so, watching as the lead formation came into view, seven fighters flying a diamond pattern with a lead and two outriders. They vectored skyward, punching their thrusters like they were afterburners, and then BOOM! It was so loud I worried that the stadium's transpex dome might crack. But it didn't. At least not in any way that was obvious. Needless to say, everyone looked up, thousands gasping as one, and then a wave of nausea, but somehow more like a headache, passed over me.

That must have been the psionic scream.

The combined exhaust trail of the first squadron left a glowing cloud above the stadium as the plasma burned out, just enough time for the second squadron to pull in and rim the glowing cloud with eight points of light. They too pointed skyward and went supersonic, and then there was another BOOM! I worried again that the dome might shatter, but it held.

My squadrons had just pulled off an atmospheric Imperial Starburst. It was technically illegal to perform it at such a low altitude right above a populated city, and so it was sure to raise complaints from the planetary authorities. But that would be on me, as I was on record authorizing the flyby. All that would have to wait, however. For now, I was just proud to be counted among their number.

I stood at the podium and looked out over the crowd, but there were simply too many people for me to see if anyone had fainted. No doubt, IBIS was paying close attention, but they had not yet made an appearance.

“Never mistake inaction for inattention,” I said. “Never think we have let our guard down. Soon, we will return to the dark between the stars. We will leave this shining Jewell of the Imperium to seek out our enemies. And we will find them.”

Library Data: The Imperial Anthem

The original anthem was the coronation arrangement played when Cleon became Emperor, but it was Artemsus who officially codified it and made the first of the mode changes. Martin III stipulated its live performance and added the Sorrowful Mode after the ending of the Ilelish Revolt.

The anthem can be played on any number and kind of instruments, from simple percussives, winds, strings, trained animals, singers, anything that can produce the notes required. But when played at a public gathering, it must be performed live. Mechanical support is fine, but there must be at least one sophont ultimately responsible for producing the music.

Recording the Anthem is also fine, and the Ministry of Culture's publication, *Anthemic Interludes*, offers the best renditions of the Anthem produced from across the Imperium.

The Ministry of Culture provides stipends to musicians from across the Imperium so they can be trained and called upon to perform the anthem in any mode required. One can often gain some feeling for the timbre of events by how the anthem is played.

The *Imperial Military Manual of Protocol and Proceedings* devotes several volumes to musical arrangements and includes suggestions for various approved combinations. Equally important is the list of combinations to avoid. (The dry exhortation to never mix howl-hounds with echo-cats is particularly noteworthy.)

Chapter 42 Jingoism & Journalism

From the entrance opposite the stadium, carried by a team of standard bearers, emerged the black banner of the Navy with its bright yellow sunburst²⁸⁴, and immediately following it were two columns of my marines in battle dress, Jaamzon's Honor Guard, her coffin suspended between them. They slowly marched out, the precision of their movements a study in discipline.

I saluted the Navy banner, then turned and strode backstage, passing the Olav robot, Amika, Guri, and Ensign Florence on my way to Captain Masa. He was talking to someone over his wristcom and made a *hang on* gesture. Josefeen, leaning with her back against a wall, was on a call as well. I drew open my psychic curtain and focused on her, hopeful that our durable link had survived the psionic scream.

"A boy? How old?" So far so good. I knew what she was saying without actually having to be within earshot, and she wasn't even looking at me.

"We'll know more in a few minutes," a voice replied. I knew, somehow, that it was the voice of some IBIS liaison with whom she'd been interfacing, a Mr. Eneri Smith, which sounded like an alias.

It struck me as curious that they'd be on an *alias names* basis, but then I realized that Josefeen wasn't really named Josefeen. Her birth name was Henrietta. Another victim of the fad for archaic Solomani names. Henrietta was nearly as bad as Augustine.

As she looked at me, I could sense a slight roiling in her stomach.

«*What's this about a boy?*»

«*Some fish IBIS just snatched.*» More like a minnow. He'd fainted during the psionic scream, his family reacting as one might expect. Josefeen/Henrietta closed her eyes and took a calming breath. She suspected he was too young to be a Zhodani spy. If he were a member of a terrorist group, he probably wouldn't have been with his entire family. They'd recently immigrated, so all their backgrounds and

284 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Imperial_Sunburst

associations would have to be reinspected, this time with a fine-tooth comb.

In any case, his future, both immediate and long-term, now depended on the strength of his psi potential. If weak, he'd be returned to his family, but if strong, he'd be taken for training; probably under false pretenses. Only if his head of household were of sufficiently high status would this even be questioned. After a long career interfacing with IBIS, she knew their ways.

"Captain Plankwell?" Masa was done with his call.

"The Countess can do as she pleases with Olav," I said. "I am done with it and whatever scheme Karneticky was cooking up with it. I am going to collect my forces and relocate back to the Jaqueline. I expect I will be testifying remotely to the Court, as I am not really interested in putting myself in the crosshairs again."

"My aides are being swamped by interview requests for you," Masa replied. "Can I put through three as a group interview to head off the rest?"

A group interview? Three versus one? "Will it be friendly?"

"I've found them to be balanced in their approach to the Navy."

Balanced. He was speaking euphemistically. They'd all be pro-Imperial, pro-military, and very pro-Navy. Without a doubt, Masa was playing his own games, but after the help he'd given me, it would be churlish to refuse, and since this would hardly be an unfriendly interview...

"Give me time to settle down and I'll do it. Say, in thirty minutes or so, while we are boosting out of the well? Virtual only."

"Very good," he said. "And good luck, Captain."

I walked over to Josefeen, noticing the Canon not too far away. He appeared to be watching the honor guard ceremony from Lieutenant Agu's security console.

"How was the speech?" she asked. *«Did you sense any telepathic probings while you were up there?»*

"Well, I didn't get booed offstage, so I guess it went okay." *«And no probings, at least none of which I'm aware.»* Though I'd certainly felt the psionic scream.

I tapped my wristcom. "Major Fa'Linto, bring secure transport to pick up my group."

"How many in your group, sir?"

"Four."

"Aye sir."

"Four?" Josefeen squinted. *«Oh, hell no! We are not taking...»*

"Canon Forklinbrass," I said, "how would you like to have dinner with me aboard my ship?"

"I'd be delighted, Captain." Of course, he was thinking mainly about the Eye of God, the cravings of his soul more insistent than those of his stomach.

"You can accompany us on the ride back."

"That's very gracious of you."

«Bringing him onboard will help keep your holy eyeball under wraps for a little while longer;» I explained. *«We can even practice memory wiping on him.»*

«Oh! Okay, then.»

The fourth member of our party would be Corporal Hoskins, my bodyguard, although why I'd still need a bodyguard aboard my own ship was a question I hadn't bothered contemplating.

"Did we leave anything in the Kinnuki?" I asked Josefeen.

"A certain medical device," she replied after a moment's hesitation.

Ah. The hypo gun. I rubbed my neck.

"Corporal Hoskins, there's a Kinnuki in Starport Parking." Where, exactly, I had no idea.

"Take the escalator back to the starport," Josefeen interjected. "Stay to the right, and go to the first lot past the customs checkpoint."

"And once there, do a sweep for any materials left in the unit, retrieve them, and return here."

He'd get access through the base quartermaster's office. Once he was gone, I fired off a quick message via my wristcom to expedite the matter and thanked Commander Shumurdim for the Kinnuki. It would have been nice to keep it for longer, but now that I'd been driving it for a while, it was probably becoming a security risk. Plus, I was pretty sure if I kept flying it in and out of orbit like it was a fighter, I'd eventually burn off its heat shield.

A message came in from Fa'Linto, directing us to one of numerous landing pads surrounding the stadium's upper concourse. It wasn't far from where we were presently, just several floors up,

so we took the gravlift, and after we arrived at a small waiting area near the pad, I contacted the Jaqueline, updating them as to my expected itinerary. I then made a note to myself to add a commendation to Wang's service jacket for the exceptional maneuvering in an atmosphere, and I began writing a message to Dr. Willin, asking her to have Josefeen report for a tox-screen once we were back onboard.

«I don't need a tox-screen, and I sure as Cleon's thumb-toe don't need Willin finding that psi-enhancer in my system.»

«That's certainly a consideration. Do you have a better idea? I'm worried about you, after all.»

«You want to worry about someone, worry about Holy Roll-me-a-Joint over here. He's had more drugs than an entire liberal arts campus after finals.»

If she meant his lifetime consumption, that was probably true. I had gone to an exclusive prep school before entering the Academy, and both had periodic tox screenings, but mostly to weed out performance enhancers. If the Navy wanted enhanced performance, they'd be the ones handing out the drugs.

«Well, if you just want to suffer through dinner, I guess that's up to you. Yes, you are invited, my new Intel aide.»

As I canceled the message I'd started writing to Dr. Willin, a jet black G-Carrier dropped out of the sky, the maroon sunburst of the Imperial Star Marines emblazoned on its ventral surface. Unfortunately, Corporal Hoskins hadn't yet returned, but this didn't surprise me. Taking the escalators back to the starport, then finding the Kinnuki, and then going through customs and getting back to the stadium would take more time than had elapsed, though how much more I had no idea.

"We're waiting for one more passenger," I told the driver as soon as we piled in via a pressurized gangway. "He's on a retrieval mission. Then we can get out of here."

"Yessir."

The passenger compartment included a holographic display, which I envisioned the Major using to keep himself up-to-date on whatever tactical situation was developing down below.

"While we're waiting, can you pipe in a feed of the memorial?"

"Yessir."

The display flickered on as I settled into a rather comfortable chair, but as I sat with my hands on the armrests, I felt an unusual mixture of emotions. I couldn't quite discern if this was some new psionic sense I was experiencing, or if it was just the mixture of emotions I was feeling myself, watching as two members of the honor guard, at opposite corners of the flag, triggered the Fallen in Service transformation. The flag's smart pigments began reversing colors, transforming the brilliant yellow sunburst on the black background into a smaller black sunburst on a yellow background. Two midshipmen of the honor guard began playing the Vigil for the Dead on their calls²⁸⁵, alternating with each other and dropping an octave over the minute-long flag change. Once the vigil was complete, the honor guard began the precision folding of the flag down to the compact square of yellow with a black bar across the square diagonally. Many weeks from now, a similar ceremony would be carried out on Olympia, and the banner would be presented to Jaamzon's parents along with her casket. The Navy, ever efficient, would also send a PAO²⁸⁶ from the nearest naval base to smooth out the distribution of the survivors' pension and deliver her effects. But for now, the task of this honor guard was done.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Masa's voice came over the loudspeakers, "we have a special guest who will now speak on behalf of Countess Helena. The Imperial Navy presents to you the reincarnation of Olav hault-Plankwell."

This was what I wanted to see, and out he came, walking slowly toward the lectern and finally bumping into it, causing it to slide forward a bit on the stage.

«This won't go well,» Josefeen mentally murmured, thinking there were better uses of her time than listening to two men and an apparently drunk robot talk about a woman they'd never met. *«Maybe the Canon slipped him a Mickey.»*

«Hush. It could be worse. We could still be out there. I could still be out there. And that's a robot

285 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boatswain's_call

286 Personnel Affairs Officer

body. Either it's not used to it, or they didn't give it enough time to adapt.»

Indeed, the Countess was taking a huge risk, putting Olav out in public like this, but maybe that's what she wanted, to make a public mockery of my family name prior to crucifying me over the interdiction. No. My encounter with the HPSS happened after Olav was already en route. Whatever was wrong with him had nothing to do with my invocation of Section 678, unless he was somehow being incapacitated remotely.

The image on the gigantic video screen at the back of the stage switched from Olav-the-robot to Olav-in-the-flesh, a version very similar to that which I'd seen holographically displayed at the Imperial Place, and quite suddenly, the crowd became quiet, each of them, no matter how far at the back they sat, now able to see the creases of his forehead and the determination in his eyes.

"Your Grace, honored descendant, ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters, and citizens of the Imperium," Olav said, his deep voice tinged by an accent now five centuries old, "I will put this bluntly, if I may. The simple truth, which we must accept, is we are at war."

He paused, letting his thesis statement sink in.

"As usual, the enemy's attack came suddenly, and was, of course, completely unprovoked. This should not come as a surprise to anyone, as it has already happened five times, the first of which I dealt with personally. Unlike the other episodes, the successive Frontier Wars the Imperium has fought and won, this time there was not a full scale invasion but merely a murder. And that's exactly what it was, a murder."

He glared at the audience, as though daring anyone to contradict him.

"How do we know it was the Zhodani and not pirates, as the Zhodani have claimed?" he asked rhetorically. "Well, that's very simple. And now I'm going to tell you some things that will probably get me into trouble with the Navy, but I'm going to say them anyway, because you should know the truth. The reason we know it was the Zhodani is that it was a stolen Imperial cruiser that ambushed the Jaqueline at Quar, a cruiser they stole decades ago. It played the role of a wounded sister, thus luring the Jaqueline into a trap.

"This is the oldest trick in the book of piracy. Pretend to be in dire need of immediate assistance, then shoot whosoever is foolish enough to approach. Shooting the Jaqueline as she turned was particularly devious, as it meant our primary weapon couldn't immediately be brought to bear, giving them the opportunity to make their escape. But the fact they jumped so quickly means they must have already been charging their capacitors, which means it was never their intent to strip the Jaqueline and either capture or abandon her crew. That's what a true pirate would have done, but that's not what they did, which means this could not have been a pirate attack.

"No. They jumped out immediately, which means they only wanted to slap us. Well, of course. This is how the Zhodani always underscore their diplomatic talking points. Interstellar politics disagree not so much verbally as kinetically, by demonstrating what can happen if proper listening doesn't occur, and this attack — this murder — was essentially Zhodani-speak for '*listen to me when I'm talking.*' So, you see, it is because of this cowardly, deceitful, and murderous act that is part and parcel of this perversion of diplomacy which the Zhodani have employed against us time and again, that we are here mourning the *cold-blooded murder* of one of our own, Lieutenant Thanatika Jaamzon. Say her name with me. Lieutenant Thanatika Jaamzon."

A small portion of the crowd joined in.

"Again! Lieutenant Thanatika Jaamzon." More joined in this time.

"Say her name, for Cleon's sake!" Olav shouted. "Lieutenant Thanatika Jaamzon! Again! Lieutenant Thanatika Jaamzon! And Again! Lieutenant Thanatika Jaamzon!" In short order, he had the whole stadium chanting her name. By now they were standing, and I could imagine their emotions mirroring those apparent in the tenor of his voice, a righteous mixture of hurt and rage, simmering like a venomous stew.

"*'We didn't steal your ship,'* the Zhodani ambassador insists," Olav continued, "*'and we certainly didn't attack you with it. That would be assault on top of larceny, and we wouldn't do that.'*" There was mockery in his voice. "*'It was most certainly, certainly pirates. Oh, and by the way, we're so sorry for your loss.'*" Must we go

along with this charade, waiting for them to hit us again, and again, and again, and again?! Because, that is what will happen. We know this from past experience.

“Why is it that every time a war starts, it’s always *them* invading *us*? That surprise attack always gives them the upper hand, and they always come here, to Jewell, and put you under siege, and then we’re forced to burn through thousands upon thousands of lives to liberate you, and this happens over and over and over! At what point will we, the Imperium, put an end to this?!”

He paused as voices from the audience began calling for Zhodani blood.

“Kill the Zhos!” people yelled. “Vengeance!”

Olav stood there, listening, but he gave no reaction, not even a nod of his robotic head. But the way he had the crowd going, it was obvious to me why he’d been a great commander. Yet this wasn’t the same Olav I’d met at the High Port. That Olav had talked about fighting for his comrades and for loved ones back home, but this one wanted vengeance for someone he’d never met. He wanted to restart the war. I thought back to all the Plankwell cartoons I’d watched as a kid as well as the civil war movies I’d seen as a teenager and as an adult. They’d all glorified war. Honor through bloodshed, victory through sacrifice, this was the curated, Imperium-approved version of Olav, and he was a reflection of us.

With the slightest motion I could muster, I clicked off the display and sat in silence.

“You don’t want to see the rest of it?” Josefeen asked.

“No.” I shook my head. “I’ve seen enough.”

I could sense her telepathic tentacle entering into my mind, and I pulled the curtain down hard.

Fecking nobles.

I didn’t want her opinion on what I was thinking, let alone what I was feeling. As I took a moment to collect myself, everyone in the G-Carrier wisely minded their own business. The barrier was for their protection after all, as it would not do to transform my close companions into thinking the way I was currently thinking about the nobility in general and the Countess in particular.

It wasn’t even the nobles, it was the idiotic mindset that threw more people into the grinder

of war for someone else’s idea of glory and victory. This Countess had used my family’s honor and the memory of Olav to stir up a mob mentality. This beta-version of Olav no doubt had his aptitude for demagoguery, which, combined with his psionic talents, had enabled him to raise a fleet to march on Capital.

What was Countess Helena playing at? And why were people buying it? Was Plankwell fever so rampant that all it took was a badly adapted program in a makeshift body to inflame the passions of war? Well, I had said I washed my hands of it, and so I had. Karneticky could deal with his own problems, since he seemed to have made them.

I took a deep breath and pushed myself to calmness, then looked over to Josefeen, and my request was all Navy.

“Begin an evaluation for the effects of this on our operational readiness. Identify all of our personnel in the crowd and give me a baseline emotional reaction of our crew to the speech. Pull the security feeds from Masa, and update our status to departure under duress, lower initiative option. Activate the security recorders on all inbound shuttles retrieving our crew.”

Using my wristcom, I keyed open a channel to the Jaqueline.

“This is the Captain. Issue general recall to all crew. Expedite all standing repairs that require the Yard. Load all the refit supplies to complete the lesser repairs on our own. Request a departure window from Traffic Control in the next seventy-two hours.”

“Aye aye, sir,” Blodder said. “Sir, you’ve received a request for a conference call from a Captain Camello Masa. He’s telling me it’s...”

“The group interview,” I said, nodding. “Accept and put it through as soon as it begins.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

The hatch opened, and Corporal Hoskins entered the G-Carrier carrying the hypo-gun and our filter masks.

“Thank you, Corporal,” I said. “Sit down and strap in. It’s time we were heading home.”

The G-Carrier lifted off the pad as Hoskins buckled his safety harness.

“Let me see that,” Josefeen said, eyeing the hypo-gun. Hoskins handed it over, and as she examined it, frowning, my wristcom beeped. It

was the conference call. I switched the holodisplay back on and flicked the call over to it, which caused four faces to appear in a two-by-two matrix directly in front of me. On the upper left was Captain Masa, and next to him was a blonde woman of about my age with dark circles under her eyes. She appeared against a blurry, purple background, which was either deliberately out-of-focus or simply computer generated. The two lower cells contained two men, one young and the other old. The older one I recognized. He was a reporter with the Traveller News Service.

"Captain, are you there?" Masa asked.

"Yes."

"We can't see you. Are you able to send us a video feed?"

I took a closer look at the holographic console and noticed a "GravCam" button. I pressed it, and two small cameras, about the size of my fist, floated out from a small compartment and positioned themselves on either side of the display.

"Ah, that's better," Masa said. "Captain, this is Kathi Gibila with Limid News, Dan Gala from the Madid Network, and Waltor Geshnura from the TNS. We are also awaiting a representative from the HPSS, but we can go ahead and start."

"Captain Plankwell," Ms. Gibila said before either of the two male reporters could so much as blink, "please tell our viewers what happened."



Kathi Gibila

"I assume you are referring to the events leading up to the sudden imposition of a Section 678 Interdict over Heron City. It was the sudden escalation and use of force on two active duty Navy officers, namely Captain Masa and myself, by representatives of the HPSS over a matter of mistaken documents. The attack was so sudden and jarring, and may I say, so out of character of the general treatment I have encountered from the civilian population on Jewell, that I immediately suspected something was drastically wrong. As you well know, an attack on naval officers is tantamount to an attack on the Navy and by extension, the Imperium. Captain Masa and myself belong to two different fleets, and he is well known to the local population. The Navy has long used

overwhelming force as a doctrine to settle conflict. It was in our interests to settle matters conclusively. As we continue to process data gathered from the incident scene, we will take up the offer of the Countess to assess our concerns in her Magisterial Court."

"Captain Plankwell," the younger man said, looking down at what were probably his notes. "Just a short while ago, a robot introduced by Captain Masa as the reincarnation of your ancestor, Olav hault-Plankwell, declared we are already at war. Do you support this assessment, and what do you think about everything else this Olav robot said in his address to the people of Jewell, and is he, sir... is it really the reincarnation of Olav hault-Plankwell, in your personal estimation?"

"No, it is *not* the reincarnation of Olav hault-Plankwell. We are not currently at war. I suggest you direct inquiries about the volatile statements made by an experimental piece of technology to the Countess, who commissioned the current iteration of the device after the Navy and the Ministry of Technology evaluated the item and deemed it not worth our time or investment. I am rather surprised that the media is chasing this as Olav reincarnated. It is simply a database of records and information about the original Olav Plankwell, with an interface that mimics human reaction. Are you so taken by the esteem of the original that you would accept what I would consider a poor copy? For what possible reason, other than to take advantage of people rightly patriotic in their holding of Olav hault-Plankwell as a hero of the Imperium from over 500 years ago?"



Dan Gala



*Waltor
Geshnura*

It was now the older man's turn, the one from the TNS. "In your speech, you spoke of seeking vengeance. Who will you be seeking vengeance against?"

"Against the enemies of the Imperium, of course... as we have always done. As you know, I assumed command of the Jaqueline after it took damage from a raider.

That raider is still out there and a pressing concern. Do I think I will be lucky enough to catch them? I do not believe in luck that much. But vigilance and vengeance on the enemies of the Imperium, wheresoever they may appear, is always our remit.”

Now it was the lady’s turn, once more. “Do you believe it is reasonable, given everything the Imperial Navy has done for Jewell and everything you are continuing to do by patrolling the border and ensuring our safety, that service members of the Imperial military, and the Navy in particular, should be afforded special consideration under local law?”

“It is settled Imperial law that worlds govern themselves, while the domain of the Navy and the Imperium is the space between the stars. It would be improper of me to express a sentiment concerning the treatment of the military on individual worlds. It does not change our mission if we are welcomed or not, however I will say on worlds where the military is greeted as a valued partner, there are opportunities for mutual enrichment. I find it unfortunate that local law enforcement chose to escalate what I understood to be a minor matter into an incident that led to the temporary imposition of an interdiction while we assured ourselves of our safety. This too, is settled Imperial law and Navy regulation.”

And now it was back to the younger man. “Captain, I don’t know if you can answer this as forthrightly as you might like, but it is a question I have to ask. Do you think someone in government is misusing the memory of your ancestor, Olav hault-Plankwell, for political purposes?”

“People have been using the Plankwell name for centuries for their own and varied purposes. It is the consequence of having an illustrious ancestor that upended the Imperium of the day and ushered in the current dynasty. Even I have a complicated relationship with my name and position in the Navy and the weight that it entails. Since arriving here at Jewell, I have been impressed with the fervor Olav is held in esteem, but ultimately, as I said, worlds are to govern themselves. Should they use Plankwell to follow in his footsteps and precipitate change off-world, and I stress there is no evidence for this

occurring, well, then that becomes the business of the Navy.”

I let my psychic curtain drop a little to see if I was able to get remote impressions as I had before with Major Fa’Linto.

“Okay, that’s all that we’re going to allow today,” Masa said, my telepathic tendrils getting nothing from the reporters, although from Josefeen, I sensed a certain degree of confusion.

“May I have my final turn?” the older man asked. “I promise, it won’t be a trick question.”

“Okay, Waltor, go ahead.”

“Final question,” the TNS correspondent said. “Captain, I have learned that tomorrow is going to be a special day for you. May I have the honor of being the first to wish you a happy birthday?”

The other reporters looked surprised. Old Waltor has apparently done his research.

“It is always a pleasure to acknowledge another milestone,” I said. “I appreciate your good wishes. It is my sincere hope that my crew is not too enthusiastic about celebrating. It is a Navy tradition to mark the birthday of the captain aboard ship, and with all of this activity, it seems I had completely forgotten about it. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today.”

They all thanked me, and I closed the connection, mostly happy with how it went. I seemed to be better at small group dynamics than at giving speeches, although the fact that Masa had handpicked the interviewers may have had something to do with it.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁷ While Timothy does the bulk of the final editing, I also present these chapters to an online writers’ group, and when reading this interview aloud over Zoom, one of the proofreaders actually started snoring (I’m guessing it was my sister, as she’s done this from time to time when other people are reading). Needless to say, I was somewhat bothered, not by her snoring but rather by what it signaled, which was that the writing was simply not engaging. This was my fault in failing to elevate and clarify the stakes, but I also suspected the scene could have been improved if Plankwell answered questions more like a regular guy and less like a seasoned politician. However, I didn’t feel comfortable editing Conrad’s replies to make them less polished, as that, it seemed to me, would be treading on his rights as the player. In any case, Timothy thought the Q&A was fine, although he also thought it would have been okay to replay the entire scene, if Conrad were to agree to it. I finally decided to just leave it as is. Nonetheless, this episode raised the question of when/if scenes should be replayed.

«We might have a slight problem,» Josefeen's voice interrupted my thoughts.

«What is it?»

«The spent ampule cartridge.» She glanced down at the hypo-gun. «It appears to have gone missing.»

«Was there any psi-enhancer still in there?»

«No, but it was here before, and now it's not. Somehow, we lost it.»

«So when you say 'we' it's really 'you', as, if I recall at the time, I was press-ganged into activation, and SOMEONE just left the hypo-gun unsecured?»

It was clearly a mistake, one she couldn't wiggle herself out of, though what it would mean was uncertain. Nonetheless, I could sense the heat in her cheeks and the slight sensation of nausea at what it might mean if any leftover residue were to be isolated and analyzed.

«Never mind.» I shook my head. «Your boss put me in charge, so it's my problem as well. Having even a trace of psionic drugs in a vehicle issued to my use will be annoying. Contact the starport for surveillance records. Maybe we'll be lucky and they showed their face to a camera or two. Or maybe the HPSS planned to detain me on suspicion of possession of restricted items, and that's why they got all shirty about the visa problem. In any case, run down the leads and report back. There is very little that will make me go back down to that planet before we head out.»

Chapter 43

Underdog

I tried not to think about the mountain of paperwork that had no doubt accumulated back on the Jaqueline. Dirtside exercises were all well and good, but the Navy bureaucracy demanded near-constant attention. Indeed, if my commanding officer were anywhere close, I'd have probably drawn a frown and perhaps even a demerit for neglecting my duties, but being on detached patrol had its privileges. My commanding officer was a week away by fleet courier, and anything slower would take twice as long.

I had my Public Affairs officer meet us at the airlock to give Canon Forklinbrass a tour of the ship. Regimath, of course, was mentally focused on the psi orb, which he strongly and correctly suspected was in Josefeen's diplomatic case.

«We'll meet for dinner,» I told him. «But there are pressing matters to which I must attend.»

«Of course, Captain.» He wanted to bring up the orb in some oblique way, but he didn't know how to do so without being obvious and, to a certain degree, guilty of covetousness, even though all he wanted was to touch it, just to see what might happen. Likewise, he was a bit afraid, I realized as he walked away with Lieutenant Parish, as he'd heard rumors that the God's Eye was a dangerous thing, the key to powers beyond human comprehension.

«How many of these things are there?» I asked Josefeen. But before she could answer, I already knew this topic was so classified that even she didn't know.

«You've heard of stovepiping, sir? If there's no need to know, there's no need to know.» She was fine with not knowing. A master manipulator psion had drilled that into her, a mandatory part of every intel psion's education.

Manipulators were the disciplinarians and, Josefeen had logically reasoned, the ultimate masters of psion society. That was why she'd been so surprised when I displayed this specific talent. But I was not *just* a manipulator. I was also a poly-psi. That was rare. All this made me both valuable and dangerous, and because of this, she

was already feeling inferior, which was a feeling she found both annoying and unexpected.

To be fair, I wasn't comfortable with the whole situation either. I was particularly worried about the upper branches of Intel deciding I was too valuable/dangerous to be let loose with an independent cruiser command. All the more reason to expedite repairs and move along while I still could.

«You can run, but you can't hide,» Josefeen's voice echoed inside my skull. *«And if you run away from the mission... well, frowns and demerits will be the least of your worries.»*

«Nobody's hiding. I know my duty, but until someone orders otherwise, I am doing what I am doing. And the mission is the same. It's just that where it's happening is changing. I'll speak to your boss tonight to get the lowdown on the fizzle at the event, and then we will see what we will see.»

I dictated a personnel advisory to the crew to politely refuse any offers of drinks from the Canon while he was onboard, pointedly staring at Josefeen while I did so. She simply stared back at me like I was a moldy piece of bread. Intel officers! All too resistant to command stares, although I couldn't help but chuckle inwardly at the memory of her psychedelic encounter with the universe.

She raised an eyebrow, wondering for how long she would remain a source of amusement.

"Lieutenant Abbonette, you are dismissed."

"Aye aye, Captain Plankwell," she said in a tired voice, then turned and walked away.

As I headed toward my quarters, Hoskins began to follow.

"Corporal, thank you for your service. You are dismissed from detached bodyguard duty with my compliments. Go get out of that armor and grab some rack time. Captain's orders."

"Aye aye, sir."

As I walked to my quarters, I could sense Josefeen walking to hers, except she had to take the bus downtown, as she called it. The intel pod was all the way at the back, directly opposite the exploration pod, meaning that if the ship had turned the other way at Quar, it would have been her people rather than the scouts that got hit. Maybe Josefeen herself would have gotten sucked out into space, and then she never would

have met this prodigy who the Imperium had held in reserve like an ace in the hole.

Why hadn't they activated him during the war, she wondered.

I'd wondered that as well. I thought over my war service and didn't think I'd been especially key. Maybe they worried about activating more psions in an environment where they could be suborned by close contact with the enemy. I frowned at that thought. I had been in close contact with Zhodani on a couple of occasions. Why hadn't they detected my potential? It probably wasn't that easy. I shook my head. There was still so much I didn't know. It was easier when Intel was a black box of instructions to be followed.

I reached my quarters as Josefeen entered a capsule and began heading aftward along the spinal transport tube. Was she still able to sense my presence as I was able to sense hers? I began changing out of my dress uniform into some work clothes, then looked at the time. It was nearly 1400. Dinner was served on almost all Navy ships from 1600-1800, which left me with only two hours, although being the Captain, I could push my meals to whenever I wanted. I was a little hungry already, although I'd long been of the opinion that a little bit of hunger was a good thing, both physically as well as mentally.

I'd put off the gym for too long, I suddenly realized, so I stopped changing into work clothes and instead put on gym clothes, realizing I was more in the mood to take out some frustrations that I'd been keeping locked up. First things first, however. I hit the call button on my wristcom.

"Bim Marshall."

"Sir," my scout liaison answered.

"Report to the Marine gym in ten minutes prepared to report on the disposition of the scout module negotiations."

"Sir, I can't get there in ten minutes. I'm dirtside."

"Get to a secure location and establish a secure connection, and ping me when it's done."

"Aye aye, sir."

Josefeen's capsule reached the Intel pod, and the door opened. *«You'll need to get him right in front of you if you want to see what he's thinking.»* Then she entered the pod, and it was

like she'd disappeared. I no longer had any sense of her presence.

«*Are you still there?*» No response. The Intel pod was psi-shielded. In a way it was a relief. I didn't want her in my head while I was showering or vice versa.

I called up the Marine gym and requested the floor officer to clear one of the combat bots for me. I then left my quarters and proceeded to the Marine Pod. I commed ahead to the officer of the deck, so they wouldn't be too surprised when I showed up. Training bot or live sparring partner, it didn't really matter. Although the ship's combat master²⁸⁸ would need to verify my ranking. No doubt, I'd lapsed in some areas with my long voyage out of the Extents. I needed to make up for lost training, but I also wanted to make up for missing my previous appointment. The whole "Captain No-Show" nickname still grated on me, and I needed to dispel it before it stuck.

The ship was emptier than the last time I was walking around, given that I had released so many for the ceremony. I liked busy ships, but I also liked these times when I had an alleyway to myself, and didn't have to worry about correct courtesy or the eager ensign with a problem and solution. Hence, I wasn't surprised when I got a capsule to myself, and as it headed aftward, my wristcom pinged. It was Bim.

"Report on your progress, please."

"General Products has scheduled the severing for tomorrow, and I'm told the new pod will be ready for installation shortly after they've taken the old one."

"And the staffing?"

Josefeen was right, I wasn't getting anything psychic over my wristcom. Either the psi-enhancer was wearing off already, or he was just too far away. Oh well, it can't all be easily bending people to my will.

I listened as Bim described the staffing plan he was putting together. The Navy had a certain

²⁸⁸ An Imperial Navy Ship's Combat Master is the highest ranked Personal Combat Instructor and is responsible for making sure everyone in combat roles is up-to-date with their certifications and could reliably be counted upon to do what their service jackets say they can do. A similar position, but for ranged weapon combat, is the Master Armsophont. Often, these positions are occupied by retiring personnel as their final assignment before mustering out.

institutional opinion of the Scout Service that, to be fair, was not entirely earned. I had once heard it described as the Navy works in space, but the Scouts live there, in squalor. Research had concluded that jump space exposure was relatively harmless, but the average scout had at least three times the hours of logged jump time compared to the average Navy spacer. That had to have an effect.

"Very good," I said. "Update the bridge on the installation schedule, and tell them to expedite. We are getting ready to leave. You will run integrity checks with Engineering as the pod is secured. Plankwell out."

The capsule's door opened, and a marine lieutenant saluted, having apparently caught wind of my impending arrival.

"Captain, the Combat Master is ready for you. Please follow me, sir."

I nodded my assent, and he led me down the corridor, pretty much all the way to the end and then to the left.

As always, the first thing to hit me was the smell of sweat. The sounds were next, muffled grunting and thumping, the thud of bodies hitting and the occasional shout of focused aggression. Navy combat gyms had many of the same amenities but never seemed quite as serious.

Resistance trainers lined the front and back walls. Free weights were situated along the sides. In the center were four squares, each with variable gravity controls. The Snuka²⁸⁹ Model 518 grappling drone was there in its charging and maintenance kennel, and an old man, fit but too far on in years to be a serious threat on the mat, was dressed in wrestling gear.

"Sir, CPO²⁹⁰ Kar Davidson," he said with a brisk salute. "There's your gear, and let me know if you need a locker." Kar was the number ten in Vilani, which meant either he was the tenth child in his family or he was named ten as symbolic of ten-out-of-ten for perfection. "Sir, may I assess your skill level?" It was the former. Like Josefeen, he grew up in a polycule, and also like her, he'd been genetically enhanced while still in a petri dish, such were the joys of Navy-sponsored human breeding programs.

²⁸⁹ Named for Jimmy "Superfly" Snuka.

²⁹⁰ Chief Petty Officer.

The gear he indicated was a standard training outfit for hand-to-hand combat. Most marines fought in combat armor or battle dress, and the training outfits simulated the fit and constraints of the armor to make sure that was taken into account. They also provided some light padding to help take the blows. I was already wearing the standard workout undersuit, so I began to pull on the pieces. I knew I was being evaluated the moment my foot had passed through the door. Time to let them know I knew what I was doing.

"I appreciate you fitting me into the schedule, Chief. I've had a hectic couple of days and am starting to feel the edge come off."

The trousers went on first, then the jacket, secured by a webbing belt. Formal martial arts indicated rank by any number of means, but among the Marines, it was based on who you were able to beat. To be a combat master required a very high ranking. This guy was on the edge of retirement, but looks could be deceiving. He was, after all, still the master in this detachment.

Once I was kitted up, Davidson indicated the combat square with a questioning grin. I grinned back.

"Good try, Chief, but I need to get warmed up first. Fifteen minutes should do it."

I was rewarded with a gracious nod and some hand motions to clear one of the other squares for me. I knew he was going to observe my form and wondered if he belonged to the school of notes or the school of correction. The sharp swipe of a stick on my shoulder gave me my answer. Corrections. I focused on my breathing and my form as I ran through a full body warm-up, getting my blood pumping and waking up underused muscles. I collected two more swipes and called it fair.

I then entered the combat square²⁹¹ and shook myself out to get a feeling on the fit of the sparring suit. Davidson entered the opposite side and activated the scoring computer. Sensors would monitor the combat and call out of bounds

²⁹¹ Conrad initially assumed there would be combat circles, but the deck plans show squares, and this makes sense to me, as most architecture both on the ground and in space includes an abundance of straight lines and right angles. Cultivating the ability to remember where they are while fighting hand-to-hand might prove decisive.

and score the moves. Combat bouts were scored on exchanges, pins, throws and holds. Other sensors monitored our vital signs and the force of blows being used. Standard training fights were to be conducted at three-quarters strength. Marines were among the most efficient hand-to-hand killers in service, and the Imperium did not pay them to thin their own ranks. Attention to form, consistency and strategy were the name of this game.

"Now, sir, with all due respect, I'm going to kick your ass, so please don't take it personally."

"I'm looking forward to seeing you try, CPO."

We each dropped into our opening stance, and the computer started the match with the word "Fight."

He was not wrong, I soon realized, as I looked up at the ceiling of the gym from my position on my back. Davidson had exploded into motion, feinting left and dropping me with a heel hook from the right as he spun like a top on one hand. The computer awarded him a full point. He had already returned to his starting location as I rolled to my feet.

There was no shame in losing to an unknown quantity, but the challenge was staying alive long enough to learn from the experience. As I dropped back into the opening stance, my mind started to race, I was opening my senses to combat, and as soon as the computer again said "Fight," I leapt into motion.

Davidson had gone for a direct attack, and I countered by grabbing his arm as I sidestepped the abdominal thrust. I pivoted on my heel and was pulling him into a throw when he added to his speed by jumping into the throw and rolled out. I managed to slip my arm away from his grab that would have turned into a counter-throw. I took a gamble and shot out my leg backwards in a hard kick, but he had already gained his balance and blocked the kick with a sweeping hand. He came at me again while I was recovering, grabbing me around the waist and pushing me down into a pin. Now I was looking at the floor while this wiry old man got off me.

"Point: red. Reset."

The computer was programmed to penalize you if you did not recover and reset in good form, so I once again pushed myself off the mat and got

into an opening stance. I was pleased to see Davidson breathing a little more quickly.

“Fight.”

Once more we flew towards each other. He’d already gone for a pin and a throw, so now he was going to pummel me. I ducked the first punch, a straight jab to my head, and blocked the reverse roundhouse as he spun in place to change his momentum. He was strong and quick, but as I felt the block, I thought I might be a little stronger. From the block, I launched an elbow into his abdomen that connected, but he was already moving back to lessen the impact. I continued my movement, dropping into a roll and aiming a hard kick at his knee from the deck. He reacted like I had hoped and shifted his knee. I finished my roll into a crouch and launched my entire body at him. He was off center from having to protect his knee and so took the body blow and was knocked out of bounds.

“Point: blue. Reset.”

I was grinning a little more than professionalism called for as Davidson hauled himself up and back into the square. It was not the most stylish of moves, but I would take what points I could get. I could see him re-evaluating me as he dropped into his opening stance. He might let me get in another shot, but I doubted he would make it easy.

“Fight.”

He started some footwork and moved about the square, hands held loosely in front, always in motion. He was giving me the attack, and I responded by starting to mirror him. He wanted me to attack, so I wanted to deny him his plan. We danced like this for about ten seconds before the computer buzzed us; engage or lose points. He had been waiting for the buzzer and moved in with some punch combinations. I moved back, blocking and dodging, but I took a couple of hits to my arms and shoulders. I was good enough to counter most of his punches, but the uppercut-bodyblow combo made it through, and once again I was on my back looking at the ceiling.

“Point: red. Warning, excess force use noted. Quarter-point deduction. Reset.”

So that was something. He took me down but had to go a little harder than sparring regs allowed. Being knocked out of bounds must not happen to him very often. I could use that.

“Fight.”

I repeated my opening move from when I had pushed him out of bounds. It was a little different because he wasn’t swinging at me this time, but I closed the distance and got a hold on an arm, preparing for a throw. I think he let me get a hold because as I moved into the throw, I felt him grabbing me and trying to counter-throw. We rolled together, each keeping our grip on the other. I focused my grip, squeezing hard and hoping to trigger a pain point to force a release, but it didn’t work. We were on our knees, straining for domination, and then he did something like folding into the clinch and ended up on his back, which was typically a pin, but in this case he had me in a leg lock, and his other arm was at my throat as I lay on top of him.

“Half point: red. Quarter point: blue. Match concluded.”

We both got out of the hold and stood and faced each other. I nodded my head and stuck out my hand. “Good match, Chief.”

I was rewarded with an impish grin, and he caught my hand in his very firm grip. “Aye aye, sir. It’s been a few jumps since I got bumped out. Now that I’ve got your measure, get back in there with the Snuka, and show me what you can handle at level eight.”

There was a brief murmur from the crowd that had gathered to watch. Level eight was challenging, but if the ship Combat Master gave it to me after one bout, well, the rest of them were now more interested. I nodded and got back in the square as the Snuka powered up and unfolded from its kennel.

Over the next few minutes, I scored twice on the Snuka but was also given a rather furious drubbing. As I picked myself up off the deck, I noticed a new woman was now there among the marines, and she was in a Navy uniform. According to the two starbursts and the throne insignia on her collar, she was the ship’s legal representative. No doubt, her presence had something to do with the HPSS and the interdiction. I decided it was time to take a break.

I walked over to her, getting a closer look. She was of moderate height and seemed to be trembling just slightly as I approached.

“Sir,” she said. “Captain....” *Captain Plankwell!* Oh, great. She was one of those

Plankwell groupies, the Olav Admiration Society. I made that up, but it honestly wouldn't have surprised me if an organization by that name actually existed. "Happy Birthday," she said. "I mean, Happy Tomorrow Birthday. Happy Birthday tomorrow." She wanted to smack herself. This was embarrassing, and not just for her.

"Thank you, Lieutenant²⁹²." I kept my answer brief, and focused on her, hoping she would come to the point. I also reached out telepathically, hoping to get an inkling of what was going on behind the hero worship routine.

"Sir, I'm Lt. Francine Sidara."

"Yes?"

"Sir, is there somewhere we can talk when you have a minute?"

"Is this something urgent or is there an issue with making an appointment through the regular channels?"

She'd debated with herself whether to seek me out or simply schedule an appointment, but when she heard through the bridge that I intended to postpone the ship's repairs and leave Jewell in three days, she decided on the direct approach. After all, if we were only going to be in port a few more days, time was of the essence.

One problem for Navy lawyers was that every world in the Imperium had its own legal code, and, indeed, every different magisterial court had its own procedures and precedents. Cases tried in a High Court could be appealed, but the grounds for appeal diminished as one ascended the legal ladder, although they did so in different ways depending on the laws and procedures of the specific Appellate Court in question. It was all a rather complex network of courts and laws, the result being a legal system so fractured that a ship's lawyer, even for ships that had them, typically had to employ the services of a local attorney when representing their ship or crew in a local court. Likewise, they'd need a high court attorney for matters under the jurisdiction of a magisterial court, and high court attorneys were even more expensive than the regular ones. And this was essentially what she wanted to discuss.

"I'm sorry, sir, but it is pressing if we are to go into the Magisterial Court, and I'm sorry about

the Happy Birthday, sir." *Shut-up already about the Happy Birthday, you idiot!* Oh, Dear Cleon. She was borderline schizophrenic. "Sir, as I'm sure you know, due to the variety of different laws and court procedures in different jurisdictions, we rely heavily on local representation, so I contacted the JAG division at Plankwell Naval Base," — *I can't believe my Captain is an actual Plankwell!* — "and they referred me to a local attorney, who..." — *who's pessimistic about our chances* — "...who's willing to meet with us to discuss the case."

"Ah. I suspected as much. Well, Lieutenant, I would be happy to meet with you to discuss what you see as our legal strategies and retaining local representation. Please submit a request into the scheduling queue, and I will be sure to give it a high priority. Now, if you will excuse me, the Chief is evaluating my combat effectiveness, and he is looking extremely gleeful about the combat stick he is holding. I appreciate your birthday wishes and will be sure to give your concern the appropriate attention at the appropriate time. Dismissed."

"Aye aye, sir."

Dejected and feeling like even more of an idiot, she saluted and began to leave.

"Lieutenant."

She stopped and turned back.

"It was a good call to come check with me in person given the chaos of the past couple of days and our impending departure plans. I meant what I said. I will be happy to fit you in at a high priority. Thank you for alerting me to the situation, and be sure you get the schedule request on the roster. As you were, unless you'd like to see me pummeled some more."

Her cheeks flushed as she struggled to think of a witty retort, but nothing came to mind. The truth was, she didn't understand why I was in a gym training for physical combat when, in her assessment, the upcoming battle wouldn't be physical but rather legal and possibly political. On top of that, she desperately needed to brush up on magisterial court procedure, just in case.

"I need to get to work, sir. I'll make the request."

There was a sharp noise behind me, metal tapping against metal, and I turned to look. Davidson was tapping the deck with an ARM-

292 Later, I'd wonder if she should've been of lower rank.

See <https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/26553600/>

01XE Combat Baton, also called a shock baton or stunstick, since it could be electrified with a twist of the grip. I knew from past experience that this particular model could also be extended or retracted, making it a concealable weapon.

The Marines, of course, were perfectly comfortable using their gauss rifles as cudgels, or anything else for that matter, but stunsticks were generally the preferred weapon for non-lethal, close quarters combat, at least against unarmored opponents. And they were known to come in fairly handy in dark alleys as well as the occasional barroom brawl.

As I donned some additional armor, I couldn't help but reflect on how rusty my baton fighting had become. The Navy tended to use stunsticks for boarding actions when high value targets were to be taken alive. Most of the ships I'd served on, however, used marines as their boarding parties, so while a lot of Navy personnel were competent, particularly boarding officers, it was the Marines who were the true professionals.

Davidson scaled down his attacks to my skill level as soon as he saw me struggling. I was a boxer and a brawler, so using a stunstick was a little taxing. It wasn't like flying a fighter where I could program the inputs to match my natural reflexes. I had to move the stick as well as my body, blocking, swinging, jabbing and deflecting, all while taking hits. After my third fall, Davidson suggested I take a break.

"Next up are your physical stress and endurance assessments, but only if you have the time."

I looked up from my position on the deck.

"If you think that's enough to go from Captain No-Show to Captain Can-Take-a-Punch, we can catch up with the rest after we jump out."

Davidson had the look of aplomb down pat, but I saw the slight crease of the laugh lines around his eyes, but only because I was looking for it, and I had my psychic nose attuned to his smothered emotional response.

"Aye sir, that you can," and he reached out his hand to help me up from the deck.

As I stood, the rest of the crowd watching had returned to their own training routines. I felt better than I had in a while. Exercise really did release those endorphins.

"Sadly, I must return to the chains of Navy bureaucracy and conquer the paperwork, and there's a guest dinner as well. Thanks for the workout Chief. I'll be interested in who you pair me up with for sparring practice."

Combat Masters also ran the ship-wide training cycles that matched combatants of equal skill but differing styles. Low stakes betting on these matches was one of the ways Navy and Marines crewmembers interacted during the week-long downtimes while in jumpspace. Not all Navy personnel participated, but the Marines treated the ones who did like little brothers and sisters, spending time with them training and sharing the wisdom of combat. The competition in the other combat modes was slightly more even, especially with the Marines who were assigned gunnery duty. Navy gunners took Marines under their wing just like Marines did Navy boarding officers.

I stripped off the training armor and oversuit, down to my sweat-soaked undersuit and made my way to the shower block. Once there, I stripped down completely, dropped my undersuit into the autoclean, and stepped into the nearest sonic shower stall²⁹³. Its steam jets combined with the ultrasonic, low-amplitude acoustics massaged my aching muscles as a thin film of lukewarm cleansing condensate dripped down my body. Then the dryer fans kicked on. As I stepped out, I was still a little sore in places but was otherwise feeling pretty good, and my undersuit was already clean, dry, and neatly folded. I put it on and headed back to my cabin, curious to see how big my task queue had gotten during my absence.

²⁹³ Sonic showers, which were apparently introduced to SF fans in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), are mentioned in the TravellerWiki's entry for Freshers (<https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Fresher>) and were probably inspired by hydrosonic showers, which were developed during the mid-1970s (<https://www.trekbbbs.com/threads/could-sonic-showers-actually-work.41317/>).

Chapter 44

Mt. Paperwork

Back in my quarters, I opted for some plain scuf instead of zardocha. I had a ton of work to do, and I'd need my wits about me.

My task queue was a veritable mountain of this and that, and at the dusty summit was a message from the Imperial Palace inviting me to Seventeas "*at the chiming of the morrow's seventieth deplar (HST).*"

Inwardly, I couldn't help but groan.

Imperial summons were a tricky business, and the Navy had a swarm of protocols about how to respond. While in port and under friendly conditions there was less discretion than if I were engaged in combat, but I was in a legal dispute with the HPSS. Didn't that create some sort of conflict of interest? No mention was made of my birthday. Either this was a thinly-veiled surprise party, which I seriously doubted, or the Countess wanted to scold me over the interdiction.

I forwarded it to Comms with a request to pass it on to the ship's protocol officer, and within the sealed portion, meant only for the protocol officer, I appended a brief note: "Can I gracefully get out of the summons?" I feared that the answer would be no but decided to make it someone else's problem for a bit.

Next was a message from Lt. Abbonette that consisted of two file links prefaced by a brief line of text: "This isn't as bad as it looks."

I tapped the first link and a video popped up, surveillance footage of Admiral Karneticky getting into what might have been the Kinnuki Shumurdim loaned me — I wouldn't know for sure unless I examined its heat shield. Then the timestamp skipped forward a minute or so, and the Admiral came back out holding something. The second link displayed a close-up of the video's last frame, which showed what was in his hand: an empty ampule cartridge of the sort used by hypo-guns.

What was Karneticky doing getting his hands dirty like this? Anyone else would have used a cut-out. This was amateur hour, and no one gets to be a Navy Admiral by being an amateur. Then again, it was his fleet's Kinnuki.

I sat back in my chair and sipped my scuf. Abbonette was right. The case could be made that there was a sloppy cleaning job. That he'd left injector gun and taken only the spent ampule indicated he was merely curious about what had been in there. Or maybe he was trying to gather evidence for blackmail.

Was he suspicious that I was taking precedence with the Countess? Well, there was some weight to that interpretation, but that was a stretch of even my imagination.

I played around with the idea of ordering covert surveillance of the Admiral using my own assets, but I wasn't sure how far the writ of command issued by Abbonette's handler extended. It was one thing to compete with neighboring fleets, but putting the commanding admiral on station under surveillance was pushing the bounds of interfleet rivalry.

I tapped the message for secure storage and responded, "Agreed. Remember we have dinner with the Canon in a bit."

Next up was a *Thank You* message from Captain Masa that included a video link to what the description said was the memorial ceremony, or at least the Navy's official public version. Did he include Olav's speech? I scanned along the timeline with my finger until I saw Olav's image on that gigantic video screen at the back of the stage. The Olav-robot stood below, behind the lectern, but it was Olav himself on the big screen just as if he were still alive, displayed for all to see.

Back in the G-Carrier, I'd stopped listening halfway through, but if I'd have to present myself again at the Imperial Palace, maybe it'd be useful to know what else he'd said. I forwarded the timeline to the last bit of him talking and hit the play button.

"...so at the end of my speech I have to make a special request to those of you who are young. There is a very special reason for this. The pacifists, in particular the universities and the merchant academies, who are quite content with the current state of affairs so long as it means ever more bloated bureaucracies and fatter bank accounts, train their children in the useless art of mouthing off. We in the military services, on the other hand, train the young both physically as

well as mentally for the hard task of defending our territory and our honor.

“Those youths who do not find their way to where the fate of the Imperium will ultimately be decided, they who only study philosophy or who learn to put profits over people, they are not assets but rather liabilities, as they cannot defend themselves but must be rescued by those who can. So I call upon you, all young people who hear my voice. I call upon you to join the Imperial Navy, or the Imperial Army, or the Marines, or the Scout Service. No matter what slander and calumny you may hear about the armed services, you will know they are formed for our protection, for our common defense, and for the protection and extension of the Imperium.

“And if you are blasphemed and if you are besmirched, then hail to you! For you already have the good fortune to be hated at the age of eighteen and nineteen by the worst scoundrels. This highest good of distinguishing the honest citizen from the bandit falls into your lap as a bit of good luck in your youth! Every battle must be fought to the end. Better that it come sooner than later.

“And the one who goes into the fight with the most confidence from the start stands the greatest chance on the field of battle. So take heart, as we do not believe in waiting for the next war. We believe the Zhodani scourge that has plagued the Imperium since my time up until today can and must end, and that we must therefore awaken to a new power and glory, to an Imperium that will fulfill what trillions of our best through centuries and millennia have inwardly hoped for, an Imperium of limitless possibility, with all of Humaniti united under one banner forevermore!

“For the Imperium! For the Imperium! For the Imperium! For the Imperium!”

Once again, he had the crowd chanting, but inside I felt nauseous.

Bombast and jingoism never landed well with me, and naked appeals to fear to swell the ranks was for politicians trying to do something sneaky while everyone else was distracted. It was my deep experience in a martial family that told me this was a deeply flawed appeal. My father and uncle were the black sheep, taking up careers in the private sector; I was the one returning to the real family business, the Imperial Navy. And in

the Imperial Navy, we did not express strong political opinions, at least not publicly, and we certainly didn't call for war.

In any case, it was meaningless. A robot, even one speaking on behalf of the Countess, couldn't declare war. Even for the Countess herself to do so without first running it up the chain to the Archduke would be madness. Indeed, a decision of that magnitude should really only be made by the Emperor himself. Yet the crowd cheered as he walked offstage, their chant of “For the Imperium” spontaneously morphing into “Olav! Olav! Olav!”

What were they thinking? That he would single-handedly lead them to victory against the Zhodani?

Locals didn't really understand the awesome destructive power of modern militaries. If not for the Imperial Rules of War, a convention to which the Zhodani as well as the Vargr fortunately subscribed, half the worlds of the Imperium would be nuclear cinders. I was now a captain in the Imperial Navy, and even for me it was hard to grasp just how much destructive power a single cruiser could bring to bear.

With so much at stake, the Navy wanted patriots, of course, but not zealots. Mostly, they just wanted officers that would put pragmatism over politics. I had seen some of the more patriotic officers I had come up with shuffled to Public Relations or Logistics. Very rarely did they find their way to Fleet Operations. People like Nizlich, who I was very sure had suppressed her views to succeed in the Navy, and myself, who had been watched carefully to see how this Plankwell would behave, were both examples of people able to put the mission of the Navy before their personal concerns.

The upshot was that I felt this beta version of Olav was doing his memory a grave disservice. Granted, this was the Imperial-approved version. But this certainly wasn't anything like the alpha version I'd met at the highport, nor was it the one I'd come to know through my exposure to in-depth study of non-authorized sources.

Back in Olav's time, the Navy, at least along the frontiers, still drafted soldiers using press gangs. One of Arbellatra's reforms had been to do away with involuntary recruitment. She'd expedited the process of establishing training

centers and intake bases near the depots. Career routes to the Navy were well established these days, and young people were challenged to see if they had what it took. Hence, there was less need to call for new recruits.

Likewise, his casual dismissal of universities and the merchants was also clearly rooted in outdated perceptions. Merchant trade was now the lifeblood of the Imperium, and the Navy spent a lot of time on escort duty, piracy suppression, and monitoring trade disputes. The Navy offered many research opportunities to promising university graduates in practically all areas of study.

So why was the Countess doing this? Why was she using Olav's memory to stir the political cauldron? Was this an attempt to put the Imperial Navy in a bad light? Was it a swipe at Karneticky over wounded pride? Whichever the case, I'd had enough. If I never had to listen to this Olav simulation again, I would count myself blessed beyond measure.

To my surprise, Lt. Agu came onstage, waving a fist and chanting "Olav! Olav!" along with the crowd. Then he put up his hands, signaling for silence, and he called for anyone from the audience, anyone who was a personal friend of Lt. Jaamzon, to come forward and speak. He looked directly at the VIP section as he did so. This is where Spooky was seated, along with many of the other pilots who served alongside Jaamzon, and after a little bit of coaxing, during which their faces were displayed on the big screen, several of them finally stood up and ascended some stairs along the edge of the stage.

The crowd, intrigued by the clearly unscripted moment, forgot its bloodlust.

"Who wants to go first?" He looked at Spooky. "You?"

Spooky shrugged but then nodded.

"Ghost was a really close friend," she said. "My callsign is Spooky, so of course we got put in the same squadron." There was a moment of laughter from the crowd; it was amazing how quickly their mood had changed, but all the while, I couldn't help but think: *Jaamzon's callsign was Ghost?*

"Anyway, Ghost... ugh... I don't even like calling her that now. Cleon's balls this sucks." She wasn't holding it together. Whether it was the

pressure of trying to speak in front of such a large audience or just the realization that she'd never see her crewmate again, she became teary eyed. "I... I, uh..."

"It's okay," Agu said. "Take your time."

For a moment, the audience seemed to hold its breath.

"I'm sorry," she blubbered, a tear now slipping down her cheek. "I don't know what to say. I'm just so... I'm so angry. I didn't want to let go of her fighter. I wanted to keep it onboard... like it would keep her alive." And I'd basically prodded her into getting rid of it.²⁹⁴ And then, of course, Jaamzon died. "I'm sorry, I just... I want someone to pay for this. I know it won't bring her back. Nothing will ever bring her back. All I can say is she'll be missed. By all of us. That's all I know how to say. You'll be missed, Ghost."

Something sparkled on the edge of the stage, just a little bit of reflected light where someone had probably spilled some water or a tidybot had applied too much wax. Then Agu turned to someone else to let them speak, and for a long moment I couldn't even process what they were saying. I just kept focused on Spooky. I'd had no idea what she was feeling. She hadn't told me. As well as we knew each other, she probably didn't want to appear weak to her new captain.

I'd been acting from low local information but within regs and privileges as a commanding officer cleaning house for a deployment, but what would I have done if I had known more? I probably would have done the same things but maybe with a little more sensitivity. But not much. Spooky had been bending regs hanging on to the hulk, and Jaamzon, well, I was still not sure of exactly what had happened with Jaamzon, other than I had somehow given permission for something to move on. Jaamzon's injuries had been too severe for continued shipboard treatment. I sighed. Sometimes this life didn't leave enough room for grief.

As Jaamzon's squadron mates took turns praising her memory in the background, I attended to some of the lower priority items, approving requisitions, transfers, and so forth, as well as approving the meeting request from Lt. Sidara. Below Sidara's request was an earlier

²⁹⁴ See page 91.

message she'd sent regarding some of our crew still held in detention at Plankwell Naval Base. Attached were several reports, one by the HPSS, another by a private investigator we'd hired, and a third by a team we sent down to look into what happened. Fortunately, Sidara had also included a summary, stating that she suspected foul play, but it couldn't be proven. In any case, she'd already secured military immunity with Karneticky's approval, so the only question left was whether or not we should punish them ourselves. Plankwell Naval's JAG division recommended a court-martial, but they were with the 212th fleet, whereas we were with the 213th, so it was actually *my* decision. I could impose whatever discipline I pleased, subject to Admiral Vasilyev's approval, but Sidara warned that if they got a mere slap on the wrist, there could be political repercussions.

And this was before the interdiction. I could only imagine what she was thinking about political repercussions now.

I closed her message, determined to hash this out with her at our meeting tomorrow morning, and opened the next one without even looking at who sent it. It was from Martinsen and included a very long and ridiculously detailed report of what he'd been doing. In the executive summary was a warning that while the ship would be spaceworthy in three days, it would not be fully operational.

Yeah, I already knew this. He was just covering his ass.

Impatient and already feeling overwhelmed, I scrolled down the list to get a better sense of how long this would take while in a small window at the corner of the display, the pilots and Lt. Agu left the stage, exchanging places with a rather rotund woman. Then the band began playing the Spacer's Hymn²⁹⁵, and the woman sang.

Eternal Emp'ror, strong to save
All those in peril out in space,
Who bid'st the vasty voidy black
Its own appointed boundaries back:
Oh, hear us when we cry your name
For those in Jump and on the Mains.

Creator Lord and King of old,
Who fashioned heaven and the worlds,
And bid'st the planets and the suns
Their own appointed orbits run;
Oh hear us howsoever far
Those travellers journey 'twixt the stars.

Most Holy Spirit! Who didst brood
Upon the chaos dark and rude,
And bid its angry tumult cease,
And give, for wild confusion, peace;
Oh hear us when we seek your face,
For those in peril out in space.

O Trinity of love and power!
Our brethren's shield in danger's hour;
From asteroids and fire and foe,
Protect them wheresoe'er they go;
Thus evermore we'll bless your name
With hymns of praise from Jump and Main.

Listening to these familiar strains and remembering absent friends, I looked over my entire unread message queue, sorted for significance by the ship's computer. The first few were from me to myself, one to add a commendation to Wang's service jacket, another to review damage control efficiency ratings, another to forward a comment on Ensign Florence's personnel jacket, and so on. After that were a string of messages from various people with the Starport Authority, including one from Director Mazarin Scarlett. They were all time-stamped from the period of the interdiction, which told me they were probably all interdiction-related. There was also a string of messages from a Khuura Locos of Heron Downport Traffic Control, again from the same time period. No doubt she was angry about the big no-fly zone I'd erected right next to her starport. Well, I'd already rescinded the interdiction, so I wasn't sure there was any point even opening them.

There was one from Ensign Arad Urdud, the chief steward, one from the Detention Coordinator at Plankwell Naval Base, one from the HPSS, one from a Major Trilbon of Bratom Solutions, whatever that was. Then there were a whole bunch of messages from various media

²⁹⁵ <https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/gallery/timothycollinson/spacershymn.html>

outlets, including one from Faye Mekizush²⁹⁶, which was the only name I recognized. There was also one from what looked like some employees' union, a few from various transport and delivery companies that I'd probably inconvenienced, one from an administrator of some housing co-op, and at least four from various people with the abbreviation "Esq." following their names.

Oh, great. Lawyers.

Another was from a hospital, and there was a message from some church I'd never heard of. Then, stacked at the end of the list were messages from numerous private individuals whose names I didn't recognize, except for one: Cassiopeia Remshaw.

I cued up the messages from Scarlett, the chief steward, the Detention Coordinator, Bratom Solutions, and Mekizush. I deliberated a bit, then added Remshaw to the end. I figured if I got through these then it would be time for dinner.

Scarlett, of course, wanted to know what was up with the interdiction. "What in Cleon's name is going on down there, and are we still on for dinner tomorrow night?"

I weighed the value of socializing with Scarlett given the update to our plans. It was never bad to have a friend in the SPA no matter where you were.

I responded with apologies, mentioned that today had been very busy, and invited him to come aboard tomorrow at 1800 for a tour and dinner. I sent a copy of the invite to the public relations officer and noted on my schedule that I was having another guest for dinner.

The chief steward's message was simply to inform me that unless otherwise directed, tonight's dinner with the Canon would be served in the Special Galley. *Special Galley?* I looked it up on the ship's deck plans. *Oh.* That was the one that was almost directly opposite my quarters. It was where I'd had breakfast just yesterday.²⁹⁷ *Yesterday.* It seemed so long ago. I kept reading. "With your permission, dinner shall be served at 1600. I glanced at my wrist. It was already past 1600. I wrote back 1700 and made my menu selection.

²⁹⁶ Gus met her in Chapter 10 and approved of her work in Chapter 16.

²⁹⁷ See Chapter 13.

The next one was from the Detention Coordinator. She wanted somebody to tell her what to do with the six Jaqueline crew members still in custody. Lt. Sidara was included on the email chain, and she'd written to me privately that I could either sign a release and administer whatever justice I saw fit, or I could waive their military immunity and leave them on Jewell to stand trial.

Even though Lt. Sidara would be briefing me in the morning, I transmitted orders for the detained crew to be transferred to the Jaqueline's brig.

Next was Major Trilbon's message, which turned out to be a groveling apology over my treatment at the hands of "those two bozos," i.e., the two security guards who'd tased Captain Masa and myself. "I assure you, Captain, they've been fired. Please know that we here at Bratom take this very seriously, and all of our employees are going for retraining. Again, I am incredibly sorry this happened. It is an embarrassment for myself and for the entire company." And so on and so forth.

So HPSS was contracting to Bratom? For customs enforcement? Not unheard of, but Bratom was an Imperial contractor as well, and this had the smell of CYA. Honest error or another veil of obfuscation and denial? I let this one go unanswered but allowed the 'read' notification to go out, and I earmarked it to follow up with Sidara during our legal conference.

Faye Mekizush's message was, of course, an interview request, but she also included a video link. "This is going live tonight. If you'd like to comment on the record, please contact me ASAP."

I opened the video.

"This is Channel One, Jewell Edition. I am Faye Mekizush, and tonight I'm talking with Agus Lapraakek, spokesman for the Heron Public Security Service."

As the camera panned out, a middle-aged man became visible. He was sitting only a few meters from her and seemed to be sweating furiously under the bright, studio lights.

"So, Mr. Lapraakek," she said, "has the HPSS issued a formal apology to the Imperial Navy?"

"No, we have not."

“Why not?”

“Because we have determined that the security guards working under contract with the HPSS followed all pertinent regulations.”

Channel One existed on almost every Imperial world. It was owned largely by the Makhidkarun²⁹⁸ Group and was staunchly Imperial. Nonetheless, in the interests of appearing fair and balanced, they would bring on locals.

“Just to be clear, your contractors, who are paid through public tax revenues, attacked two Imperial Navy Captains over a bureaucratic mix-up.”

“The HPSS had nothing to do with that.”

“But you did attack these officers.”

“We had to arrest the one... Captain Plankwell...”

“Who is a descendant of Olav hault-Plankwell.”

“The guards did not know that at the time.”

“How could they not know that? How could anyone on Jewell not know that?”

“I don’t know. Not everyone is plugged into the news.”

“Captain Plankwell gave a speech at that very stadium where he’d been attacked, and you know he didn’t even bring it up?”

“Yes, I noticed that.”

“Was that not magnanimous of him?”

“Magnanimous? I... I don’t see how that...”

“He’d already let it go,” she said.

“Which is something I completely agree we should all do.”

“So the HPSS is no longer seeking his arrest?”

“No. We consider the matter resolved.”

“Then tell me, why do you think those contractors... why do you think they attacked two Imperial captains? Was it personal?”

“I don’t know. All I can tell you is that they were following all pertinent regulations.”

“HPSS regulations told them to attack two Navy captains?”

“The two captains failed to follow our officer’s instructions, and so these guards, who I stress were working for a contractor and not for the HPSS directly, did exactly what they were trained to do.”

“But these were *Imperial Navy Captains*,” she retorted with bulging eyes, a stark contrast to her elfin features.

“The stadium in its entirety is under the lawful authority of the HPSS.”

“But this was over a bureaucratic technicality. Surely you can see...”

“That’s not for you or I or even for the guards to decide. They were following their training.”

“But they fired weapons...”

“They’re not weapons. They’re non-lethal devices. There’s quite a difference.”

“I have just such a device with me now. Would you like to see what it’s like, getting stunned by one of these?”

He visibly blanched at the suggestion. “I don’t see how my getting stunned would prove anything.”

“How cowardly.”

“Excuse me?”

“No, I won’t. You’re saying these officers of the Imperial Navy, who have, by the way, put their lives on the line in our defense — *their lives, sir* — deserve to be stunned over a bureaucratic mistake, and yet your organization, rather than apologizing, as it should, has instead chosen to minimize the offense it has caused, which you say was not an attack, and yet you yourself are unwilling to undergo similar treatment, to experience what it’s like to be stunned by one of these *non-lethal* devices, because you know they *can be lethal*, in some circumstances, but more to the point, because you know they *hurt*. These two Captains deserve an apology, and yet you won’t give it! You refuse!”

“We have not refused. As I said before, the situation is being assessed and discussed, and when we are ready to make a statement on the matter, we will do so.”

“When will that be?! How long is it going to take?!”

Obviously, I enjoyed watching this tiny, short-haired blonde with her high-pitched voice tearing the HPSS-flunky a new exit port. The rest of the video was more of the same, her challenging him again to take some volts from the taser, even pointing it at his groin and asking where he’d prefer to be shot.

I composed a short, no-comment acknowledgment and complimented Mekizush on

²⁹⁸ <https://wiki.travellerpg.com/Makhidkarun>

her interviewing style. I then went into my contact database and upgraded her contact privileges to bypass Navy PR and be added to my mediated²⁹⁹ contact list, finally adding her updated contact privileges to the note and sending it off.

Finally, I got to Kaz. It was a video call. “Hey Stranger,” she said. “I’m sorry to bother you, Gus, but something happened, and... it’s about my position with the Chamber of Commerce. After my performance at the Commerce Committee, they decided my services are no longer required. I don’t know how tight you are with the Countess, but if you could get someone on her staff to send a... a note or letter, just something saying that the Countess is looking forward to my future attendance at the CCE, it could go a long way to getting me reinstated. If it’s asking too much, I understand, but it would mean a lot to me.”

I sat for a while and thought about what she was asking. On the one hand, influence peddling was a long established practice, and in the grand scheme of things, this was a small ask, but I thought about how the Countess had reacted to her during the council meeting. In terms of relative value, relationships with the Countess and the local nobility were more important than the local business representative. I put aside entirely the fact that I had slept with her, adding that into the equation would make one or both of us prostitutes, and with her background, I was not willing to make that intimation. So, from a purely influence transaction, there was not a lot for me. There was more for the Navy, in repairing the image of her father ever so slightly, but not much for me, other than not being like a lot of other Navy men who had disappointed her. I activated my own video recorder.

“Hello, Kaz. Nice to see you again. I fear that my relationship with the Countess has frayed a little since her security forces shot me, but if the

²⁹⁹ I asked Conrad to explain what *mediated* means in this context, and he replied, “*Mediated as in pre-cleared for prioritized access. My feeling is all press requests go through Public Relations. I have a small white list of contacts that can bypass the PR runaround and get brought to my attention. More like a cleared to the second level of contact. There is a third level that provides direct access, even fewer are on it than the 2nd level.*”

opportunity arises, I will do my best. You might already know Captain Masa. I’ve found him to be a reliable fellow. Feel free to contact him on my recommendation should you need something from the Navy. Our current departure plans have been updated, and we are jumping out probably in the next three days. Thank you for everything, and if circumstances allow, I would like to see you once more before departure. But if not, you are one of the highlights of my visit here. Take care.”

The niggling thought that Nizlich had not yet checked in with me bothered me enough to give her a call.

“Sir?”

“Commander. It is a pleasure to hear your voice. I am truly sorry for all the extra work that has been heaping up. I am working my way through the queue, but I also wanted to check if you would like to join me for dinner with the Canon this evening. Not a requirement. I know there is a lot to do. And I am sure you are as overwhelmed as I am, but it would be nice to see you in person.”

“Of course, Captain. I would be honored. Where and when?”

“In the special galley,” I glanced at my wristcom. “In eight minutes.”

“I’ll be there, sir.”

Chapter 45

Food for Thought

The Special Galley was nicely turned out for dinner guests with a tablecloth, dishes bearing the ship's crest, condiment dispensers, and even a floral decoration. Everything had magnets, of course, except for the dishes and flatware, but those had ferromagnetic cores. To qualify as spaceworthy, dishes had to be shatterproof, and they had to stay where they were put, even if gravity went sideways. Only non-spacers, such as the Canon, were intrigued by such things, although anyone who'd done any traveling outside of a low berth would be familiar with the concept.

I was in my standard uniform, and Josefeen, seated across from me, was dressed even more casually, given that she was technically off-duty, but she wore uniform trousers and a draped top covering her... uh... assets. The fact that I could detect her mental snigger at my observation while she was engaged in conversation with the Canon was more proof that our durable psychic bond had survived her entering the Intel Pod, a psi-shielded area, but the bond had clearly diminished, as I hadn't noticed when she'd come back out, and, indeed, it wasn't until she and the Canon were nearly on the other side of the door that I sensed her presence.

They were talking about the additives used with alcohol to forestall liver failure, which had killed so many members of his order back in its early days.

"The problem still exists," he said, "but nowadays we grow backup livers, although mine is bionic. I burned through my backups some years ago."

"I didn't realize religious life is so hazardous," Josefeen remarked.

"Oh, the real problem is the brain. There's no backup for that, although who's to say what the future will bring?"

"You have problems with your brain?"

"Well, as the brain ages, things start to go wrong."

"Oh?" Josefeen gazed with focus, trying to discern exactly what he knew about psionic orbs. As it happened, she was his elder, but being the

beneficiary of anagathics, she'd managed to sidestep the ravages of time.

"We were never intended to live as long as we do," he said. "Our minds are designed to retain only so much information, only so many memories, and after a certain point, dysfunction inevitably occurs. Some accept this gracefully, but others... not so much."

The door slid open, and Nizlich entered.

"Canon, may I introduce my Executive Officer, Commander Stefani Nizlich." I motioned with one hand as she approached the table. "Commander, Canon Regimath Forklinbrass."

"Your Grace," Nizlich nodded.

"The Captain's right hand," he said with a grin as Nizlich sat in the only available chair, which just so happened to be on my right.

"More like my entire arm," I said.

She smiled, but as she glanced at me, I could sense a certain unease. Somewhere, perhaps long ago, she'd learned to distrust the effusive compliments of men, though she wanted to believe mine. Ever since our exchange of call signs and my recognition of her as a soldier of note³⁰⁰, she'd felt a certain warmth toward me. But she also suspected I'd studied her service jacket prior to that conversation, and though it was true that I had, albeit in a cursory way, I'd not noticed her call sign nor connected the dry facts of where and when she'd served with the semi-famous exploits of *Sauerkraut*, semi-famous at least to those of us who served in fighter squadrons during the war.

"That is very kind of you, sir," she said as Ensign Urdud entered the room followed by a small gravcart.

"Dinner is served," Urdud announced, parking the cart and bringing out our respective dinners.

Given the turbulence of the past few days, I'd decided to indulge, so on my plate were a trio of folded cracker shells stuffed with marinated mycoprotein, which had been chopped and mixed with a variety of spicy vegetables and melted cheese and finally topped with a pungent sauce.³⁰¹ As for the beverage, I'd stuck with some fruit-flavored carbonated water. Urdud also placed a bowl of dried mushroom dippers and some of the

³⁰⁰ See page 87.

³⁰¹ Traveller Tacos.

dipping sauces from my personal stash on the table.

As usual, I was observing and evaluating. Urdad had correctly ascertained the pairing of the snacks with my dinner order. He'd used the correct kind of bowls for plating the sauces, and the dippers were just the right level of crisp. He had done his research and served the right combinations to enhance my dinner and offer me the opportunity to share with my table if I so chose. He was definitely going to get a merit commendation for this.

«You missed your calling.» Josefeen rolled her eyes. *«You should have been a restaurant critic.»*

«I attended a prep school where the juniors served the seniors, and I learned to appreciate getting preferences right to avoid demerits and beatings. In any case, good service is always appreciated, and while I would accept less, it pleases me to see people invested in their responsibilities. They also serve, who keep the stomachs full.»

The Canon smiled as his dinner was put before him, a steaming heap of seaweed in a citrus sauce served over a bed of green rice, but in his eyes, I could sense anxiety, as he didn't want to bring up the Eye of God to anyone but me and, possibly, Josefeen. Yet if speaking of it could have unforeseen consequences, touching it, which was his main desire, could wreck his mind to a degree that decades of drugs and alcohol had somehow failed to accomplish. This, however, was his last chance at wisdom. But he wasn't sure what would happen if he should mention it in front of Commander Nizlich.

«Uh-oh,» Josefeen telepathically voiced *«You shouldn't have invited her. He's going to start yapping about the psi orb, and how are we supposed to brain-rape him with her in the room?»*

I hid a brief moue of disgust in a cough.

«We are not brain-raping anybody. Keep a civil thought in your head, please. I need Stefani here to serve as a control and to cover my ass. I'm not letting you get me alone again.»

In the back of my head, I was still thinking of the fateful speeder ride that had made me an unwilling Naval Intelligence asset.

«We're both on the same team, Gus.»

«I'm aware. However, you are training me to be a covert psionic asset, so train me. Can I plant thoughts in Reggie's head... or send visions?»

«You can try, but until you've been properly trained, you won't know what you're doing. My boss indicated you would be seeking a Psionic Master, a Khouzkhoug Kanrrae living in Pitfall. That's another reason we were both surprised by your decision to run away from Jewell.»

«I'm not running away from Jewell. I am expediting a departure on my original orders. I realize Navy Intelligence can cut orders removing me from command, but that would be kind of overt for Intel. In any case, I was going to reach out to this Kanrrae this evening, after dinner.»

By now, Urdud was finished serving the meals.

"Sir, is there anything else you or your guests require?"

The Canon and Nizlich, to my left and right, shrugged and shook their heads, but Josefeen, across the table, kept her gaze fixed on me, her expression a deadpan so blank it was at the cusp of boredom.

"This looks excellent," the Canon said. "Thank you very much."

"It is truly a pleasure to return the hospitality you showed to a stranger in a time of need." I smiled. "I am pleased to offer the thanks of the Navy for the kindness you've shown to one of its officers. That the officer offering the thanks is also the one who received the kindness is just one of the little ironies of command."

"Speaking of irony, before we eat," the Canon said, "may I be permitted a brief conversation with the universe? Let us hold hands and pray."

I shouldn't have been startled, but there was a little shiver in the base of my spine. The phrase, *conversation with the universe*, struck a nerve. I reached out to take Regimath's hand, felt Stefani take mine, and closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to react to the dead eyes of my Intel liaison.

"Oh, you who are nameless and whose ways are powerful and beyond our comprehension, thank you for your generous sustenance, and please allow me the honor to beseech you for your favor for Captain Plankwell and his crew. May they do what is right, and may they do it well, no matter the cost. Amen."

«What in Cleon's left ear is this dude all about?»

«Some people are sincere in their beliefs. Comes from living at the bottom of a well, or so I hear.»

Spacers came in all varieties, but many ascribed odd beliefs to the phenomenon of living in natural gravity wells, a.k.a. planets. There were some odd beliefs around natural vs. artificial gravity and its effects on human psychology.

“I thank you as well, Captain,” the Canon said, grabbing his chopsticks. “And I hope my prayer met with your approval.”

Nizlich smiled as she dug into her salad, thinking it cute that he'd asked.

“Contrary to popular opinion,” I said, “the captain's preference is not the be-all and end-all rule on Navy ships.” There was a quiet cough from across the table. “Yes, on some of them to be sure, but unless the captain has a monster of an ego, it's just too much work to pronounce on all the various preferences and permissions that sprout up. As long as it does not interfere with operational readiness, I prefer to simply experience it all and let the universe decide things.”

“That's a commendable attitude.” The Canon nodded. “Now, don't feel you have to answer this, but are any of you religious?”

We all looked at one another. Josefeen, I was pretty sure, believed in only two things: duty and pleasure. And, fortunately, they were not necessarily mutually exclusive. As for Nizlich, well, I looked to her, raising an eyebrow as though daring her to answer first.

“I'm technically Aesirian³⁰²,” she said. “I'm not a Sword Volder, mind you, but I descended from members of the Gram Fleet who first settled Caladbolg, and I grew up in Broken Stone.”

“Broken stone?”

“It's an asteroid belt.”

302 GURPS Traveller calls them Aesirians, while Mongoose Traveller refers to them as Aesirists. For the purposes of this campaign, I'm going to assume these two names are interchangeable.

That explained, at least in part, why she did so well in the Navy. She was already accustomed to living in space.

“And why do you say *technically*?” Regimath asked.

Nizlich momentarily pressed her lips together.

“There are two broad groups, devout Aesirians and cultural Aesirians.”³⁰³

“Ah, I see. But do you have a patron deity?” he asked.

“Frigg. She's the goddess of wisdom.³⁰⁴ But I don't pray to her, at least not as you pray.”

“You've never tried?”

“Not for a long time.” Nizlich smiled. “We refer to these figures as the *gods-that-vere*. They are heroes... a source of inspiration, but we do not think of them as... vell... as beings who would listen to us or care about our problems.”

“You never know,” the Canon said. “A little faith can work wonders. Would it be all right with you if we sent a message to Frigg?”

“Right now?”

“There's no time like the present,” he said. “Oh, Frigg, please forgive this intrusion, but we could all benefit from your wisdom, if you would be so kind as to grant it. Amen.”

“That's it?” Nizlich asked.

“As you speak to her, so too will you speak to the universe.”

“And how do you know Frigg's not too busy with her own affairs?” Josefeen asked with a smirk. “Being a goddess isn't easy.”

“And you know this for a fact?” the Canon asked.

“From personal experience.”

As I listened to their conversation, I dipped and chewed on one of my dippers and sent a tendril out to Regimath to see if I could establish a connection. I then placed the image of the orb in his mind and sent the thought: *«It is real.»*

303 Mongoose Traveller: Sword Worlds (2020), page 21.

304 GURPS Traveller: Sword Worlds (2004), page 74.



He stopped chewing his food and just sat there for a moment, looking at me. He had heard my voice in his mind, and now he was wondering how I'd spoken without moving my lips. Did he truly hear that, he wondered, or was it merely the slow creep of drug-induced insanity?

I sent the thought again, this time with more emphasis. *«It is real! Do not fear.»*

He looked at me rather intently, as Nizlich and Josefeen went back and forth about the social life of goddesses. *Of course*, he reasoned. *It was all so obvious. But are they all psions?* He glanced toward Nizlich and Josefeen. We were obviously not Zhodani agents. He blinked for a moment, adjusting to this new reality.

"Is your food okay?" Nizlich asked him.

"Ah... yes," he nodded. "I'm just... preoccupied."

"Vith vhat?"

"An epiphany," he said. "A semi-private one, I'm afraid. I still need to work out the details."

"A semi-private epiphany?" Nizlich wondered out loud. "Sent by Frigg?"

"Perhaps," he replied.

"That was quick."

"I don't like epiphanies," Josefeen said.

"Why is that?" the Canon asked, taking the bait.

"Because they usually mean either I screwed up something so long ago it can't be fixed or some religious dude drugged me, and I'm on a magic sofa ride I never requested."

"Does that happen often?"

"No, but it happened recently."

"Did I miss something?" Nizlich asked.

"People are often resentful at their fate," the Canon said, "though in your case your wish for a *Get Out of Jail* card was granted and rather expeditiously. The universe is apparently keeping an especially close eye on you," he said, thinking again about the Eye of God. "You should feel blessed."

"I don't feel blessed," she said. "I feel tricked and used."

What goes around comes around, I thought to myself.

"Don't take it personally," the Canon replied. "The universe tricks and uses us all. It may seem capricious, but there is usually an underlying reason."

Josefeen, of course, could say nothing to this, as she knew exactly what he was talking about, even though he had no idea. But then that was the very essence of faith, to believe without knowing. During all this, I extended a telepathic tendril over to Stefani, to see if I could get another perspective and see what she was uneasy about, and as our minds touched, she glanced up from her salad and noticed my unblinking stare.

Uh-oh, she thought, and quickly resumed eating.

But there was something more, the memory of someone she'd caught staring at her a few times back in Officer Candidate School. He was in her class, a competent pilot, and for a while she thought she could trust him, but then he made sexual advances.

OCS was the hardest challenge she'd ever undertaken as well as the greatest opportunity of her life, and she didn't want to mess it up by starting a romance. "Oh, I'm cool with FWB³⁰⁵," he'd said with a grin. Her response was not as diplomatic as it might have been.

In any case, he turned on her, began calling her *Sauerkraut*, and it stuck. There was a process for complaining to the higher-ups, and this included a process for contesting an insulting call sign, but to do so would have gone against Navy tradition, and, in any case, she rather liked it in a perverse sort of way, as sourness wasn't so bad — not really — as it was excellent protection against people like him.

She looked up and caught me staring again.

"Sir?"

I blinked.

"I'm terribly sorry, Commander. I was taken by a thought about the universe. I was thinking about when I discovered that you were *Sauerkraut*, and how I'd felt like I'd been given a gift, an unforeseen discovery about someone whose career I had been impressed by, someone whose actions I had appreciated, and then to find out it was you?"

I turned to the Canon.

"You asked if I was religious, and I don't think I am terribly so. Certainly I have outgrown the spiritual upbringing that I had, but I have seen the infinite and the dark."

³⁰⁵ Friends with benefits: a sexual relationship without the romance.

I turned a little more, facing him fully.

"I really don't think there is a higher power looking out for me, but there is a terrible emptiness that is naturally hostile to us, the dark between the stars, and in jumpspace, there is the unknowable unknown. Earlier you called on the universe to favor me and my crew. While I respect and appreciate the sentiment, the universe I know will take us when we let down our guard. We may think we have a good command of living in space and using jumpspace, but it requires constant vigilance. I recently suffered and survived a misjump, and count myself lucky to be here at all."

"Being here, as we are presently, is an unlikelihood of imponderable complexity, and yet here we are, and so we make the best of it," Reggie said, and there was again that feeling of the universe as a conscious entity.

"That's my conundrum. Happy coincidences like Commander Nizlich being on my crew against the terrible emptiness of the dark. I think my solace comes from simply living in the face of a hostile environment and being ornery enough to figure out how to survive so I can be pleasantly surprised when something nice happens."

I worried for a moment that I might be rambling, so I decided to smile and sip my drink.

Reggie smiled in return. "An ancient Solomani philosopher once said — to summarize him somewhat hazardously — the meaning of life is the pursuit of the highest good, but that because reality, in and of itself, is unknowable, we can only hope the universe designed the innate structure of our minds in such a way that universal morality can be revealed to us, so that we may act accordingly and within the will of the divine."³⁰⁶

306 This is an exceedingly loose and perhaps somewhat biased take on the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant. He did not merely hope but rather assumed that moral principles are accessible to all rational beings and that, being grounded in rationality and autonomy, they don't depend on divine will. Although, to be fair, his idea that the existence of a universal morality is suggestive of the existence of God does lend itself to the Canon's interpretation. But, of course, we must take into account the social mores of the time and place in which Kant lived. 18th-century Königsberg was not exactly a hotbed of atheism.

Needless to say, I didn't quite know how to respond.

"Not to change the subject," I said, "but I was hoping to ask you about Jewell."

"What about it?"

"What's your favorite natural feature?"

"Favorite natural feature? Of Jewell?" He rubbed his chin. "Speaking personally, I'd have to say Mushroom Valley, but it's dangerous to visit. Even the guided tours, which are careful about when they go, are not without risk, so I don't suggest it."

"Any other places?"

We talked for a while about various natural features of Jewell as well as the relative merits of the Navy life vs. merchant spacing. As dinner passed, I kept my connection to Reggie quiescent. Josefeen, however, was growing impatient with the polite banter and began staring at him, unblinking, as she tried gleaning memories off the surface of his mind. In this way, I could sense that he was still thinking about the psi orb, wondering when would be the most appropriate time to inquire about it.

Never, she thought to herself.

I was too engaged in the conversation to join her on her telepathic journey, although I could sense he had a cluttered mind. Every time I tried to get in, however, it'd be my turn to say something, which broke my concentration.

«See if you can get him talking to Stef,» Josefeen sent.

"Commander, you've been rather quiet," I said. "What do you think about all this?"

Nizlich looked stunned for a moment, and I suddenly realized she was preoccupied with matters related to running the ship and had barely been listening.

"Have you ever been on a merchant ship?" I asked, throwing her a lifeline.

"I've been on many, but I've never served on one."

"Go on."

As she described various details of what she'd observed, I nodded along as if I were listening and followed Josefeen into the Canon's mind. Both of us now stared at him intently, although he failed to notice, as he was focused on Commander Nizlich, who was sitting directly across the table from him, and although she

noticed us, she was the one talking, and so she, at least initially, paid us little mind.

The Canon's mind, however, I could now see was a spider's web of aged threads on the verge of collapsing into dust.

«You could probably do a lot of damage in here, if you wanted to,» Josefeen sent. «Memory-editing is something that, as an obviously powerful manipulator, you can probably learn to do. Although, not all manipulators have this ability. Some can only influence people emotionally, causing them to, for example, shut down when they're being verbally assaulted. It's a great way to win an argument. Cheating, for sure, but very effective, although the degree of humiliation is such that the victim will usually harbor a very deep grudge, so that's something to watch out for. In any case, if you want to learn how to do all this stuff and discover the scope of your talents, you need to go find Khourzkhoug Kanrrae or some other psionic master. Thinking of which, I may know another, but... you might not want to get trained by him.»

«Why not?»

«It's Olav.»

Olav? Olav was dead. Wait. «You mean the alpha version?»

«We have a Model X in the Intel Pod.» That's the model of computer Zeenye was using to run the Olav simulation.³⁰⁷ Presumably, somewhere there was a backup of the original version.

«I told the alpha version there was no way it was going to make its way onto a Navy ship, and that means double for you. What even makes you think...»

I paused, horrified at the implications. Had I been going about this all wrong? Was the Admiral a catspaw for Navy Intel? Were they responsible for the tech being made available to Zeenye? And the records of *all* of Olav's history?

Of course, being psychically linked to a possible conspirator in this scheme was terribly bad for internal security. I could feel my tenuous trust in Josefeen slipping away like sand under a wave. Damn but this psi enhancer was elevating my paranoia.

I gathered what little will I had in holding the connection and asked in as polite a telepathic voice as I could muster, *«Is that what you want?»*

«I want to get you trained, and the Model X is compartmentalized, so that's not an issue, but I don't know about this alpha version of Olav and if it's really up to the task. All I know is if we're really leaving in three days, we don't have a lot of choices.»

The upshot was that I needed to be trained by a master manipulator. In the meantime, of course, I could do some experimentation in the Canon's mind. But given its state of decay, it would be inherently risky, at least for him. Looking wasn't a problem, but trying to modify a memory was another matter entirely. I might accidentally sever its connection to his consciousness and leave a dangling thread. Insofar as Josefeen understood it, that could cause all sorts of mental problems, possibly even leading to dementia, delusions, or even derangement.

Of course, given his age and professional habits, a mental collapse would hardly be unexpected, but what gave me the right?

«Go ahead,» Josefeen sent.

That was the reason psionics has been suppressed. The Imperial government realized it needed to get psionics under control or it would inevitably take over Imperial society, turning the Imperium into another version of the Zhodani Consulate.

Josefeen, being a psion...

«Stop reading me and read him!» "I agree," she added to Nizlich, "but tell us more about that."

Back in her early training, when Josefeen had first learned about telepathy, she'd also learned about the excesses of the Zhodani and how basing a whole society's leadership on psionic potential relegated every other form of leadership potential essentially useless. That, she was convinced, was detrimental for a whole host of reasons, economic, political and otherwise, and would inevitably lead to a form of tyranny much heavier than that alleged by even the Imperium's worst critics.

«We can go over the Psi-Wars later, but right now you need to focus on what's in front of you.»

Did I need to say something?

«No. In the old fart's brain.»

³⁰⁷ This was mentioned in Chapters 8 and 12.

I looked at the spider's web and touched one of the threads. It was a sermon he'd given years ago, decades perhaps. In his church, the sermons were often more like lectures, and the congregation was invited to ask questions, to essentially interrupt whenever the priest said something confusing. Due to this way of conducting sermons, they were often constructed with the parishioners in mind, even with specific parishioners, for example those who had fallen into sin.

One such case was of a man who'd committed adultery and would likely do so again. It was complicated, in his mind, by the fact that his wife had refused him sex for many years, so he was going to a particular establishment to satisfy his cravings, and since he was the one who paid the bills in their relationship, it was unlikely she'd ever find out.

"If you don't think you're doing anything wrong," Reggie had asked him, "why bring it up in a confessional?"

"Am I doing something wrong?"

"What do you think?"

"I'm keeping it secret from her," he said.

"Why?"

"Because it *feels* shameful."

"Rejoice in that feeling. That's your conscience, your link to the soul of the universe, and the only thing that can ultimately give you the wisdom to save yourself."

"Save myself from what?"

"From yourself," Reggie said.

The man, of course, was mystified.

"Just tell me, what should I do?"

"You have two choices. You can tell her and continue, or you can tell her and stop."

"I'm not going to tell her."

"Then you won't do as you should."

"But I can stop. I can just stop and never mention it."

"If you don't have the will to reveal the truth, you probably don't have the will to stop, and, in any case, the betrayal is not the sex so much as the deceit."

Of course, standing in front of the congregation, Reggie couldn't say any of this. Confessions were a private matter. If people did not come to their senses privately, within their own hearts, then no amount of teaching could

save them. Ultimately, every person had to save themselves. All the universe could do was prod.

"What is pleasure?" Reggie asked the congregation. "From where does it derive?"

Various people put forward their own propositions, calling them out for all to hear, but the man remained silent, sensing this would be about him. In truth, it would only partially be about him, for he was not the only one who was cheating on their spouse, nor was infidelity the only issue Reggie wanted to address.

The upshot was that pleasure and pain were mere feelings, and more to the point, they were fundamentally subjective. They could be felt but not understood. But right and wrong could be understood, although not with absolute certainty. But they could be sensed internally.

Shame existed for a reason, and when informed by universal morality, it contained a degree of objectivity, perhaps not as much as we would like, but enough to sense when something was wrong. It was therefore of greater value than purely subjective feelings and could even be used for self-training and the ultimate mastery, mastery over pride. But not everyone felt shame, at least not to the same degree, and even for those who did, pleasure beckoned.

"When you trade one for the other," he said at the end, "pleasure for innocence, it's like trading away a piece of your soul, a strand of your connection to the universe. Now you have to keep a secret from yourself, a regret you don't want to think about anymore. Over time, it may become like a shard of glass in your mind. Look upon it and see the path to self-hatred, but if that is the price of wisdom, so be it. You will be blessed to receive it. You will be blessed to bleed."

You're reading my mind, aren't you? Regimath thought to himself, as Nizlich went on about the chief differences between merchant and Navy craft. Rather than allow his eyes to glaze over while he was looking at her, he'd stifled a yawn and glanced to the side, finding my gaze fixed upon him, upon his eyes to be more specific. *Have you found what it is you're looking for?*

Chapter 46

Temptation

“Well,” I said, breaking eye-contact with Reggie, “I must say this meal was better than the one I had a couple of days ago. Crew stew takes some getting used to. Canon, will you join me in my cabin for a drink? One that *I will make for you?*”

“I’d be delighted, Captain.”

«*What about me?*» Josefeen’s eyes bulged in outrage.

«*What about you?*»

I needed to talk to him in private, and preferably under the protection of the psi shields in the overhead bin. If I was going to wipe his memory, I could at least let him know why. I squelched the rising objection from Josefeen by pulling the drapes, as it were, shielding my mind from her telepathic verbal onslaught.

“Thank you for your company, Commander. Lieutenant. Canon? Shall we?”

“Of course, Captain.”

It was but a few steps to my quarters, and once inside, I offered him a zardocha as we sat beside the low kava table.

“What’s a zardocha?” he asked.

“You’ve never had one?”

“I don’t recall,” he said, thinking to himself that he’d had so many different drinks over the years, how could he possibly be expected to remember all their names?

“Jackie, bring me two zardochas.”

“To confirm,” a synthesized voice said in the androgynous tenor to which I was well-accustomed, “you want two medium zardochas, both ice-blended, each with thirty milliliters of Frangelico.”

“Correct.” Somewhere in the ship, probably not far away, an autoserve was grinding ice and pouring coffee. “I forgot to ask, how was your tour?”

“Of your ship? Very nice, although it got cut a little short,” the Canon replied.

“Oh?”

“We stopped at the theater. Brother William was telecasting the remembrance for those who couldn’t attend in person.”

Brother and sister were terms used among the clergy to refer to one another, even those of different chapters, so long as they were both under the umbrella of the Imperial Church. Hence, Brother William had to be Lieutenant Briggs. No doubt he’d stayed aboard to be here for all those who couldn’t be spared, not that there was much chance of the Zhodani attacking us while we were in orbit, surrounded as we were by the bulk of the 212th Fleet. Nonetheless, maintaining certain minimum crew requirements were demanded by Navy regulations.

“Of course, we ended up talking theology,” the Canon continued. “Our respective observances are quite different, but there are certain congruities to our beliefs.”

“Faith is actually something I want to discuss with you.”

“Oh?”

The door swooshed open, and Gopher, the modified 476-INLAV, floated in. That was quick. A small hatch on its round surface opened, revealing our drinks, and two retractable arms extended themselves, taking the glasses and quickly setting them on the table, all without spilling a drop. Then it floated back out, the door swooshing shut in its wake.

“Let us then toast *faith*, Captain, and tell me what is it about faith you wish to discuss?”

“You want something,” I said.

I could sense the thoughts forming in his mind, something about the psionic orb, but I held up a finger before he could put them to words.

“I know you want something,” I continued. “The question, as always, is the price.”

I sat back and sipped my drink, taking comfort in the familiar taste.

“What would you be willing to pay, to do the one thing you want?” I continued further. “And you know I am not talking about money. This is the whole of your pleasure-versus-innocence debate. Do you want to know and by knowing lose faith, or keep your faith and have the knowledge of what you gave up?” I paused, swirling my drink. “You should have some. It’s at the perfect temperature.”

He took a sip, thinking it a glorified, hazelnut frappé, which was actually a fair description.

"You're saying the knowledge contained within the Eye of God will destroy my faith? You know this for a fact?"

"I don't just know it," I said. "I feel it. And so do you."

I stood and walked away a little and then turned on the holographic console, selecting a feed from one of our cameras pointing out into the depths of space. Up here, in orbit, the stars didn't twinkle. They looked brighter, unblemished, purer somehow, and the great clouds enshrouding the galactic core resembled a storm frozen in mid-swirl, its chaotic beauty the common backdrop to all of known civilization.

"You feel it?" He sought clarification.

I contemplated the evidence of all my fears and said, over my shoulder, "I have given you my word that what you want is real and true. Even doing that may cost you, and for that I am sorry. But if you want more, if my word is not enough, then the cost will be higher."

"Meaning?"

"You once gave someone a choice about what they needed to do, a binary, do this or do that. This is not quite as stark, but it could quickly become so." I turned and met his gaze. "I am a man who has sent people into battle to die. I have killed in the defense of the Imperium. I stand ever on the edge of the great night and carry the light of the Emperor against our enemies. If you tell me that you will accept death to learn a truth at your very core, I am in a position to grant it. In the short time I have known you, I have come to like and respect you. My line of work calls on me to make these kinds of judgments quickly. But this goes beyond mere fondness. This approaches something far more fundamental."

"I am ready," he said.

"No." I shook my head. "No, you're not. Please, don't answer so quickly. Enjoy the drink. Think about this. You will come to an answer, and I will know what it is and how you came to it, and then I will make my decision. And then, well, then we will see if our worlds change."

He contemplated for a long moment, thinking here was his chance to know something revealed to very few, his last chance at true wisdom, and he wasn't going to let it go. If he did, if were to shy away from this opportunity the universe had

so unexpectedly granted, then his whole life's journey would have been in vain.

Yet, there was certainly a reason the Eye of God was not shared freely among the clergy. He'd asked about it, of course, but was told, quite simply, "It's not for us."

"Why not? Why do some have access and others don't?"

"These things we do not discuss. It is like the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge."

"We're priests. Shouldn't we know all about good and evil?"

"It is better to think without knowing than to know without thinking."

And that was the end of it. No more explanations, other than "patience is a virtue", "be ready and be fearless," and "if it will happen, then it already has," all bits of bumper sticker wisdom albeit not without truth. Their expectation, in his final analysis, was that he would simply accept, and so he did, but only because there was no choice. But now there was a choice. Now, near the end of his life, he could choose to know whatever it was that had been forbidden. And whatever the risk, he was ready.

He looked at me, eyes unblinking beneath a furrowed brow.

"It might not accept you," I warned. "It might not give you anything. Is it worth the cost of knowing there is nothing more for you, that they were right?"

"Perhaps that would be the best outcome."

I couldn't help but smile and nodded in agreement.

"Bear in mind, a lifetime of devotion has left your brain... well-used."

"That's a kind way of putting it."

"The point being, it may not hold up."

"Yes, I know all this."

"I know you know."

"And I know you know I know," he said with a nod, "which I am sure you know as well."

"I just want you to understand that it will be me that will be in your head trying to figure out how to fix the damage, which is not something I want to do or which I *should* be doing. I'm no anointed messenger for the divine. That's your job. I'm just a man who has been placed in authority and given responsibilities, and I have my duty. Most people in my position wouldn't

offer you this choice. Most wouldn't even consider it. Devotion to our duty is so overwhelming that anything that distracts from it is to be eliminated." I turned back to the starscape. "It is because I am new to this and to my own abilities that I am taking the time to talk to you, but I too am looking for something. I am also weighing the costs, not just the costs to you but also the potential costs to myself." I took another sip. "But I am used to this sort of balancing," I added.

The Canon nodded, now realizing that I too would be taking a risk, and what was to be gained for me? The friendship of a man whose mind I'd destroyed? *Maybe I'm asking too much*, he thought to himself. He didn't want to put me at risk, even though, in his heart, he felt an exponential increase in wisdom so temptingly close. If he could only reach out and touch it.

"I am sorry," he said with a sigh. "I don't want harm to come to you because of my ambition."

Hearing those words escape his lips almost made him chuckle, albeit ruefully, as he was once the least ambitious person he'd ever known.

I nodded, feeling a sudden heaviness as he stared down at the low kava table sitting between us. I poured all my focus into my telepathic tendril, hoping to strengthen the clarity of my peephole into his mind once he looked up at me again. If only I could touch his face, I sensed I could go deeper.

I pulled back my focus into the here and now and rolled my chair beside his.

"Close your eyes," I whispered.

He looked up, the pensive, far away look in his eyes suddenly over-bright and almost feverish as he stared at me for a long moment. *Is this a test?* he wondered, hope suddenly rebuilding. *Trust the universe*, he said to himself. *Whatever will be will be*. He then closed his eyes and waited expectantly.

«*So do I get to help you skullfuck this dude or what?*»

I winced.

«*Where are you?*» I asked, not sure I really wanted to know.

«*On the other side of your front door.*»

I looked at the door, imaging Josefeen on the other side.

«*Yes, that door;*» Josefeen clarified. Indeed, I could now sense her quite clearly.

I went over and pushed the *Open* button, then stepped back to let her enter.

«*Were you out there long?*» I asked, glancing back at the Canon. He was still waiting, eyes shut, the very picture of obedient expectation.

«*Long enough to admire your efficiency,*» she replied. «*I see you've already got his ankles up over his ears, so to speak. Nicely done.*» She then mentally counted the number of empty chairs: one. «*Have you considered investing in additional furniture?*»

«*You can sit on the table,*» I suggested, though I wasn't sure it could withstand the weight of her mid-upper torso.

«*I'll stand.*»

I shrugged and sat back in the chair, the Canon directly in front of me. Though his eyes were closed, I tried reaching into his mind, and it again occurred to me to touch his face.

«*Go ahead.*» Josefeen thought, putting two fingers along my neck where not too long ago she'd injected the psi-enhancer. «*Touch is the best route for establishing a deep connection.*»

«*How do I do it?*» I asked, opening my hand in front of his face.

«*Whatever feels right. Your psychic body will tell you.*»

Indeed, my fingers seemed to know where they wanted to go. It was strange, to say the least, and no sooner had they made contact with his skin than I could once again sense the spider's web of aged threads that beckoned my favor. Despite the fact that he could feel my fingers on his face, he kept his eyes shut, still thinking this was all part of some elaborate test after which I would present him with the Eye of God. Meanwhile, various threads lit up in the vast recesses of his mind. The question was: which was the one connected to his memory of the green room?

«*Which one?*» I asked Josefeen.

«*For recent memories, always try the nearest.*»

I touched the nearest.

"You're saying the knowledge contained within the Eye of God will destroy my faith?" he'd asked. "You know this for a fact?"

"I don't just know it." I could see the creases along my own forehead. "I feel it. And so do you."

«Now rip it out,» Josefeen telepathically intoned.

«How?»

«Just grab and yank like you're pulling a weed.»

«I don't want to leave him with lasting brain damage. One more thing to explain.»

«He's an old stoner. Who'll even notice?»

A lot of people, quite possibly, but that's not what actually bothered me; nor could I exactly understand how this felt different from pulling a trigger in combat, although it did. I reached out with my mind, somehow wrapping my psionic tentacle around the memory. It was almost like one snake latching onto another, and then I yanked. It was coming loose. I could feel its tether to his mind stretching and then snapping, as I dragged out its root, exposing every memory to which it was once connected. I could sense them all lined up on a moment-by-moment basis.

As I'd led him into my quarters, he was suddenly afraid, as if a part of him knew he would not exit the same person. He did not think I would mind-rape him — he'd heard of such things — but he also didn't really care if I did, as it would be the will of the Universe and perhaps a just punishment for reaching for the divine. If nothing else, it might force the inner circle of Supreme Stoners to finally invite him to join them. But he didn't really believe I would do it.

This is a kind man, he'd told himself. A man who is appreciative, kind, and gentle to those beneath him is a man worthy of his authority. He imagined me as being highly self-controlled, which was true, but also merciful, which wasn't. He will do as he must, and if that means killing me, then I am dead already, so there is nothing to contemplate. I am on his ship, and I am at his mercy, just as I am a part of the Universe and at its mercy, so long as I am suffered to exist.

Needless to say, he'd ascertained and accepted that I was a psion. I'd effectively told him so. But I had the Eye of God, and if he wanted to touch it, he'd have to go through me, even if that meant following a path through the disassembly of his mind.

Whatever the cost.

Why did he want to become a Supreme? And was it a sinful thing to want? No, no, it couldn't be sinful to become one with the divine! *If and when the invitation comes, it will come without warning, he was told. There will be no time to think, and it may even appear in disguise, but you will know it for what it is, and that moment must be seized. Be ready and be fearless. That is all you need to know.*"

This is that moment, he'd thought to himself. He'd waited so long, even fearing he might die before the moment came. That thought, in particular, had been slowly filling him with a silent melancholy. He, after all, was old enough to drop dead at any moment. Even his mind felt old, sluggish, and whenever he got high, he felt the sorrow of not being good enough, not being chosen.

"I forgot to ask, how was your tour?" I'd asked, interrupting his inner thoughts.

"We stopped at the theater," he explained after getting his bearings. "Brother William was telecasting the remembrance for those who couldn't attend in person."

He liked Chaplain Briggs well enough. They'd met a few times and engaged in interfaith dialogue on each occasion, the Canon eventually offering my Religious Affairs Officer a little pouch of mushrooms for assistance in future meditation. This was at my reception, actually. And Briggs was apparently not religiously prohibited from saying yes, as he didn't make any religious protest, but as a Navy Officer he understood that accepting such a gift, at an official Navy function, no less, might be problematic and began to explain that it would probably violate Navy regulations in some way.

"Oh, surely not. The Navy makes exceptions for religious exploration, does it not?"

"Oh, yes, of course, but I'd have to get it approved through my chain of command."

"Who needs to approve it?" Reggie asked. "The Captain?" It felt weird to hear him refer to me from even before we'd met. Dwelling within him as I was now, experiencing the memory from his point of view, it felt, at least in part, like the question was coming from me.

"At the very least, I need *her* approval," Briggs said, pointing at Nizlich.

"Well, let us go ask."

“No, no,” he shook his head. “She’ll say no. Trust me.”

“What about when you’re off duty?” Reggie asked.

“You see that Vargr over there?” Briggs pointed at Lt. Shepherd. Manda looked nervous and awkward, standing by herself with a glass of wine, looking around at all the high society types. “She just lost her shore leave over some off-duty *chocolates*,” Briggs said.

“Isn’t chocolate poisonous to Vargr?”

“Exactly.”

“I see,” the Canon said, smiling as he decided who he’d talk to next. A few minutes later, he intercepted her at the hors d’oeuvres, offering his condolences over the whole *Chocolate Incident*.

“How do you know about that?” she asked, wide-eyed.

“Oh, I saw it on Channel One.”

“*What?! It made the news?*”

“Actually, he told me,” Reggie admitted, gesturing in Briggs’s general direction.

“Oh! Oh, thank Cleon. You just about gave me a heart attack.”

“My apologies. But speaking of increasing your heart rate, would you be interested in some magic mushrooms?”

“Magic mushrooms?”

“You can put them to use at a later date. Here, take the whole bag. There’s plenty more where these came from.”

Lt. Shepherd wrinkled her snout in confusion.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m evangelizing,” Reggie explained. “It’s my job. I’m with the Sodality of the Silver Chalice.”

“The what?”

“We’re more popularly known as the Deacons of Drugs.”

“Oh! I’ve heard of you guys,” Manda nodded, still distracted by the mushrooms.

“I don’t want to get you in trouble,” the Canon said, holding the pouch out to her again, “so you’ll need to be careful with this, especially considering the fact that you are not a careful person as evidenced by the aforementioned Chocolate Incident, but I trust you will take that into account.”

She looked at the pouch, then she looked to both sides, locating me talking to the Admiral.

“I have a new captain who I really can’t afford to... *knousogho fue kith zari*.”³⁰⁸

Reggie had no idea what she’d said, even though I did, but from the context, he could guess easily enough.

“He’ll understand,” he said, “especially if you don’t get caught. Here, take them. If you change your mind later, you can flush them down the toilet.”

«*Gus, this is pointless. You need to come back.*»

I heard but ignored Josefeen. This was intoxicating, a side of Reggie I hadn’t suspected: subversive, cajoling, preying on instincts. I’d never needed to do that. I followed orders until I was in a position to give them, and I always had an objective. This was different, and I needed to see what happened. If he suborned my crew, it would relieve my conscience somewhat.

But just as she reached for the pouch, he withdrew it, tucking it into a pocket in the green folds of his robe. Josefeen, meanwhile, faded into the distance as I settled into the moment, watching as Manda’s ears stood on end.

“These mushrooms are poisonous to your kind,” the Canon rebuked her. “The smallest nibble would make you sick. Eat a whole one, and you could die.”

“Then why were you offering...”

“To illustrate how easy it is to make a terrible decision, a decision that could alter the course of your life... or even end it.”

“For the record, I was going to flush them down the toilet.”

“Excellent choice, but you can flush these instead.” He handed her another bag, this one containing a dozen little, bite-sized biscuits. They were laced with a drug specifically formulated for Vargr physiology.

“Are these...?”

“Skuubi snacks,” he said, nodding. “One should last you about five deplars — just under an Imperial hour — but it will take as long for their effects to even begin, and make sure you’re in a safe place with people you trust, as they’re plenty strong, enough so that I’d caution against doubling the dosage.”

308 ...to sit down on his tail.

“Wait. How do I know these aren’t poisonous too?”

“You don’t, and you are well-advised to be skeptical.”

“So I can’t even trust a man of the cloth?”

“Good heavens, no!” The whole scene went left and right as he vigorously shook his head back and forth. “Terrible deeds have been done by religious figures throughout history, too many to enumerate. I’d tell you all about it, but it would only offend your canine sensibilities and probably kill any spiritual wonder that might be lurking within you.”

“I’m very spiritual,” she said, tucking the bag of skuubi snacks into her vest. “I even do yoga.”

“Good for you. I trust my gift will make your meditations more meaningful.”

Her ears flattened as she mulled over how to respond.

“I don’t trust you,” she finally said, staring at him for a long moment. “Maybe I *will* flush these down the toilet.”

“As you wish.”

“Are they really safe?”

“No drug is ever entirely safe,” he replied, “but these should help with the formation of ideas and memories that will hopefully be of benefit to you, even if only as confusion-inducing mind-expansion.” He smiled. “They may also increase local entropy, possibly coaxing our Divine Mistress to put her finger on the scales of fate, which is sometimes amusing but, of course, not without potentially unpleasant ramifications. One must take the sour with the sweet, after all.”

“Who’s this Divine Mistress?”

“Eris. The Sodality of the Silver Chalice originated within the College of Discordia.”

“College of Discordia?”

“The Erisian Mysteries,” he said, as if that explained everything. “We even have ties to the Cult of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.”

“I thought that was a joke.”

“College, cult, joke... what’s the difference?”

«Gus, you need to come back to the surface before it’s too late.»

This time I pulled myself toward the source of Josefeen’s voice.

«Well, one more mystery solved.»

Back in the cobwebs of his mind, the neatly lined-up array of memories was now a free-

flowing mess. They had disassociated and were presently all floating off in various directions.

I checked my wristcom to see how much time had passed, taking me out of his brain and back into the here and now. Wasn’t time supposed to compress when using psychic abilities? Popular dramas had a lot to be held accountable for. And what was this weird giddy feeling I was having?

It inverted as the Canon opened his eyes. They bulged from their sockets, terror-filled. Last he remembered, I’d invited him into my quarters, and he’d thought to himself that this was his moment of truth, and then, quite suddenly, his eyes were closed and my hand was on his face. He was missing time, he realized with unsettling surprise. Where was the Eye of God? He looked around, feeling suddenly ill. *What’s going on? What’s happening to me?!*

And then I made it even worse — much worse — projectile vomiting my recent dinner all over his nice green robes.³⁰⁹

“I am so terribly sorry, Your Grace.” My mouth tasted like a combination of zardocha and dinner but marinated in stomach acid. “I’m terribly sorry...”

«*I should have warned you, sir. Brain rapes often result in convulsive vomiting, but usually more for the subject than the psion. It’s probably due to your lack of training. Uh-oh, I think he’s gonna...*»

“Blarrrrgh!”

The funny thing about vomiting is that it’s a bit like yawning. I’d just gone blowy all over him, and now it was apparently his turn to go blowy all over me. I couldn’t tell if it was his reaction to me mucking around in his head or simply a vomit reflex caused by my own reaction to what I’d learned having just spent some time there.

“I don’t know what sort of drink you made me, young man,” he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve, “but whatever it was, I want the recipe.”

³⁰⁹ It was Conrad who decided his character needed to spew his dinner all over the Canon, and needless to say, I was a bit surprised, but I decided to roll with it and give him a little tit-for-tat. I think it’s the first time a player in one of my games decided his character needed to puke. I hope it was just good roleplaying and not in-game commentary on the quality of the campaign.

I winced at his sincerity. He really did want the recipe, as he assumed the interruption in his short term memory had been caused by whatever intoxicant I'd given him, but then he touched his face, remembering my hand there when he'd opened his eyes, and he remembered I was a psion.

"Would you like to visit Medical, Your Grace?"

"Medical? Is that what you advise?"

I shrugged. I certainly wasn't going to go myself. I was probably leaking psi traces all over the place. I noticed a cleaning bot roll in and tried to remember if they automatically logged a report to Medical in case there was the possibility of a pathogen becoming communicable. That sounded like the Navy.

«Josefeen! Help!»

I gave in. I was hopelessly out of my depth and needed to take an entirely different plot here. It was too new, too powerful, and I did not understand what I was doing. I admitted, possibly, I had made things worse for myself.

"One question before I forget," the Canon said. "Why were you touching my face?"

"He was picking your nose," Josefeen replied.

"Picking my nose?"

"Well, you picked his."

"I did?"

"The Captain tried telling you that you can pick your friends, and you can pick your nose, but you can't pick your friend's nose, but *you* begged to differ."

"Ah," the Canon nodded, trying to mask his befuddlement.

"I didn't want to interrupt," Josefeen continued. "You two were having one of those male-bonding moments. It was actually quite beautiful."

The Canon smiled, and I was in awe.

«*You are the absolute Queen of Crap.*»

«*Thank you, sir.*» "I think we'll need to wash your robes, Your Grace."

She stepped around to the back of his chair, took the hypo-gun out of her pocket, and pressed it to the back of his neck. *Nighty-night, Your Grace*, she thought to herself as she pulled the trigger. A moment later, he was slumping over into my arms.

There was glint in her eyes as she leaned in, hand on one knee.

«*Ready to learn the ways of the succubus?*»

Note to the Prospective Reader &/or Contributor

As you've been reading this, you've probably thought to yourself that this looks more like a story than a PBEM. Well, it's both. It was written through the back-and-forth of a single-player / multi-GM play-by-email campaign.

For various reasons, I became dissatisfied with the traditional single-GM/multi-player framework that has been so long established in both tabletop & PBEM roleplaying.³¹⁰ I've long wanted to experiment with something new, and so I began to jot down some ideas for how to flip the paradigm, essentially creating a few alternative RPG frameworks.³¹¹

Although we've now been doing this for a few years, and although the single-player framework does result a tighter story, which is hardly a surprise, I still feel like I haven't really achieved what I set out to do, and it's my own fault. I didn't stick to any of the frameworks I created. What I've done, essentially, was run a single-player PBEM while using Timothy as my assistant GM.

I did learn several lessons, however. One thing I learned is that you need a player who's simpatico with your style of play and with your vision of the universe their character inhabits. I learned that from Phil, and it was an important lesson. I also learned that playing in a well-established universe makes it easy to find participants, but it also ties you to that universe, putting you in the situation of having to interpret and expand on the source material and possibly even resolve inconsistencies (both internal and external) in ways that may not please everyone.

What I learned from Timothy is that having an assistant GM is extremely helpful. Timothy did a lot of the background work on the ship, its crew, and various other NPCs, and he essentially wrote the lion's share of the tour (Chapters 1-3), honestly doing a much better job than I would

³¹⁰ The roots of this go back to essays I wrote in *Alarums & Excursions* #532 & #533. You can download these: <https://mega.nz/folder/hGYliCKK#a0fr1dDhy3no6Ey5xNPukQ>

³¹¹ See *Alarums & Excursions* #502, #534 & #535 or see *Faraway* #4 in *New Worlds APA* #5, in which all three of these articles were combined and re-edited.

have done myself. And he's been willing to take on various NPCs and has done so quite competently. It's also been very useful having someone with whom to bounce around ideas. GMing can be a lonely pursuit to the extent that the GM is isolated in his or her own thought-bubble.

I've also discovered that while roleplaying and authorship might seem very similar insofar as they are both about creating a story, they are also very different in a number of ways. For example, the examination of character flaws is a standard feature of most modern writing, whereas in roleplaying, not so much. There are probably numerous approaches to reconciling this issue, and so far I've only scratched the surface.

So I'm gratified to have learned all these things I didn't know when I started. However, what I'd like to do now is push a little further and see what else can be learned. To that end, I'd like to run, or assist in running, or even play the protagonist in other 1PMG³¹² PBEMs. So if you'd like to run one or play in one, let me know. We can talk about it, and maybe I can at least help you get things started.

Also, as far the Plankwell Campaign goes, I'd still like to see if the game/story can be improved by adding more voices, so let me know if you'd like to take part in this campaign. If you'd prefer to simply observe and possibly issue comments from the peanut gallery, that's also an option.

Here are the four basic options in order from least to most involvement:

Distant Observer: You want to keep up with the story but don't care to see how the sausage gets made. If you tell me you want to be a distant observer, I'll email you new chapters as they're released or let you know where you can download updated versions of this campaign write-up.

Close Observer: You want to follow the PBEM traffic in detail to see how the story gets crafted from the emails. If you tell me you want to be close observer, I'll subscribe you to the game's mailing list (either individual emails or the digest version). I'll also

³¹² Single Player, Multiple Gamemasters.

subscribe you to an observer-only mailing list so you can write your comments and ideas and possibly receive replies from other people who might also be reading along and commenting as well.

NPC-GM: You'd like to make a guest appearance, playing an NPC in a particular scene. If you tell me you want to be an NPC-GM, I'll send you an invitation to join the GMing list. Although you only need to keep up with it intermittently, you'll need to create an NPC or two that you'd like to play, should the opportunity arise.

Co-GM: You want to take part in the actual GMing. You're going to need to work your way up to this, as it will require a lot of effort. You'll need to start out as an NPC-GM. You'll also need to read through this entire write-up, and you'll need to show a willingness to engage with the material. It will involve writing up a character sketch, some plot suggestions, and/or a description of a particular location. Then you'll write the initial draft of an upcoming scene, and we'll all take pot shots at it and try to make it better. Then you'll GM the scene, using the pre-written dialogue as needed but with the understanding that no plan survives contact with the enemy. If you want to assign NPC-GMs to various NPCs, that's fine. Meanwhile, we'll all be kibitzing in the background where the player can't see, offering suggestions, and probably watching the whole thing go to hell.

Regardless of the level at which you want to watch and/or participate in this experiment, I want you to bear in mind that it *is* an experiment.

Did I expect this to work? I wasn't particularly hopeful at first. When you're experimenting, failure usually precedes success, and success might not even be possible. What I did expect was that I'd learn something, and I did, but I'm pretty sure there's a *lot* more to be learned.

Truth be told, my sense is that we're still a long way off from figuring out how to make this work in a reliable way, and as we add co-GMs, I think at some point we'll probably have to start using actual rules to help us interact

constructively and resolve internal conflicts as they arise. The goal of this, ultimately, is to *create a useful, play-tested framework for how to generate written stories using one player and multiple GMs.*

Quick legal note: One thing we should all agree on at the outset is that all/each of us own the copyrights to whatever writings are produced by this PBeM both jointly and severally, meaning that any of us can publish it, and any of us can commit it to the public domain (to the extent anything Traveller-related can be committed to the public domain).

As for myself, I'd been submitting these chapters to *Alarums & Excursions* for the past few years, and now that Lee Gold has brought A&E to an end, I'll be publishing new chapters in *Ever & Anon*.³¹³ When the whole thing is done, I'll probably send a final version to Jeff Zeitlin to see if he wants to put it in *Freelance Traveller*.³¹⁴ There is no intention to make money from any of this. I'm doing it purely for the fun of it, and I expect the same from anyone who joins.

So think about whether you want to take part or simply observe or maybe even start a whole new 1PMG campaign, and if you have any questions, email me: jim.vassilakos@gmail.com.

³¹³ <https://everanon.org/>

³¹⁴ <https://www.freelancetraveller.com/>