

It's too bad, Agidda thought as we both smiled our false smiles. *With just a little more strategic opportunism, he could go far. Admiral, perhaps. But he has no interest. Is it even worth trying to help him see the possibilities? It could be useful*, he thought, *to have a friend in the Imperial Admiralty.*

"You do realize the possibilities you're giving up?" he asked.

"There are possibilities to be given up... and certainties in hand. I appreciate the concern, but sometimes best friends are found rather than made."

Agidda's eyes narrowed slightly as he tried putting my last sentence into context.

"Take, for example, Lady Alise. We got off on the wrong foot, so to speak, but now I am apparently escorting her out for a night of dancing. Or Captain Masa, who now shares the distinction of being shot in the line of duty with me. I am not sure either of them would consider me a friend yet, but both have remarkable beginnings in that direction."

Agidda struck me as a career politician. Out here on the frontier, everything was greased by who you knew and what you could do. Someone high up in the Imperial bureaucracy had immense pull, and I am sure he would have been an asset in my portfolio. But only on my terms. He would be thinking about me in the same way, and we would maneuver to see who actually had sway in the relationship. I wasn't surprised he was thinking about my future prospects, because he currently had the advantage to do me favors. Nobles tended to collect the shiny of the day, more interested in putting their ripple in the pond, rather than reading the waves for threats. Some nobles did both, like the Countess, who was not above tossing in some small fry to see what submerged predators moved beneath the surface.

«No offense, Alise, but that is what happens.»

She didn't respond, however, and Agidda squished his eyebrows together. He was thinking *something*.

As I looked deeply into his eyes, I could sense he recalled an interview he'd seen shortly before taking the tubes to the palace. *The tubes*. That's what they called the turboporter network, a fact I realized as soon as I was sucked into that moment, for that was what this level of telepathy sometimes felt like. Did my power have something to do with the psi-orb, the Canon's so-called Eye of God?

Regardless, there I/he was, with his usual cup of scuf, flipping through the thumbnails of his personalized newsfeed. The computer, knowing we'd recently met, put my G-Carrier interview, the one I'd had with those three reporters on the way up to the Jackie, front and center, ensuring he's see it, and intrigued, he'd selected it, watching as my holographic image appeared across the table from him, such was the sophistication of his viewy.

"The Navy and the Ministry of Technology," my hologram said, "evaluated Olav and deemed him worth our time and investment." That's *not* what I said! "It is Olav reincarnated," I went on, lying though my holographic teeth! "The people of Jewell are rightly patriotic in their holding of Olav hault-Plankwell as a hero of the Imperium."

My stomach churned as I struggled to maintain a neutral expression. Agidda obviously thought I'd been making a move by endorsing the Olav *upgrade*. No wonder he was confused I wasn't taking the next logical step.

«*Who gave you permission to speak for the Ministry of Technology?*» the Countess asked. I turned to look. The Countess was drinking tea and looking at Alise, who in turn was looking down at her plate, expressionless. Her left hand was under the table, as was the Countess's right hand, leading me to suspect we were all linked and Helena was essentially talking to me through her daughter, perhaps as a sign of her own power and telepathic skill.

«*You have a media problem,*» I telepathically voiced, assuming she'd hear me. «*That is not what was said. I have my own recording to offer in counterpoint.*»

«*Delete it. I don't care what your personal feelings are about Olav. I believe it unwise for any of us to talk down any new technology that might give us a military advantage over the Zhodani, unless, of course, Intel has some operation in play that requires it, in which case I should have been informed of this long ago so I could have adjusted my actions accordingly.*»

By now she was looking across the table at Josefeen.

«*I get it,*» Josefeen sent, her voice distant but still perceptible. «*Gus spoke for the MoT, so now you're returning the favor and speaking for him.*»

I was still angry as well as confused. «*The very thought I would usurp the speech from MoT is ridiculous.*»

«You did, Gus,» Josefeen replied.¹ «With all due respect, Your Excellency, this sort of tit-for-tat is ridiculous. If you wanted our cooperation in establishing a media narrative, all you had to do was ask. And holding this discussion telepathically instead of behind closed doors is equally absurd. The Captain's mind belongs to the Imperial Navy.»

«Just as the minds of my subjects belong to me?» Helena shifted her gaze ever so slightly, past Karneticky and to the Canon.

«That was part of an operation,» Josefeen replied.

«Cleaning up a mess, I'd wager. Reggie is dear to me. You should have asked permission.»

«With all due respect,» I interjected, *«I will not be deleting official Navy records at your say so, especially not when I have evidence that your “dear Reggie” was the one who drugged my Vargr crew members resulting in the fire that you have been making the centerpiece of your anti-Navy tirades. And as for military advantage... of Olav? Who told you that? Are you planning a March on the Capital as well?»*

«How dare you?!»

«Gus, don't.»

They were both glaring at me from opposite ends of the table, but my fire was going now, and I had no interest in holding back.

«The minute I set foot on this planet, I have been buffeted, used and maneuvered! I have gone along out of a sense of duty and a desire for peaceful relations. But instead, all I get are threats and cajoling by your catspaw. I for one am sick of the stick and the carrot!»

I let my psionic power rise, flooding it through my touch connection into Alise. Everyone kept telling me I was stronger. Well, maybe they should feel what it was like playing with a loaded weapon.

“Aaagh!” Alise screamed, pulling back her hand and pushing herself away from the table so hard her chair almost tipped over backwards. “Cleonfelching adults!” she yelled, now standing.

All conversation immediately stopped, of course, everyone staring at her like she was utterly mad.

“I...,” she looked around the table, wide-eyed, “I never want to grow up,” she said. “I can't stand the thought of becoming one of you!”

¹ See the 5th page of Chapter 42 in A&E #590.

“Wiser words were never spoken,” Canon Forklinbrass declared. “May I propose a toast? To the fleeting exuberance of youth.”

Everyone raised their cups, unconcerned whether they contained tea or juice or white wine. The whole thing was so terribly awkward, there was simply nothing else to do. Even Countess Helena partook but then turned to her daughter and told Alise, “You will go to your chambers and stay there. See to it she finds her way,” she added to one of the guards.

“But.”

“Go!”

Alise’s lip quivered, and then she was ushered out.

Had I caused all that? I drew my psionic curtain, shielding my mind.

“Another toast, if I may,” the Canon said. “To forgiveness and reconciliation.”

Everyone drank, even the Countess.

“Speaking of forgiveness and reconciliation,” she said, “I believe it is time for you to greet your assailants, Captain Plankwell. Assuming, of course, you haven’t changed your mind.”

“As I recall, Your Excellency, I expressed my wishes to resolve the issue through my counsel. It is by your directive that these individuals enter your palace and speak to you regarding their offenses. I am simply not opposing you in this matter.”

She nodded to one of the servants, who scooped her chair out from the table for her. One of them came behind me as well, but I saved him the trouble and scooped myself out. Obviously, we were going somewhere to meet these two HPSS contractors. I dropped the curtain, looking over to my Intel Liaison.

«Josephine. Situation Bravo-Nine-Nine. Relay to Jaqueline. Bravo Alert Stand-by.»

There was obviously a chance this would be overheard by one of the telepaths at the table, but neither the Countess nor Squiress Durami made any intimation they were tapped in.

Navy Bravo situations were preparations for combat, to be on standby in the event of hostilities. The Nine-Nine signified orders to try and take prisoners but not at the cost of personal or allied safety, and use of all weapons was permitted. Of course, being that I was in the Imperial Palace, it would be awfully hard for my

ship to know if hostilities had ensued. Only if I or Josefeen or Lt. Sidara managed to get word to the ship that we were under attack would Hell come raining down on the Palace and, indeed, on all of Silver City.

Of course, that would be up to Nizlich.

Somewhere up above, I could imagine Blodder reading the message and relaying it to the entire bridge crew. *Holy Mother of Cleon*, they had to all be thinking. *Is this for real or just another drill?* As per standard protocol, she'd next inform Nizlich, and somewhere in the back of my mind I could sense Stefani bolting immediately toward the bridge at full sprint as if the klaxons were already blaring the call to battle stations.

Of course, I understood that if we were, indeed, to fall under attack, it was implausible that a second signal would ever get out, at least not without being electronically garbled. But in the event my ship saw the palace jamming comms — well, in the absence of a Bravo-Nine-Nine, they'd be curious, but with Bravo-Nine-Nine in effect — that would be tantamount to an attack. I didn't know what Stefani would do if such an event were to transpire, but I was certain she'd not do nothing.

«*Bravo-Nine-Nine confirmed,*» Josefeen sent back as the Countess led us back down the corridor toward the security lobby. Josefeen, of course, was following us along with Lt. Sidara and a few of the others, including Agidda and Canon Forklinbrass. Agidda stepped alongside me, saying something about Olav while thinking that I seemed a little off, like maybe I hadn't been getting enough sleep or something.

“At least this one is Imperial-approved,” he went on, “uncorrupted by whatever garbage Zeenye poured into the prototype. Regardless of questions pertaining to fidelity, it's the version of Olav we need, the version that will be most likely to serve Imperial interests rather than its own.”

“An interesting observation, as Imperial interests seem to be somewhat divided on this world, at least when it comes to the local nobility and the armed forces.”

He narrowed his eyes so much his eyebrows nearly squished together, but I quickly raised my hand, cutting off whatever reply he was attempting to conjure. “Not really asking for an answer, just expressing my curiosity about what interests exactly are being served by Olav.”

“Recruitment, of course. And reminding the citizenry why we need to support our armed forces. I am, indeed, looking forward to this apology from these two locals, and it had better be a good one.”

We passed through the security lobby and down another corridor, the same one he and I had been escorted through on my first visit to the palace. Up ahead was the reception room where we'd interrogated the beta version of Olav. The media crew that had been present when the Countess had come to pay her respects was already set-up. They obviously intended to record this and release it to the public assuming all went as planned.

As for the two HPSS-contractors, they both looked a bit on-edge, one adjusting his clothes as we entered, the other clutching a data slate. They both stared at me for a moment, though neither appeared to be armed. Indeed, they didn't even have their uniforms, and so it took me a moment to even recognize them.

Seeing these two stripped of their symbols of authority, I couldn't help but recall how only yesterday they were hitting Captain Masa and I with their weapons' built-in tasers. On some worlds, we'd have been within our rights to execute them on the spot. Indeed, even here I could probably get away with it, though I'd have to declare another state of emergency and then endure the Countess's wrath as well as naval bureaucratic hell. Far easier to just acquiesce to her wishes.

Nonetheless, I remained near the room's entrance, moving to the side for the others to pass, one of the guards looking down to his slate, the other standing there, looking at me while trying to appear relaxed. I realized this, of course, because as we stared at each other, I couldn't resist reaching out telepathically to see what *he* thought about all this.

There was certainly something there, resentment intermixed with a healthy dose of fear. His boss, Major Trilbon, CEO and Company Commander of Bratom Solutions, hadn't merely fired them but also threatened legal action, and he and his girlfriend had quite the "discussion" when video of the arrest was leaked over the planetary subnet. Suddenly their friends started calling, and everyone wanted to know what happened.

"I was just following the training," he'd insisted.

"Then why were you fired?!"

«*You're staring.*» Josefeen sent, walking in front of me.

I looked to her and gestured with my chin for her to "get on with looking like an aide and getting this over with," backing it up with a telepathic «*please*».

«*It wasn't me who got my ass sizzled by two parking lot guards. They're here to apologize to you.*»

«I don't care about their apologies. I'm here to listen as per the desires of the Countess and the explicit instructions of our attorney to go Captain Ironface. So you are my designated conversation starter, or you can hand off to Sidara. I am just here to listen. And you were the one to drink the hallucinogenic potion, so don't get all holier-than-thou on me.»

I arched an eyebrow at her meaningfully, somewhat wasted as she turned her head and walked over to Lt. Sidara.

“You’re acting protocol officer,” Josefeen whispered into Sidara’s ear. “Aren’t you supposed to be intermediating or something?”

Oh, Cleonspoop! I'm so dumb! The volume of Sidara’s internal self-recrimination was such that even the Countess blinked in surprise. *Okay! You can do this.* Wide-eyed and suddenly trembling, she willed herself to walk over to the two former security guards without yet formulating a plan on what to say. Of course, she recognized them from the video of the arrest. And she’d read lots of comments on the planetary subnet, trying to get a feel for how the overall population had been reacting.

Subnet : Jewell : Heron : Politics & Current Events : Recent Subsnips : Search “HPSS & Navy”

VargrChewtoy69: Holy Mother of Cleon! HPSS versus Navy! <hpssarrests2navycaptains.vid>

NoblyIgnoble: Dang. No wonder we got hit with an interdiction.

Belter5150: LOL! Now the Navy knows what it’s like to live here.

NoblyIgnoble: Except they can call the Marines.

Belter5150: Those rent-a-cops were probably as baked as a loaf of puur.²

VargrChewtoy69: Indeed, rye would they do such a thing?

NoblyIgnoble: It’s the yeast they could do.

AirFilterPumpNoise: Stop! We don’t knead another pun thread!

NoblyIgnoble: This won’t end well, no matter how you slice it.

² Puur is a Vilani word for bread.

The previous Protocol Officer was one of the scouts who left the ship when the whole Exploration Department got up and left, and so Sidara was tossed into the role mainly due to her legal knowledge. Nonetheless, she understood she lacked the cross-cultural training necessary for this duty, something she'd brought to the attention of her supervisor, the Logistics Officer.

"Just cover until I find someone."

"Aye aye, sir." Sidara dutifully nodded. It would only be for a little while, she'd thought to herself, and they'd be in port the whole time, so what could possibly happen? In any case, it would look good on her service jacket, and the alternative, which was to take her reservations to Commander Nizlich who was the next step up the chain of command, did not particularly appeal. The truth was, she was a bit scared of Stefani. And so when Nizlich approached her about convening a military tribunal in accordance with my orders pertaining to the Section 678 Interdiction, Sidara found herself momentarily speechless.

"T... tribunal? What happened?"

"The locals crossed a line, and now we must demonstrate the consequences."

"Consequences?"

"Lessons will be learned."

"I'm Lt. Sidara of the INS Jaqueline," she said to the two former guards, bringing me back to the present. "Which of you will issue the apology?"

They both had to — Major Trilbon had been explicit — but neither was happy about it.

"I'll go first," said the one with the slate.

Sidara looked at me momentarily, but when it became apparent I wasn't going to venture any closer, she nodded to the guy. "Go ahead."

"Captain Plankwell, we deeply regret the misunderstanding that led to this unfortunate incident." The apology had actually been written not by them but by somebody in the HPSS. The Major had simply passed it along with a stark ultimatum. Not only were they fired, but he'd sue them as well. "We take full responsibility for our actions and assure you it was never our intention to insult the Imperium or undermine its authority." That threat about suing them might have been a bluff, but given all the negative press they were getting, they were unlikely to find another security job anytime soon. "Our actions were a mistake, and we apologize for

any undue stress or inconvenience caused.” Ultimately, all Trilbon really cared about was the HPSS contract. Well, that and future Imperial contracts. He’d mentioned once how he wanted to take the company into the big leagues, and so this guy had imagined himself eventually serving alongside the Imperial Army. Maybe then his Dad would be proud of him.

He handed the slate to his partner, a guy who I sensed had applied to the Imperial Army years earlier but had been rejected. His sister was a dancer in one of the miltown’s more notorious nightclubs, and he’d worked security there for a while but was fired for being overly-protective. Suffice it to say, he had some pent-up anger toward Navy-types like myself, and so as he began reading, I could sense him wanting to grit his teeth, something he naturally couldn’t do while voicing an apology.

“Captain Plankwell, there is no excuse for our actions and we can only beg for forgiveness.” Yes, perhaps he’d been a tiny bit overzealous, but in his mind, he’d been strictly following the training. “Treat everyone the same,” they’d all been told. The job was simple. One, two, three, and then light ‘em up with the taser. If that didn’t work, they could resort to bullets.

“This was a failure on our part, plain and simple.” Above all, however, they weren’t supposed to take any guff. There were gangs out there, and they continually tested law enforcement. “If you show weakness, they’ll stop respecting us, and if that happens, then crime goes up, and then we have to clamp down even harder, so you never show weakness.”

“But what if the Countess spits on me?” he’d wanted to ask but thought better of it. It seemed funny at the time, though not quite so funny when Masa and I were lying unconscious in front of him and his partner.

“We were just following our training,” he’d said during the mandatory HPSS debriefing.

“You idiots tased two Imperial Captains.”

“Nobody ever said there was an exception for Captains.”

“Sometimes you need to read between the lines,” his girlfriend later explained.

“What’s that even mean?”

“It means you don’t shoot Navy just because your sister’s a whore.” This was a sore spot for him, a big one, but of course she didn’t care. She saw he was down, and so now she was kicking him in the face, because,

y'know, that's what girlfriends were for. "With you unemployed, how are we gonna pay the rent? Huh? For Cleon's sake, how are we gonna pay the air tax?!"

"I'll figure something out, and don't talk that way about my sister."

He didn't want to end up with the mole rats or out on the streets breathing that poison the government euphemistically referred to as air.

"If I do this," he asked the Major, "can I have my job back?"

"If you do it right, exactly as written, and these two captains both accept it, then I'll rehire both of you after this all blows over. But if you mess it up..."

"We overstepped, and we are deeply ashamed of how we handled the situation," he continued, remembering how Masa and I had been lying unconscious, kissing the concrete as it were, and thinking how much worse it would have been if we'd pissed ourselves as often happened in these situations. "In the heightened security environment, we are forced to make quick decisions, and this time, we got it wrong," he went on as I peered into his mind, seeing the time a stunned detainee had let loose an explosive shart³, and he'd been in the proverbial line of fire. Suffice it to say, that was a shitty day.

"We believed we were acting to safeguard the security of Jewell, but in hindsight our actions were unwarranted. For this, we are truly sorry. Therefore, with humility and loyalty, we ask that you please accept our heartfelt apology."

The cameras turned toward me along with the Countess and everyone else, all of them no doubt waiting to see how I'd respond.

This is why I didn't want to hear the apologies. The system had failed these two. I was part of that system. The Imperium was a noble ideal, spanning thousands of star systems, but when you zoomed right down to it, it stood on the pillars of people like this, pushed by other people in authority to do the right thing without ever really knowing what that right thing entailed. Looking in their thoughts, I saw every rough spacehand who I'd tried to shape up for duty. I never really thought about the ones I washed out. Apparently they ended up like this. Scrambling to find a way to be meaningful and help their family.

³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/shart>

In the Navy, I was surrounded by people who had seized the challenge of service in the Navy and fought to excel. The bitter reminder of every time someone had thrown “Plankwell” in my face as a reason I had gotten promoted or even noticed roiled under the surface of my thoughts. But even there, the currents of patronage and petty power swirled. The Navy fought for the idea of meritocracy, but everyone knew once you ascended to the upper ranks, the game changed. I knew it. I was playing that game right now.

Gus would give over in a minute. I could see there was no deeper intentions or subterfuge, only two people who were having their ideas about their own strength and power radically changed. Were Gus to continue the Tribunal, the full weight of Imperial displeasure would fall on these two. Penal colony. Gus would at least be able to advocate not for the death penalty.

Captain Plankwell had larger concerns. The interdiction had been a massive incursion into planetary affairs. But it had also served a powerful purpose in illuminating that Captain Plankwell was not afraid to use the weapons at his disposal and to remind everyone exactly how powerful those weapons were. Captain Plankwell was secure in his reasoning that the interdiction had been necessary. It was right there in his thoughts, bullets were the next escalation. Captain Plankwell had no qualms about throwing Navy personnel in danger to complete an objective. But what was the objective here?

If nothing else, I believed in consequences for actions. But not disproportionate and not counterproductive. Punishing these two solved none of my other issues. Even laying them out as scapegoats would only follow the local playbook, signaling to some I was willing to play their game. Was I? Was I willing to throw two random strangers into a meat grinder to further my own plans?

Josafeen would do it in a heartbeat. Nizlich would probably have maneuvered things so as not to be in that position. Karneticky... well, the less I thought about what he would do, the better, as he was one of the opposing pieces I was working around. I didn’t bother thinking about the nobles. They spent their lives moving people and making sacrifices, mostly of their own relations.

Whatever I did, I had to be able to live with it. I had to be able to look my reflection in the eye and see that I was still Gus, even if I was wearing the shell of Captain Plankwell. But they had shot me. No getting away from that. I was one captain with one ship, and I was not going to change the Imperium overnight. But I wasn’t going to bring my hammer down on these two. The more interesting question was what was someone trying to

stop me from seeing by throwing these two out as sacrifices. I needed to get Sidara to review the Tribunal findings to date and see if the intel sweep had caught anything interesting. I ruefully thought she was the exact same thing, someone being pushed into a role she thought was too big for her. Well, we all had to grow sometimes.

I stood away from the wall and drew myself up to my full height. I stared at these two, the same searching look I used on new recruits. The challenge to do better.

I turned to the Countess.

“My honor is satisfied. The legal case remains.”

And with a slight bow, I turned and exited the room. I needed to get on the comm and get back to work, birthday or not.

Feel free to suggest a title.