

Remembering Faulk's advice, I settled my expression into one of surprised bemusement, like noble-sponsored surprise parties were an everyday thing. Nonetheless, though I'd sworn not to set foot on this planet ever again, I could feel my resolution wither up and blow away in the wave of feelings, albeit mixed, coming from those assembled. Was that envy oozing from Admiral Karneticky? Whatever it was, it seemed likely he didn't want to be here. As for the Canon, Agidda, Amika, Dakhir, Bim, and numerous others, including the Countess herself, their thoughts were far too numerous to simultaneously discern, but their overarching emotion, as Alise and I entered the room, was one of excitement and celebration. I would have smiled and greeted everyone, but there were protocols to observe in approaching the Countess while walking past senior officers in the Navy and other services. I pulled Alise to a halt long enough to acknowledge the Admiral and General Dakhir. At the same time, I couldn't help but wonder what Bim was doing here, along with the bushy-bearded man in an IISS uniform. Due to Agidda's status as a senior Imperial bureaucrat, as well as being one of the few people present who I actually liked, he also got a respectful acknowledgment, and as he returned the favor, I could help but sense he'd wanted to reply to my message, the one I'd sent before visiting the lawyer, but he couldn't very well have said he'd see me at my surprise birthday party. Then it was time to be presented to the Countess, who no doubt already knew I was a fellow psion.

Or at least she did now, I realized, as she looked from Alise to me with widening eyes.

Presenting Alise, I fell into a court bow of the older style. It was one often practiced when learning the forms but lacked modern flourish. While not quite gauche, it held a definitive message, a thanks for instruction, either past or future. I watched her hands, as the depth of the bow hid her face from view. They would tell me my next move, and as I'd hoped, they turned palms up, her fingers motioning me to rise as everyone felt silent.

"Welcome again, Captain Plankwell," the Countess said with an unblinking stare, "And happy birthday."¹

"Thank you, Your Excellency."

¹ After Timothy sent me his essay, *Birthdays in Traveller* (see the 7th page of our zine in A&E #550), I decided that it would be a good idea to randomly determine the birthdays of all the various NPCs, and it just so happened that our protagonist's birthday was just a few days off. It's worth noting that there was only a little over a 1% chance of this being the case, so I made note of it, realizing it would very likely come into play, and sure enough, here we are.

“I would ask again how you’re enjoying your time here on Jewell,” Helena said, “but, of course, I’ve seen the video; quite appalling.” Somewhere in the back of my mind, I could sense she’d reviewed the surveillance from under the stadium of my VIP parking lot encounter with those HPSS contractors. “Oh dear,” she’d exclaimed, as Masa and I hit the floor. Meanwhile, her manicurist continued polishing the iridium gilding on her nails. “So tell me,” she said now, *«if you’ve not allowed yourself to be muzzled»* “tell me what it is you want done, Captain? What do you want for your birthday?”

“It is with great humility that I ask for nothing for myself. I have been given plenty in my short time here. Your generous offer befits your care of your people, but my only wish is the ongoing good relations between your Imperial subjects and the armed forces that serve and protect them.” *«Privately, however, if you could require the retention of Kaz Remshaw in her position with the Chamber of Commerce, I would consider it a favor.»*

I permitted a slight uptick in the corner of my mouth in response to her eyebrows squishing themselves together as two servants pulled out the empty chairs nearest her and held them for us. As before, Aliss sat in the one nearest her mother, the two exchanging a meaningful glance, and only then did Countess Helena smile and nod her head approvingly.

“Humility is among the noblest of qualities, Captain, as are wisdom and loyalty, all of which with you are most gloriously well-endowed.”

Josefeen coughed slightly as I followed Aliss’s example and sat myself in the proffered chair.

«Your praise is noted and graciously accepted, Your Excellency.»

Both Josefeen and Sidara were led to the far end of the table, Karneticky eyeing Josefeen, his lips pressed flat, as she sat beside him, still holding the diplomatic pouch he’d tried to steal.

I tried to reach out to her psychically, not sure if I had the juice to sustain two connections, or if I wanted them fighting in the common ground that was my head.

«I’m here Gus, but you’ll need to look to me.»

“It just so happens,” the Countess continued, “we are presently discussing a matter of some importance and could use your wisdom,” *«and loyalty»*. “As you know, I asked both the Imperial Army and Navy to issue proposals for addressing the problem of... ah... members of certain military services setting fire to local

establishments and otherwise stalking locals of their preferred sexual orientation.” *«I’m sure you wouldn’t know anything about that.»* “General Dakhir, attending to my request, issued a recommendation that the Navy and Army swap bases again.”

«As a matter of fact, I do have some information about my spacers being set up for public humiliation. A certain willingness to let certain clergy run loose with highly questionable substances.»

I looked over to the general and nodded, acknowledging his role in the on-going battle for prominence that the Army was never going to win. Fundamentally, the Imperial Army was a bottom-of-the-well force for occupation and re-adjustment of native opinions on Imperial policy. The Imperial Army was beholden to sector nobility for their keep, but the Navy drew its funding from the Emperor directly.² The services always scrapped for advantage, but they were never going to be more than us.

“Plankwell Naval Base was originally out in the desert northeast of Heron,” Dakhir explained, “whereas the Army was originally headquartered at Heron, where the Navy Base is now.”

“The swap happened not without reason,” Karneticky interjected.

“Reasons that were largely political and which no longer apply,” the Countess said. “I don’t know that I should ask a Navy captain this question, but since you are not under the Admiral’s command, I will hazard it. If you, Captain Plankwell, were Fleet Admiral, and the local Imperial General *and* Planetary Sovereign both agreed that things should go back as they once were, would you drag your feet and make excuses, or would you hop to and make it happen?”

My gaze rested on Countess Helena. She was, of course, asking me an extremely loaded question. She’d mentioned loyalty before correctly pointing out I was *not* under Kaneticky’s command. Meanwhile, she handed me the dagger to plant in him. I had to hand it to her, she was not one to waste time. But I wasn’t the type to stab a fellow Navy officer in the back, even one as craven and corrupt as I suspected the Admiral to be.

“Clearly I am not briefed on the reasons for the previous relocation of bases, nor do I need to be, so if you will accept my opinion, as a loyal officer of the Navy, I cannot imagine a greater waste of resources in essentially a useless exercise of one-upmanship.”

² I couldn’t help but question this when I first read it, so I asked the TML (<https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/25998180/>), and Alex Goodwin responded that it shows up in GURPS Traveller: Ground Forces, pages 17-18.

A few of them gasped, not least of all General Dakhir.

“One-upmanship?! Is that what you think this is?”

“Please forgive my blunt words,” I said, “but as a combat commander, having the most capable units near the capital and available to react in the event of a possible invasion, and the units most able to resist the invasion, our noble Army brethren, sited well away seems to present the most logical strategic doctrine.”

“Heron is better served with the Army close at hand,” Dakhir insisted.

“Even if that were true,” Karneticky said, “do you have any idea what it’ll cost?”

“For the Army, yes. It’s all in my report.”

“But how much for the Navy?” Karneticky grimaced. “And what about the consequences to our supply chains?”

“Consequences to your supply chains?” the Countess pursed her lips. “Heron’s miltown is turning into an embarrassment, Admiral. I think that’s a little more important than your precious supply chains.”

Karneticky glanced at me. He knew it was my crew members who’d burned down that nightclub, but I’d just done him a favor by taking his side.

“Your Excellency,” he said, “I take responsibility for all Navy personnel under my command, and I will see to it that this sort of incident...”

“Will most certainly happen again,” she completed his sentence, though clearly not as he’d intended.

“Admiral, we need a service close to Heron that will help us keep the peace, not one that habitually sets fire to things, including apparently the self-esteem of *half* the population.”

The female half, she most certainly meant.

“I watched that committee meeting,” Karneticky said, “and if you don’t want the Navy in Heron, you are free to close the gates.”

“It may come to that, which is why I vastly prefer this solution instead. Sometimes, Admiral, it is worth considering if old ways were best.”

Karneticky looked down at his hands for a long moment. “I will have my people study the Army’s report,” he finally said.³

³ Okay, it’s time for me to be completely honest. This whole base-switcheroo subplot owes its existence to a rather egregious mistake on my part. I’m not even sure one can properly call it a mistake. It’s more of a

“I don’t want any more incidents,” the Countess warned. “No more fires. No more declaring martial law over a... oh, why bother? Captain,” she said, turning back to me, “I have two members of the HPSS in our media reception room. Are they here?”

“They are, Your Excellency,” a male voice spoke from somewhere behind me. I turned to look. It was that young, bronze-skinned man who was apparently some sort of aide. “Captain, we met before, but I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Sanga Sekrunii, Her Excellency’s Chief of Staff. We have the two HPSS contractors who... ah... with whom you had an unfortunate altercation. Would you be amenable to meeting with them to accept their apology on behalf of... uh,” his eyes glazed over as if reading from a retinal display, “Bratom Solutions?”

I struggled to keep my expression neutral as I recalled the voice message from Major Trilbon. He’d said he’d fired them, and now they were apparently here to apologize on behalf of a company they didn’t work for anymore?

“I would not,” I answered. “Following regulations, I have retained local counsel to advocate for the 213th Fleet’s interests in this situation, and I have been advised to allow Bili Faulk to speak for myself and for the

disability. Many have heard about how a certain percentage of people, and particularly men, are considered colorblind or acquire some measure of color vision deficiency as they age. According to the Internet (more specifically, a blog post on [hunterlab.com](https://www.hunterlab.com/blog/how-our-perception-of-color-changes-as-we-age/) dated Nov 28, 2023, “the lenses in our eyes become yellowish, which appears like looking through a yellow filter.” (<https://www.hunterlab.com/blog/how-our-perception-of-color-changes-as-we-age/>) Now, I’m not completely colorblind, but obviously there’s some sort of problem, and to compound this, my perception is truly horrendous. I offhandedly mentioned this to Louis La Mancusa back in A&E #364, and during the intervening 18¾ years, my perception has only gotten worse. It’s so awful, at this point, that it’s become a source of continual mirth and frustration for my wife. But the truth is, I’ve always been this way to some extent. My brother told me a story about me, as a young kid, walking over a big snake without realizing it was there. I was old enough to know better, but I’d apparently thought it was a stick. In any case, while initially studying the world map on the last page of Jewell’s System Survey (2nd edition), I failed to notice the naval base, which was signified by a five-pointed yellow star in Jewell’s only major desert, which was in turn signified by a mustard-colored splotch east of Heron. Yellow and mustard are not exactly the same color, but they are close enough that I apparently couldn’t see the difference. Confused, I asked Timothy if he could find the naval base, and he said, “Yes, it’s there in the desert.” But try as I might, I just couldn’t see it. In retrospect, I should have asked him to count the hexes east and north from Heron to guide me to the exact spot. Maybe then I would have noticed it. My mistake was that instead of listening to Timothy, which given my disability would have been the most sensible thing to do, I assumed that the Army’s base that was just south of Heron must double as a Navy base. And then, many chapters later, I finally noticed that five-pointed star, signifying the Navy Base in the desert, but by then it was too late. I’d already said in this write-up that the Navy’s base was just south of Heron. So there I was with a problem my legendary lack of perception had created, and the only way to fix it, it seemed to me, was to put the Army base where the Navy base was on the world map, and then develop this subplot to switch them back to where they belong. So, basically, this whole subplot happened because I’m essentially a blind idiot.

fleet. Therefore, I choose to remain under the cloak of regulation and not disturb the order of things here more than has already been done.”

«Faulk, you Cleonfelching dogfather,» the Countess was thinking quite loudly.

«Now you see where I've learned such language,» Alise contributed.

«Ssh!» Durami shushed her.

I, of course, had also heard such language. We sailors, after all, were known for our inventive invective, but to hear it from a Countess....

«A Countess with whom you don't want to go to war.» She seemed to be glaring, albeit slightly.

«I must protest,» Josefeen interjected, her telepathic voice unusually distant. The Countess, meanwhile, placed her hands before herself in a most peculiar way, almost as though momentarily meditating or perhaps even praying. She was considering altering the environment, hitting the whole room with a psionic suppression field, but then, instead, she glanced across the table, her gaze meeting Josefeen's.

«Why is that, my dear?» Helena sent with a smirk “Disturb the order of things? Yes, you've certainly done that, haven't you.”

«That is quite enough...,» I telepathically interjected, «...from all of you. Your Excellency, I absolutely do not wish to antagonize you further, but I will not be bullied into submission. I was, after all, the injured party on your territory. You may dislike the measures we are taking, but it is clear to me that the local Navy has colored your opinion of the rest of us. If you expect me to undermine the Fleet due to local issues, I fear you have a very poor opinion of us as a whole. My Lieutenant is speaking up for me, but in this matter I am more than willing to impose my will. Go ahead and trigger the suppression field, and we can all go back to posturing and innuendo. Or we can settle this. Your daughter clued me into the reality around here, and for that I owe her a debt. You are treating with me, and for that I thank you, but it does not change the situation that some very curious things have happened in the past few days. Things that have made me suspicious of outside influences. Regardless...»

The real world pause had grown into a lengthy silence, every non-psion waiting to see how I'd reply.

“I do apologize for the disturbances caused by the temporary interdiction,” I said, inclining my head. “We are now working to rectify the local complaints and ensure that the event is resolved.” *«Surely you realize the*

incongruity of the two individuals involved in the assault on my person being dismissed and then showing up to apologize in person? If they had approached me anywhere else, I would be having my Marines apprehend and thoroughly interrogate them.»

«You can interrogate them here if you like,» Helena replied. “Which is precisely what I am trying to do, Captain. The people need to see the Navy working hand-in-hand with local authorities, not getting into brouhahas over jurisdiction. At least listen to what they have to say for themselves, won’t you? If you don’t wish to respond, that’s certainly your right.”

I was suspicious and was pretty sure I’d screwed up by apologizing out loud. No doubt, everything said was being recorded, so it didn’t require precognition to envision Faulk screaming, “That was your ironface?!” Nonetheless, she was a Countess, and I was but a Captain.

“It is your court, Your Excellency. I am here at your invitation and would not do you the disrespect of departing before we have attended to your wishes.”

“How very kind,” «*and wise,*» “of you.” The Countess smiled, and so did most everyone else, even the non-psions, for though the bulk of our exchange had been telepathic, the tension between us, I could well imagine, had been palpable. “Why isn’t anyone eating?” she asked.

“Canon Forklinbrass has yet to bless the table,” Alise dutifully answered. She’d been studying the rules of protocol rather intently since the recent media coverage at my reception.

Hearing his name, Reggie perked up. “Which version would you like, Your Excellency?”

“I’m famished, so the briefer the better.”

“Ah... well, in that case... rub-a-dub-dub, let’s have the grub!”

No lasting damage it seems.

Though it wasn’t the most saintly invocation I’d ever heard, it was straight-up Reggie, and as if on cue, the servants lept into action, offering tea and cakes and all the rest. Agidda, again seated on my immediate right, leaned in slightly as one of them offered him a selection of beverages.

“What do you think of Olav’s performance?” he asked, pointing to the darkest of the teas on offer. “Would you say we succeeded?”

“That depends on your metrics of success,” I said, glancing toward him. “If your client was pleased by the message, then yes, a success. I rather doubt that the original Olav was quite that bombastic. He preferred the straightforwardness of the main guns. But, as a symbol for our current days, I will grant you it was certainly stirring.”

Under the table, someone touched my left hand, and given the seating, it could only have been Alise. From the direction of her gaze, she seemed to be focused on her mother’s conversation with Amika, but her voice in my head indicated otherwise.

«So... you owe me a debt?»

“The Countess wanted to send a message,” Agidda explained.

There was something about Alise’s hand upon my own that sharpened the telepathic communication, and I remembered Josefeen telling me touch was the best route for establishing a deep connection.⁴ I left my hand beneath hers and picked up one of the beverage glasses with my other hand.

“Would you like tea or juice, sir?” a waiter asked.

“Just water, please.”

«Don’t get too greedy, but yes.» I held the glass as he poured water from a carafe. *«Revealing the nature of the nobles here has certainly changed the field of battle.»*

«What would you consider too greedy?»

I could sense her trying to reach into my mind, but she wasn’t jacked up on psi-enhancer the way I was, and so I could sense her looking over what I’d just learned from her about the psionic nature of the Imperial nobility and, more particularly, about her mother. The communication of this knowledge, I suddenly realized, hadn’t been a gift, except insofar as she’d opened herself to the possibility. Instead, my own train of thought combined with the Darrian psi-enhancer had exposed her memories for me to read. But she was not concerned by this, as she did not consider me an adversary. We, after all, were fellow Imperial psions, part of a fellowship that stretched back millennia, albeit punctuated by civil war, and, in any case, I was cute and something of an enigma, being powerful but untrained.

“She hopes the reincarnation of Olav will strike fear into the hearts of the Zhodani,” Agidda continued.

⁴ See the 3rd page of Chapter 46.

“How does she suppose that will happen?”

“I suppose it all depends on whether or not they believe we’ve really achieved it.”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes. The Zhodani didn’t rely on propaganda the way we did, at least not according to my security briefings. The Tavrchedl, their so-called *Guardians of Our Morality*, ensured *correct thought* on all matters. The only thing Zhodani agents would be observing was the relative effectiveness of an AI-controlled hologram stirring the nationalistic tendencies of the population. And like me, they’d wonder what the Countess was hoping to achieve.

Did she want another war?

I’d fought the Zhodani. They’d launched the last war and had, only at great cost, been forced to withdraw. Now they were exploring diplomatic relations, which is what they did during every interregnum. That a Zhodani ambassador was here on Jewell must have been part of Helena’s calculations.

And now, thanks to Alise, I knew that at least some frontier nobles were psions. Did the Zhodani know this as well? Did they know about the Countess specifically? In which case, what did that mean for Jewell’s relationship vis-à-vis the Consulate? Was the Countess trying to impress them? Was she auditioning, in effect, hoping to collude with them in some way?

«You’re seriously overthinking,» Alise’s voice echoed between my psi-boostered synapses. *«And you still haven’t answered me. What’s too greedy?»*

«Too greedy would be asking me to spirit you away from your duties for a carefree life of gallivanting.»

«Ooh... gallivanting sounds like a splendid idea! It’s been so long since I got to galavant! Will you take me to the Stardust?»

“What’s the Stardust?” *Oops!* I hadn’t meant for that to be out loud.

“It’s a nightclub here in Silver City,” Agidda replied. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, I love the Stardust,” Alise interjected. “Mom, can I go? I’ll put on my disguise.”

“If you can be quiet for the rest of this meal, I will consider it.”

“I’ll be quiet! I’ll be perfectly quiet,” she promised, lowering her voice to a whisper. “You won’t even know I’m here.” Then she turned to me and grinned.

«So will you? Don’t worry. It’s perfectly safe. And we’ll have so much fun!»

«You know, I am active duty. I have a ship and everything involved in getting it ready for duty. You and your mother have... complicated this assignment.»

«So is that a yes?!»

I could not help but be charmed by her enthusiasm. I figured I must be getting old to be so easily swayed by feminine wiles.

«Fine. It seems I am destined to escort junior scions out into the world. Am I likely to get shot at again? Or would that just make it more exciting?»

“The Stardust is open all night every night,” Agidda said.

“I’d heard the name in passing and was just curious. Talking about Olav too much, I suppose. Needed a change of topic.”

“Speaking of Olav,” Countess Helena interjected, “I want to thank you both, once again. His speech was exactly the sort of message I wanted sent, and it will do much, I think, to help us meet our military personnel quotas.” These quotas were strictly unofficial, but in order to get preferential treatment, worlds had to prove their worth, and getting their citizens to volunteer for military service was one of the primary methods. “So tell me again,” she continued, “what does the Ministry of Technology have in store for him?”

“We’re sending the beta version to the Core Sector,” Agidda said, “to a research facility where our top experts will learn how exactly it works. Olav’s inventor is going too, of course, to explain everything and make sure it operates effectively throughout its tour.”

“Its tour?” Amika asked. Though she was obviously expressionless, I could sense a wave of sadness. She already knew Olav-2 would be leaving, and she’d asked Agidda if she could keep Olav-1, the alpha version I’d met at the highport. “For what? As a souvenir?” he’d quipped.

“Yes, it will tour many worlds between here and Capital,” he now said, “and it will give many speeches. I have no doubt it will raise recruitment across the Imperium.”

“He,” Amika corrected. “*He* will give speeches, not *it*.”

She was thinking about one of the first conversations she’d had with Olav, shortly after I’d left the palace the last time I was here. She’d asked Olav if he was single⁵, and taking that as a cue, Olav apparently decided

⁵ See the end of Chapter 30 in A&E #578.

to treat her as an experienced but unattached man of an emotionally generous temperament would naturally treat a lonely woman of quality. In short, he'd flirted, and she'd flirted back, and in a hazardously short time she found herself utterly enthralled.

"I would not presume to woo you," Olav told her, though that was precisely what he was doing. "I know I am merely a thing. But were I a man, an actual man, I *would* woo you, and I would *keep* wooing until you gave me a definitive no."

"And how do you know I would shoo you away?" She would have smiled if she could. It was nice being hit on, even if only by a hologram.

"You've shooed away many, I'd wager," Olav replied. "Though perhaps not as many as were you not a Stavelot."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Some men are easily intimidated. Others, like myself, not so much." He proceeded to tell her about Sir Josen Stavelot, a distant ancestor of hers who, like Olav himself, was brave to the point of recklessness. "See, there is courage in your blood. So you deserve a man of courage, do you not?"

And just like that she cracked and told him all about Admiral Karneticky and what had happened on safari. She hadn't meant to. Indeed, it didn't make sense to, and afterwards she felt quite foolish. She couldn't help but worry where the data might go. She wanted to delete it, just that part of Olav's memory. So she found Zeenye, and he told her it would take some time to rebuild Olav yet again. It was then that she learned of the original Olav, the alpha version, which was pure and complete, as opposed to this beta version, which Zeenye warned might go insane at any moment.

Agidda, however, wasn't so sure. He wanted to test it under a variety of situations, including stressful ones.

"Stressful?" she'd asked. "Like perhaps giving a speech?"

"Yes, like that," Agidda had said. "Speeches are indeed stressful," Zeenye agreed.

So it was decided. Olav Beta would speak at the memorial. And they'd give him an actual robot body. In the meantime, she had them load up the alpha version, because she wanted to talk to the original, and she asked him about Sir Josen, and the story was similar but different. Olav Beta had told her only the good things. Olav Alpha, by contrast, had some dark details to add.

Needless to say, they reloaded the beta version for the speech in Heron. The alpha version, according to Agidda, was too reckless. As for the possibility of the beta version going insane, as Zeenye had warned, that seemed unlikely to both her and Agidda, given the stability it had displayed thus far. In any case, she decided to bring along the remote and have it ready on the off-chance something unexpected were to occur. Having an Olav-expert might help as well. That's how Ensign Florence was included.

"Now that I have physical substance," Olav Beta said to her after the speech, "and am not merely composed of light, I would be happy — most deliriously happy — if you were to permit me to court you."

It hit her then that this was truly insane. What was she doing, allowing herself to be wooed by an AI? Was she genuinely that desperate?

"I'm sorry," she'd told him, "but... it's impossible."

The hologram of Olav's face inside the robot's helmet closed its eyes for a moment, but then he smiled. "Nothing is truly impossible," he said. "I, myself, am proof."

«What kind of psi-drug are you on?» Alise asked, bewildered at the strength of my telepathy.

"He," Agidda agreed, not wanting to offend Amika. "You know," he said, turning to me, "if you want to accompany Olav on his Imperial tour, as his... uh... guardian, I'm sure something could be arranged."

It took a supreme effort of will to school my face from showing the shock and revulsion that swept through me.

"Ah, no thank you. My duty takes me in a different direction."

I could not imagine a worse fate. I had spent one tour beached when my father was ill and had no desire to sabotage my career further by voluntarily giving up combat command to shepherd a hopped-up hologram as it gave speeches. Why did everyone continually think I wanted to be associated with Olav?

I smiled in Agidda's direction.

"I know it is hard to imagine wanting to put yourself in harm's way, but this command is everything I have been working towards for my entire career. Giving it up would mean disappointing a great number of people who have invested in me over the years."

"That's very noble of you," Agidda said, smiling, though I could sense he thought me a fool.

Accompanying Olav across the Imperium would give me countless political contacts. Who knows? Perhaps I

might even be granted an audience with the Emperor himself. But instead, I wanted to patrol the Imperial border, looking for smugglers and pirates. It was hardly the choice he would have made, but then he didn't know how I actually felt about Olav.

Free free to suggest a title: