

Faulk's office was high up in one of Silver City's towers, at least as evidenced by the view from his office window. The turboporters had dislodged us, one at a time, on the very floor of the building in which it was located, all without giving any indication of which building we were in or even which floor we were going to. Hence, the view came as a mild surprise, but then I remembered that the thin man of middling height standing before me was a high-end lawyer, a specialist in High Justice, no less. He had gaunt features and a beard that was more white than gray, but his eyes were his most notable feature, dark and penetrating, like a predator sizing up potential prey.

"Let's start by you telling me what happened," he said once we'd gone through the perfunctory introductions, sat down, and been offered drinks by his autoserver.¹

"To make a complicated story simple, I was accosted by Heron security," I said, "ostensibly over an incorrect entry visa. Captain Masa, the Public Relations Coordinator at Plankwell Naval Base, attempted to intervene on my behalf, and when these security agents resorted to force whilst ignoring our comments, I called in my own forces and laid a temporary interdiction over the area. I admit there was an inconsistency in my visa approval, but I submit that the response was an order of magnitude greater than it needed to be, and, let me be clear, attempts to apply force to active duty naval officers is *not* tolerated. Especially when it is agents of the local government applying force. I have commended my Marines in their restraint."

Faulk looked at me, perhaps waiting to see if I'd go on. Meanwhile, Lt. Sidara was thinking about their prior conversation and how he'd told her that at least during peacetime, the Navy only had free reign within the naval base and starports, and in the case of the latter, we still had to deal with the SPA, although they, at least, were an Imperial institution. Faulk didn't bother to repeat any of this to me, however, and his brain, unlike Sidara's, wasn't bleeding stray thoughts into the ether. Instead, he simply asked a question.

"Now that it's all over, what do you want?"

I felt a certain heaviness in the pit of my stomach. What *did* I want?

¹ <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Autoserver>

I'd spent so much time implementing and doing whatever the Navy wanted, it sometimes took me by surprise that I had needs that didn't always align. But here was a chance to try to make some positive change so some future spacer wouldn't get roughed up by power hungry locals. I could even exact some personal revenge, but I pushed that thought to the side. If my experiences with Maakhiriin were anything to go by, I preferred revenge through living well.

"What I would like is an investigation into policing practices as relates to the Navy," I finally answered.

"A local investigation or an Imperial one?"

Before I could decide, Sidara asked, "What would you recommend?"

"Well, it would be fun to attack the bastards from both sides," Faulk said. "The problem we'll run into is the JIPD will probably back the HPSS."

"JIPD?" Sidara asked. She began to scroll through her notes.

"The Justice, Incarceration, and Policing Division," Faulk replied, "a.k.a. the keepers of order. How long do you plan to be here?"

"It depends on how long it takes to do repairs," I said.

Faulk nodded. "I'll petition them and the County Court for expedited hearings."

"We've already got an Expedited Adjudication Request," Sidara said.

"Signed by?"

"The Countess's Chief of Staff, I believe."

"Really? How did you manage that?"

Sidara looked at me, causing Faulk to do likewise.

"I saved the Countess some face by drawing down the interdiction in exchange for the Expedited Adjudication Request, this after she ignored my attempts to contact her directly."

"Interesting," Faulk said. "Flick me a copy of that request. Actually, when they're signed by the palace, we call them orders."

"It says request," Sidara said.

"But it's from the palace, which sort of makes it an order."

She glanced toward me, wide-eyed. As acting protocol officer, that was something she should have known, and it rather confirmed my initial assessment of the palace invitation.

“It’ll definitely help us cut through the bureaucracy,” Faulk continued. “I’ll schedule a pair of hearings, and we’ll get this show on the road. With any luck, we’ll get the County Court to order the MOJ² to open an investigation. Once that happens, the JIPD will be compelled to actually do their job.”

“What about this Directorate for Ethical Reform in Policing?” Sidara asked, looking at her notes.

“They’re a Citizens Action Committee that got too big for its britches,” Faulk said with a smirk. “Ever since they were elevated to the status of a directorate, they’ve been pushing for blindness in justice.”

“Blindness in justice?” Sidara asked.

“Anti-profiling. But that’s fine. We can talk to them, and with this EAR, they’ll have no choice but to wedge us into their schedule.”

I groaned inwardly, the heaviness in my stomach tightening into a knot.

“What I’m worried about,” I said, “is that at the end of all this, I’ll get an official apology, meaning a false one, and someone will make a notation in some secret file flagging me for additional screening every time I come into contact with local law enforcement.”

Faulk stared at me momentarily, his expression perfectly blank.

“Are you planning on retiring here?” he finally asked.

“No.”

He shrugged. What he was saying, albeit tacitly, was that it didn’t matter if Jewell’s labyrinthine bureaucracy decided to hold a grudge. I wasn’t going to be here long enough to let it bother me. And although that was certainly true, I was going to be here for however long it took General Products to replace our Exploration Pod.

“Something else may be going on,” I said, leaning in, “something that leaves me with an ill taste in my mouth. I can’t prove anything, but there have been enough random events connected to me and my crew to give me suspicions. My job involves keeping the Imperium safe. The Imperium has seen fit to give me the tools to do that job decisively. The interdiction I ordered? It could have been a lot worse if one of us had died.

² https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Ministry_of_Justice

We are currently processing all the Intel data we scooped while we were in control, and we are looking for differences in the stories we are being told. What are the penalties for lying during court proceedings here?”

“In the Magisterial Court for the County of Jewell, perjury carries a five year sentence, but in the Jewellian courts, it’s seven.”

I leaned back again. He was nominally my representative to both.

“We are in a situation of overlapping jurisdictions, and decisions made in one sphere are likely to precipitate actions in another.”

“I get it,” he said, nodding. “This is political. Caution is justified, prudence an asset. But there’s something you need to understand. Legal contests at this level are like street fights, and if we mean to win, we can’t pull our punches. It’s go for the throat or walk away.”

Walk away. Now there’s something I hadn’t considered. But I nodded. Faulk was using language I understood.

“What I want, Mr. Faulk, is to finish repairing my ship and continue on my mission, with the least amount of official interaction I can get away with.”

“My understanding is you’re scheduled to appear at the Imperial Palace today.”

“Yes.”

He arched an eyebrow, probably amused at my role as the reluctant birthday boy.

“When you get in there,” he said, “somebody on the Countess’s staff will ask for your side of the story, but what they’ll really want to know is how angry you are and how serious you are about getting even. If you tell them what you just told me, they’ll make a bunch of promises that will most likely be forgotten the moment you leave. Once you’re gone, this whole incident will be swept under the rug. The HPSS will keep doing whatever they want, and nothing will change.

“If you want things to change,” he continued, “we have to get under their skin. But you need to be careful what you say, because if the palace decides it’s more expedient to throw you under the bus than go to war with the HPSS, that’s what they’ll do, so you need to avoid saying anything they might be able to turn against you. So what you do is you tell them you hired me and will be speaking through me. Tell ‘em Bili’s got your back. Then they’ll stop bothering you, and they’ll start bothering me, and when they do, I’ll get them to fall in line,

because like I said, this whole thing is probably going to end up local versus Imperial, and once that happens, they really have no other choice. No matter what they say to you now, they *will* ultimately fall in line. But you have to let me do the talking.”

I took this in and really studied the man before me. Command involved assigning the best person to the job and letting them get it done.

“Understood. May I show them how mad I am? Or would you prefer Captain Ironface?”

“Ironface,” he replied. “The fact that you hired me will speak for itself.”

“Just so you know, I have some personal history with someone on the Countess’s staff.”

“Oh?”

“An old shipmate, Guri Maakhiriin, now of the Subsector Navy.”

“An old friend?”

“Quite the opposite. If I were them, that’s who I’d assign... to see if he can get a rise out of me. It’s what they’ve been doing so far, either that or he’s been freelancing for his own reasons.”

“What’s the beef about?”

“He thinks I ruined his career.”

“And he’s a member of the palace staff?”

“Naval Liaison.”

“Naval Liaison to an Imperial Countess. Doesn’t exactly qualify as a ruined career. What was he expecting? That he’d be Grand Admiral?”

I couldn’t help but grin. “For some people, their anger doesn’t need to make sense. But, to be fair, he was discharged from the Imperial Navy and ended up relegated to a colonial fleet, which I can well imagine feels like a slap to the face.”

“I’m glad you warned me about this guy. Be very careful what you say to him or in his presence.”

I nodded. “There’s one more thing. I’ll be perfectly frank. If worse comes to worse, we can make a deal, and I can accept the surface platitudes and be on my way. But I can’t help but think someone is trying to make some changes, and they’re using me as a lever. Those most affected should have an opportunity to fight back,

so maybe we should talk to these *ethical reform* people. I'm probably not the sort of victim they're used to, but maybe we can find some common interest."

"I suppose it's worth a shot," he said.

"Please keep Lt. Sidara apprised of any further requirements. I will be happy to make myself available at your discretion. If there's nothing further, I believe we have a summons — sorry, invitation — to accept."

Sidara's brain seemed to go offline for a moment, but then it chirped back up with *You Idiot! How could you not know it was a summons!? Because it said invitation. How was I supposed to know it was being coy? Because you're the acting Protocol Officer!*

«Schizo,» Josefeen observed. «*This is what happens when people take their jobs too seriously.*»

Indeed, Sidara was flushed and beginning to sweat, so much so I could feel the tingling heat in her face as we took turns shaking Mr. Faulk's hand. Then we headed back to the turboporter, Sidara still scolding herself for the error.

«*Poor woman. You should really give her some shore leave. By the way, the reason you couldn't read any thoughts from the lawyer was because of his subderm.*» A subdermal psi-shield³, she meant. The operation was somewhat dangerous, as it involved a partial skull transplant. Nonetheless, for reasonably wealthy individuals with good reasons for keeping their thoughts private, subderms were becoming something of a fashion, albeit an invisible one.

«*Interesting.*» I hadn't tried probing Faulk's mind and wondered what might have happened if I had. Did subdermal psi-shields include sensors that let the user know they were being probed? «*Any wisdom there?*» I asked, assuming Josefeen was listening in on my every thought.

«*Huh?*»

³ I couldn't find anything in the Traveller literature about subdermal psionic shields, so I just made it up that they existed, thinking that since the Mongoose edition shows psi-shields arriving at TL-12, it was reasonable to assume subderms would become available a few tech levels after that. During a TML discussion on this topic (see <https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/25650551/>), Rupert Boleyn pointed out that TNE's (Traveller: The New Era's) *Fire, Fusion, & Steel* shows cybernetic psionic shields coming available at TL-13, and they apparently go slick (subdermal) at TL-14 (see the Cyber Head Options table on page 82). Different versions of Traveller treat psi-shields somewhat differently, but for this campaign I'm assuming they need electricity to operate.

Apparently, I was mistaken, and then it hit me. Though she'd pumped me with a second shot of the psi-enhancer, we hadn't reestablished our durable psychic link. I really didn't want to kiss her again and wondered if we could make the connection with really intense thoughts.

«If you were properly trained, that would be an option,» she answered, proving she could still get in my head. Indeed, as we approached the single turboporter terminal, I sense her tentacle skimming my surface thoughts. *«And what's this about you not wanting to kiss me? Do you find me revolting, Gus?»*

«Of course, not. Don't be silly. It's the constant having to counter the impression that I can't keep my hands off of you, because we always seem to be in public places when we need to reassert the connection. Or is this part of the plan to harden me?»

«Nice verb choice.»

I could sense her browsing through my memories, trying to figure out what sort of things hardened me.

«Stop probing me! I'll find a private moment in the Palace to reassert the connection.»

I looked over to Lt. Sidara, sensing there was something she wanted to say to me privately, something about the meeting we just had. Oh, of course. She wanted to apologize for her mistake. I gently placed a hand on her arm and motioned for Josefeen to take the first capsule, which she did. Sidara then turned to me during the brief interlude between when the turboporter door closed and would reopen.

He doesn't want the crew to salute him, she was thinking. How do you think he's going to feel about having to listen to an awkward apology?

"Lieutenant," I said, wishing she'd get on with it.

"Sir?"

I sighed. "I am sure you are capable in your role as legal liaison. But as acting protocol officer, you are taking on a bigger burden. Where are you from?"

"Mongo, sir."

Which was only two parsecs away. It made her ignorance with respect to matters of court all the more glaring.

“Doesn’t matter really,” I said. “Protocol is a big area, and you never know when you are going to run into people who have more knowledge than you. Do not let yourself get caught up in my battles too much. I need you to safekeep the Navy’s reputation.”

“I understand, sir, and I promise I’ll do better.”

I smiled. “You’re doing fine. Keep up the good work. And remember, you could have it worse, like Lt. Abbonette, who I pressed into being my aide. She has to agree with me,” I said, pretty sure I was keeping a straight face. “You get to offer contrary suggestions, at least.” I gestured to the waiting capsule. “Off you go.”

“Aye aye, sir. And thank you, sir.”

She entered her capsule, and soon an empty one took its place.

“State destination,” a computer-generated voice said as I entered.

“Imperial Palace.”

My capsule left the building and picked up speed, its inertial compensators masking the acceleration, although as the capsule turned sideways, so did gravity, but this too was mostly suppressed, and, in any case, there were handholds, and by now I was more or less used to it. Outside the narrow window, the city sped by like a flowing mosaic, white floodlight reflecting from seemingly countless angles, Silver City starkly luminous against the jet black sky.

It was a mixed bag, being able to see the inner thoughts of my crew. It certainly made me seem more effective in delivering needed reassurances or stinging points of correction, both of which I hoped might begin the legend of the omniscient Captain Plankwell. On the other hand, I had actionable intelligence that I could not act on without revealing the source, which would create bigger complications than I was prepared to deal with.

The capsule came to an abrupt halt, and as the doors slid open, I could see I was back in the palace’s security foyer. As expected, Josefeen and Lt. Sidara had arrived ahead of me, but who they were introducing themselves to was surprising. It was none other than Lady Alise and her minder, Squires Syeda Durami, the latter now free from her head-bubble.⁴

⁴ To give you an idea of how much I let the dice determine the course of events, I rolled a d6 determine who’d be there to greet Gus and his assistants. If I’d rolled 1-2, it would have been Gus’s old nemesis, Guri Maakhiriin, who, being the Countess’s Naval Liaison, really should have been the person greeting him. But, it stands to reason one of the palace psions might have noticed Guri’s inexplicable anger toward Gus, and so he might have been given some time off. If I’d rolled 3-4, it would have been Agidda, who, although

“Hello again.” The Squireess smiled. “I’m cured.” She curtsied as I approached, using the form that denoted respect to the Imperial Military. Alise, of course, couldn’t follow suit, for she was a lady and could only curtsy a flag officer, but she nodded her head slightly, no doubt awaiting my bow.

I took a few steps forward and bowed to Alise, not the best bow I’d ever done given the stiffness of my bulletproof vest, but I managed to include Durami by dint of shifting my direction several degrees off-center from Alise. It was in the form of respect to Imperial nobility, but I made it a little quick, short of what would be normal at a first meeting but not so short as to infer familiarity. Finally, I flourished it with a slight click of my heels, indicating loyal service.

“My ladies, a pleasure to once again be in your company.”

“It is our pleasure to be attended once again by the gallant Captain,” the Squireess said.

Lt. Sidara, for her part, was in awe, as Alise was the reigning noble of Mongo, her homeworld. Millions of people lived there, and very few of them ever got to meet Alise, much less her mother, the Countess of Jewell. Needless to say, Sidara was worried she’d do something stupid, like bowing for too long or too short or not clicking her heels together with just the right amount of force, so she endeavored to bow exactly as I had, and she mimicked me so well that she came up too quick, given that this was her first time meeting these two noblewomen.

Yes! she thought to herself. I did it! Wait. Why’s everyone looking at me?

Aside from the bow being too brief for an initial audience, there were other, even more glaring problems, and I made a mental note to have Sidara review the male/female and alternate gender signifiers of courtly bows. In short, she’d bowed as a man rather than a woman, and in some circles that was considered a very forward suggestion.

“To what do I owe the honor of your greeting?” I asked.

“I want to thank you for your assistance with the Lady Mongo,” Durami said, glancing briefly to Alise, but then she returned her gaze to me as I pulled my shoulders into a parade rest, my uniform tight across my

himself being a guest in the palace, might have been chosen to lead Gus into Seventeas, since they’d worked together previously. However, I rolled a 6, and on a 5-6, I’d decided, the Squireess would want to thank Gus for filling in for her at the Commerce Committee. Also, she has certain talents which the Countess might want to utilize to discern Captain Plankwell’s intent with respect to his recent tasing and subsequent interdiction. And because I rolled a 6, I rolled again to determine if Lady Alise would be present as well, and I rolled another 6, so yes, Alise is there to observe and, of course, to learn.

armored chest. No less than five guards and a beefy-looking robot stood nearby, and I was curious to see if there was anyone behind them, but it would have been rude to shift my attention while the Squireess was looking upon me so intently, so I stretched my mind out instead and discovered a psychic tentacle poking its way in. “I want to thank you by warning you,” Durami continued. “The two HPSS contractors who... ah... acted so ungentlemanly toward you..., they’re here.”

I cocked my head to the side. “Are they now? I suppose that will be of interest to my counsel, Bili Faulk. Lt. Sidara, please send an update to Mr. Faulk.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

I kept my face expressionless, as Faulk had instructed, but I opened up my psyche to ‘hear’ whatever might get leaked as a consequence of that declaration. Almost instantly, I could sense there was something in Durami’s mind about Faulk, a memory of him getting snarky, effectively gloating after a victory, and it made me think of Kaz and her brief conversation in committee with the Countess. They were both situations of over-familiarity but with the crucial difference that Faulk was able to get away with it, whereas Kaz, not so much.

«*What do you think you’re doing?*» Josefeen’s voice floated across my mind but as if spoken in another direction.

«*Who are you?*» “Faulk? You hired Bili Faulk?” Durami asked. She’d glanced at Josefeen for the first part, but I could somehow hear it, and I could even hear Josefeen’s reply: «*Naval Intelligence. You will cease and desist immediately. Captain Plankwell’s mind is off-limits.*»

I snapped the mental drapes shut and did my best to retain the *ironface* I’d bragged to Faulk about.

“Please, let us not keep the Countess waiting,” I said, ignoring Durami’s question, which was more exclamatory than interrogative anyway. Every time I thought I had a handle on a situation, I was reminded I was like a tiger cub wandering around cluelessly, swatting at adults, and it was only their forbearance that kept me from feeling the claws.

I extended my arm to Alise. “My lady, if I may have the honor of escorting you?”

My request was not so bold as it might have seemed, having acted as escort for her in the recent past. It was a more normative offer, indicating, I hoped, that I was open to hearing whatever the Countess might propose but also that I would be the one making the decisions.

Alise, her eyebrows rising slightly, glanced to her minder, the Squireess, who nodded without glancing back. She then stepped forward, placing her hand in mine, her form *en ludicra*, as one might take into a birthday party, which, of course, reminded me this *was* my birthday. Perhaps it was a tacit warning that a birthday party was about to commence?

Of course, I didn't know which way to go, but she motioned with her chin toward a wide hall, and so we walked hand-in-hand, the thoughts I'd been keeping locked down stirring within me. I ached to just let loose, like I had with Masa. Somehow, I'd gotten him on my side, and without even trying. But my command sense locked down even harder. The only thing worse than someone running around with a hot fusion gun was the one who did not understand the capabilities of the weapon, and right now, that was me.

As we walked through the wide corridor of "living" statues, I wondered if maybe I should have skipped the pep talk with Lt. Sidara and just sent her ahead of us, either that or crowded into the first capsule with Josefeen, despite what Sidara might think. My brain painted the imagined scene quite vividly, until Alise squeezed my hand just enough to get my attention.

"If you would trust me," she whispered, leaning in, "you might well find a friend. Or am I too young for that also?"

"I don't mistrust you." Ever-conscious of being watched, I turned my head slightly towards her. "And I am always interested in new friends."

Alise violently shook her head, causing her hair, which had been combed back, to suddenly drape her face. Then, using the fingers of her free hand, she combed it back to where it more or less belonged and finally looked at me with raised eyebrows.

I returned the look, slightly perplexed. Then the credit dropped, and I released the hold on my mental drapes.

«*Go ahead,*» I telepathically sent.

I adjusted the turn of my arm to something more suitable to old friends than party guests, bringing her in closer. It was a hell of a leap of faith, but *if* it gave me an in, I was willing to take it. I'd thought Durami was the one being cautioned by Josafeen. That may have been, but Alise was likely in possession of even more information than her minder, given her close relationship with the Countess. I just hoped she wasn't about to force a durable psionic connection on me.

"You must be very careful with whom you choose to telepathically conjoin," Sy (aka Squireess Syeda Durami) had told her at some point in the past. "A *psimergence* is not a trifling undertaking. The participants are each flooded with each other's knowledge and perspectives. When forged properly, its durability is such that it is difficult and painful to rescind. Whoever you do this with must be someone of whom your mother approves."

Mother is a manipulator, I could sense Alise thinking.

The Countess was a manipulator?

"The most powerful nobles are often manipulators," Sy had told her. "Although rare, even among telepaths, the talent runs through the bloodlines of the oldest and most powerful of the noble lineages, including yours."

So the Countess was a manipulator, as was I. At least, that's what Josefeen had told me. But what did it mean precisely? I recalled the previous night, and how I'd been yanking Reggie's memories out by their roots, severing from his mind any recollection of psi orbs and especially of the one Josefeen carried in our diplomatic pouch.

Alise twisted her neck back as far as it would stretch and caught a brief glimpse of the pouch, essentially a small briefcase, before returning her gaze to mine. It was only then I realized our eyes had been locked, and during that long moment I couldn't even feel my feet against the polished floor despite the fact we'd continued walking, and in a straight line, no less, as though the parts of our brains associated with complex ideas and abstract thought had slipped away from those responsible for agility and motor control.

«You're hopped up pretty well. I hope you're planning to share.»

"Happy birthday!" a chorus of voices cried out as we entered the tea room. There were even more people than before. The Countess, of course, sat at the head of the table, the two closest seats to her right unoccupied and therefore obviously reserved for myself and her daughter. At the opposite end of the table sat Canon

Forklinbrass! He stared at me, his gaze narrowing, and Admiral Karneticky sat beside him, his lips forcefully pressed into a smile. Agidda was also present, as was Amika, accompanied once again by General Dakhir, and even Bim Marshall, my Scout Liaison, was there. He sat between a bushy-bearded man in an IISS uniform and a young blonde dressed in business attire, both of whom seemed vaguely familiar. Meanwhile, the table overflowed with decanters containing teas and juices as well as platters with cakes and breads and cheeses and jams, and there were fruit and prunes and even dried cave fungus and poppers, a veritable feast.⁵

⁵ After I posted this update, Conrad wrote, "...Holeee shit!!! This is like the Dr. Who episode where they discover that the British Royal Family are probably werewolves.... My film critic friend often complains about the stakes in movies not being high enough to engage the viewer more viscerally, and you my friend just kicked the stakes in this story/game into the stratosphere... the revelation that old noble families are psionic, the implications for what that actually means for Gus, and coming into a party room with all of the live threads feels like Rosemary's Baby, the Red Wedding, and Al Capone's baseball bat scene rolled into one, and all I got on my side is a questionable IN agent and a rebellious noble girl. gonna need some time to let this sink in. All of my paranoid senese just went into overdrive. Is it like a Cold war East Berlin situation with the Zhodani and the Frontier Imperials, who is training everyone (are there Zho rebels seeking political asylum?), and it explains a LOT about how nobles remain in power, and very similar to current day power and information manipulations. Have I been a naif moving through enemies I thought of as friends, and are my actual friends (who I may have been considering enemies) have been trying to extricate me? Is the campaign of sabotage and rebellion really the aftereffects of the clampdown on the rebels? This is not the first time you did this to me, and it is a big reason I keep playing this game. Thanks for a huge pick me up!!" While I was, of course, pleased to received such high praise, I also thought to myself that perhaps I'd revealed too much too soon. Granted, Gus had just gotten an injection of the psi-enhancer, and the rolls I made seemed to justify my giving a little bit extra beyond mere surface thoughts, but absent a hit from the psionic orb, my update probably went a bit too far. Nonetheless, he obviously enjoyed it.