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Intelligence

The Department of Personnel's waiting room looked a lot like that of a dentist's: black plastic chairs lined the walls with glass tables standing near them, the latter littered with outdated, dog-eared magazines. A lonely, empty water cooler stood in a corner, waiting for the day somebody from Maintenance would change its water bottle and top off its paper cup supply. A large desk occupied by a frantic-looking secretary stood at the back of the room, guarding several doors leading into the depths of the department. The walls and floors of the waiting room were made of grey Generic Surface, lending the room a drab appearance. The only thing helping people distinguish the walls from the floor was the fact that the latter was a darker shade of grey and that the walls were scarred with gouges, scorch marks, and slightly smeared with last Tuesday's vegetable casserole and other various Cafeteria "edibles". Several other people were already in the room, busying themselves by reading a book, listening to music or sleeping.

The large wooden double doors creaked open ever so slightly, letting in a slim, black haired 17-year-old boy dressed in full agent uniform. Everything he wore was black, save for an urple armband on his right arm. Gaspard De Grasse looked at the paper slip he held in his hands, reading it again and again:

Congratulations, intern. You have completed your internship with your chosen department and are ready to become an agent of the Protectors of the Plot Continuum. Please present yourself at the Department of Personnel's waiting room at 1700 hours (give or take several hours depending on your perception of time) to be partnered with a fellow agent and receive your commission.

Well, the Intelligence internship wasn't so hard: some slide shows, equipment demonstrations, and a short How Not to Kill Yourself With a Weapon video, he thought. At least I'm getting hired now; no more bouncing around Departments for me.

In fact, the intern had had quite a few problems finding a niche for himself in the organization: at first, he had applied for DoSAT, the Department of Sufficiently Advanced Technology, but he had been turned down because he only possessed a superficial knowledge of fictional technology. He had then tried to join the Department of Floaters. He managed to obtain an internship, but requested a transfer to the Department of Mary Sues immediately after a Bad Slash training mission gone wrong.

To quote his mentor at the time: "I think it was the part with the stuffed badger that did it for him. That or the floor lamp bit."

Gaspard obtained the transfer to DMS, where he thought he had found his calling. Unfortunately for him, he had failed to do the basic task that the department asked of him: to kill a Sue quickly and efficiently. He still didn't understand why he had frozen up when presented with the opportunity to finish it off. It had taken a whole lot of willpower (and the evaluator yelling in his ear: "Kill him already!") to finally slay the 'Sue, and even then he felt horrible about it. Fortunately, the evaluator had slipped a good word for him when it came time to submit the mission report: she had suggested that her charge be placed into the Department of Intelligence, where she deemed his attitude would benefit the Canon Protection Initiative much better than as an Assassin or Floater.

So there he was, returning from a particularly eventful Christmas party, smelling of smoke and caked with crusty bits of unidentifiable grey matter. He scanned the room for someone he knew. Seeing no one familiar, he wandered over to the nearest chair and collapsed on it. Like him, the other occupants of the room were interns or new recruits waiting to be assigned a partner, a Response Centre, and a department. He wearily raised his left arm to check the time on his wristwatch. *Five pm. Partnering should start soon.*

Sure enough, a crowd of agents entered the room several minutes later. Most were human, Gaspard remarked, with several elves and various aliens thrown into the mix. The secretary at the desk stood up, shuffled his papers and looked at the agents.

"All right folks, listen up. I have a list of partner names here. Can I have all agents line up here... okay. Agent pairs, when I call your names, please come up front to receive some paperwork to fill out. I need the forms back within... say... er... excuse me." The secretary walked over to a door behind his desk and cracked it open. "Hey Dave, when do the forms need to be back? ... Speak up, I can't hear you!" he shouted into the room beyond.

Gaspard thought the answer sounded a lot like: "Since when do we actually care?" but it could have been his imagination. Or not.

The secretary, now trying to avoid eye contact with the rest of the room's occupants, walked back to his desk. "Just give them back to us eventually. With that, let's get started!"

One by one, the interns were called, assigned a partner, grabbed several sheets of paper the secretary was giving out, and left the room. The crowd thinned until there were only three people left in the room: Gaspard, the secretary, and a tall, muscular African man with short black frizzy hair. The secretary glanced at the burly man. "He's all yours, Bulldog," he said, returning to his paperwork.

Gaspard rose from his seat. "Pleased to meet you, sir. I'm Gaspard De Grasse."

The spy peered down at the boy. "S'a pleasure to meet you too, Gaspard. I'm Agent Bulldog."

"Well sir, I look forward to our partnership and-"

"You haven't been assigned a partner," Bulldog replied curtly.

"Eh? How's that?" Thoughts swirled in Gaspard's head: *did I do something wrong? Is this some sort of punishment?*

"Follow me. I'll explain on our way to the Department," said Bulldog as he grabbed several sheets of paper from the secretary's table and strode towards the doors. As Gaspard followed him, Bulldog began speaking. "The reason why you don't have a partner is that on most days you're going to be sitting at a desk for ten hours a day burning your eyes out over badfic while consuming insane amounts of bleeproducts. You don't need a partner to do that. 'M not saying that pairs don't exist though; they're just extremely rare." Bulldog pulled open the doors to the waiting room, letting Gaspard walk out first. The senior agent walked down the corridor at a brisk pace, forcing the intern to half-jog to keep up with him.

"*Most* days, sir? What do you mean by that?" said Gaspard.

"Well, while some spies stay in the Sorting Room for the entirety of their career, most of them are cleared for field work. For every five days of desk duty, you have a sixth day where you are working on the Action side of DoI with one of six teams. The rotation is there to help prevent agents from going insane at their desks; though sometimes, Intel missions can prove to be even more dangerous than steady exposure to pure, unadulterated stupid."

"How so, sir?" If there was danger involved, Gaspard wanted to know all about it. He wasn't going to go charging in there without an idea of what he was going up against. But then again, how bad could it be? He wasn't going to intervene or anything...

"I once returned from the Potterverse convinced that I was a house-elf. It came from observing the effects of bad writing in the continuum. Don't ask," said Bulldog as Gaspard opened his mouth. "In fact, not being able to directly help canon often drives operatives to insanity. There's also the risk of detection by the Sue: two days ago, Agent Mendel was gored by a warrior!Sue in the Zelda continuum. It's a good thing he had a bottled fairy on him, or else we'd be attending a funeral now. Make no mistake: it's dangerous out there."

Gaspard could only manage a surprised "Oh." and plodded in silence alongside the spy.

Bulldog, noticing the intern's sudden mood change, said: "That was a little bit heavy, eh? Well, I have some tips to share with you: just keep your cool, have an escape plan, tread carefully, and you'll be coming back home sane n' sound every time. Cheer up: you'll probably have a welcoming committee down in Intel. There aren't many people who choose to become spies, so it's quite a big deal when a newbie joins. You're going to be the centre of attention for a while... well, at least that last recruit was. The fact that she is a unicorn pony kinda drew a lot of attention to her."

"I see, sir." *Still, it is slightly bizarre to have a non-anthropomorphic animal work for the PPC,* thought Gaspard. *How can they operate? Opposable thumbs are a sheer necessity for*

any sort of work. I wonder what other animals work here... Maybe there's a horse-agent. Or a bird... nah. That's impossible. Who would be desperate enough to hire a bird?

"Monty! Long time no see, buddy," boomed Bulldog, addressing a brown goose across the corridor. The bird honked and waddled over to the spy. "Gaspard, this is Agent Monty. He's also in DoI."

Gaspard took a moment to look from Bulldog to Monty, trying to come up with a rational explanation as to why the sane(ish)-looking man was chatting with a goose. It was harder than he thought. "Er... Is he... sentient, sir?"

"Well Monty, it's nice to see you here. I'd love to stay and chat but I gotta take this one down to the department. Catch you later then," said Bulldog, completely ignoring the intern's question. "Oh, and don't forget about that Bleepka you owe me!" he called after the goose.

The pair continued their stroll down the hallway, Bulldog whistling a Christmas carol, Gaspard still trying to wrap his head around what had just happened. After taking an elevator three floors down, making a wrong turn into the Department of Bad Slash ("I swear this place rearranges itself," said Bulldog), and passing by the Cafeteria, they arrived at the entrance to the Department of Intelligence. It wasn't very impressive: just a pair of plain black doors in a hallway filled with Response Centres. Gaspard never realized that these doors were the entrance to the DoI despite him living just right down the hall; his Intelligence training took place in some musty classroom another two floors down.

"Here we are," said Bulldog, pushing the door open.

The room beyond was a lot more interesting than the doors: it was about the size of a tennis court and had several doors branching off of it. The doors to the left and right were mounted with signs labelled: "Supply Depot", "Offices", and "Library". Those directly across from the entrance were inscribed with black letters spelling: "Sorting Room". Tables and chairs were placed here and there, where agents on break hung around telling stories, eating snacks, and trying to get some sleep. Their conversations stopped when Bulldog and Gaspard walked into the room. Somebody called from the back: "Hey Bulldog, is that the new guy we were promised?"

"Sure is," the African man answered. He turned to Gaspard and said, "All right then. You just wait here while I go and fetch your registration files. I'm sure these guys," he gestured to the growing crowd, "would love to get to know you." Bulldog then walked over to the doors leading to the offices and disappeared inside.

The crowd of agents gathered around Gaspard, reminding him of predatory animals circling a potential kill. The agent that cracked open the Sorting Room doors yelling: "Hey guys, the new meat is here!" didn't help either. The intern's nervousness must have shown, as a portly blond Caucasian man spoke up: "Relax, rookie. We're not going to eat you or anything. You're

going into Dol, right?”

“Yessir,” Gaspard replied, standing straight up and looking dead ahead.

“It’s nice to know that. We’re understaffed, just like all other departments, but it’s nice to actually see someone join Intel for once. About a fifth of the people in there,” the agent pointed to the Sorting Room, “are Floaters on Intel duty. So, what’s your name?”

“De Grasse, sir. Gaspard De Grasse.”

“Oh, pleased to meet ‘cha. I’m Angus MacFarlane, but you can just call me Gus. Where are you from?”

“Montreal, World One, sir.”

“Hey, nice to see another guy from World One. How’s New York this time of the year? ... Don’t know? ... Ah well. I come from there, y’see. Anyways, tell us a bit ‘bout yourself. What ‘verses are you going to patrol? Go on now, don’t be shy.”

“Yessir. I am trained to work in the Inheritance, Zelda, Metroid, StarCraft, and Portalverses, sir. In a pinch, I can also investigate Harry Potter and Redwall fics, but I’d need to re-read each series to be sure of my judgements.” Gaspard paused, and added, “Sir.”

Angus facepalmed. “Stop calling me ‘sir’. We’re all equals here, so loosen up a bit will ya? So you were saying you liked StarCraft, hm? Oh, I think I heard about you! You were that poor guy who tried to don a CMC-400! Did it hurt a lot?”

“Yes, that’s me,” said Gaspard weakly. “In all honesty sir, it did hurt quite a lot, even with the suit’s automated morphine injections. I really should have foreseen the complications involving the use of an anatomically impossible suit of armour. It’s just so obvious, when I think about it: the shoulders are too far apart and the suit’s elbow-joints just snap your forearms in two when they bend.”

“...crud.”

There was an awkward pause in the conversation. There wasn’t really anything much to say after someone shared a personal story of painful-sounding unintentional self-injury.

Gus, finally cleared his throat and said: “Well then... I’m Gus, an’ I’ve been working here for about three years now. I specialize in the Discworld verse, but my five-year-old daughter,” he pulled a battered photograph from his pocket, “recently got me into My Little Pony G4. Don’t judge me, bro.”

Gaspard looked at the photograph. A young girl with curly blond hair and brown eyes stared back at him. “Very cute, sir. What’s her name?”

The senior agent pocketed the picture. “Sophie. She came with me when I ended up in

HQ. You wouldn't believe the paperwork necessary to bring a dependant here... Let alone partially erasing traces of her from World One. It'll only get more complicated if she decides to lead a normal life instead of joining the PPC."

"When *you* ended up in Headquarters, sir? What about Mrs. MacFarlane?"

Angus sighed. "No Mrs. MacFarlane. She died a few years back, right before I joined this here bunch of misfits. It's been hard without her but at least I still have Sophie. She's happy here with all of the different kids she gets to meet, the stories I can tell her, and the places I can take her... I'm really just happy for her. The job might be hard and nerve-wracking, the pay is nonexistent especially for you class thirteen newbies, but I wouldn't be anywhere else in the universe."

"I'm glad things worked out for you, sir."

"Thanks, I-" Gus looked at Gaspard. "You're never going to stop calling me 'sir', are you?"

"No sir."

The crowd laughed and someone behind Gaspard gave him a friendly pat on the back. "Don't worry, you'll fit right in anyway. Welcome to Intel, man." The other agents echoed the greeting, introducing themselves at the same time.

For the next ten minutes, Gaspard listened to the agents' introductions and chatted a bit with the group. They talked about their fandoms, the badfic they encountered, notorious Sues, a misplaced glose flying manatee encountered in a particularly awful Portalfic, and eventually the Cafeteria.

"Oh, don't get me started on the Cafeteria," Gaspard said. "See this grey stuff on my shirt? Living food. The monstrosity came out of the trays at the Christmas party. Darn thing hopped out of its container and started mugging people, asking for their wallets. I don't trust the Cafeteria one bit. They're breeding stuff in there, I swear..."

"The Cafeteria isn't all bad, y'know. There's an Enderman from Minecraft working in there," said an agent somewhere to Gaspard's right. "You know how stuff that Endermen touch become perfect cubes, right? I asked for a chocolate bar and he handed me a cubic metre of the stuff for only two dollars. Over one tonne of chocolate, just for me."

An agent laughed in the background and said: "Sure, you got a tonne of chocolate, Jon, but you needed five other people and a hand trolley to carry your block back to your RC."

Before long, Bulldog came back holding a manila folder. "Here you are, Gaspard. Enclosed is your commission, papers to fill out, and most importantly," Bulldog pulled a circular patch of fabric from the folder and handed it to Gaspard, "Your flash patch."

With almost exaggerated care, Gaspard tugged off his urple armband, placed it in his shirt pocket, and took the flash patch. This was the moment he had been waiting for. He gazed at the black palm-sized circle bearing the sage frond insignia for a second, and then affixed it to a Velcro patch on his left shoulder. An agent at last. "Thank you, sir."

"No problem," said Bulldog, checking his watch. "It's 17:35-ish now. Break time is over!"

The crowd around the newly-minted spy thinned, each agent saying something to the effect of "See you around!" as they marched back to the Sorting Room.

Bulldog turned to Gaspard. "Come to think of it, you haven't been issued your equipment yet, have you? Well, you can't go out in the field without an RA or a Neuralyzer, so let's swing by the Depot to grab your stuff."

Five minutes later

"These pouches are actually quite nice," said Gaspard as he and Bulldog stepped out of the Depot. He had been given a belt with an Adventure Pouch from the Zeldaverse to stow his equipment in: enough room to fit his Remote Activator, Neuralyzer, DORKS, notepad, and whatever might prove useful later on. "Made out of genuine leather, too."

"I'm sure they are," replied Bulldog distractedly as he leafed through some of Gaspard's registration papers. He suddenly stopped and pulled one out of the folder. "Hm. You've been placed in Green team. This means that you've got Action duty today." The spy walked towards the Sorting Room at a brisk pace. "Follow me. I remember that there is a Zelda fic that needs investigation today and Green is stretched almost to its limits. According to your papers, you're qualified for service in this 'verse, so you're going in."

Gaspard quickly caught up to Bulldog. "Now, sir? Isn't this a little too early? I mean, I just came here, so don't I get some sort of orientation or tutorial run or something..."

Bulldog opened the doors to the Sorting Room. "You did the internship and received basic training, so I can't see why you shouldn't go."

Gaspard paused at the entrance and looked at the senior agent. "Sir, all I got was a demonstration of the RA, the DORKS, and the Neuralyzer, a five minute lecture on how to gather intelligence, a 'good luck' from the instructor, had a sword and a bow thrust into my hands, and shown a video on how not to kill myself with them."

Bulldog shrugged and pushed the door open even wider.

"Okay then," sighed Gaspard as he stepped into the room. *I should be thankful I got any training at all. I hear some poor souls are simply thrust into the field with nothing at all.*

The Sorting Room was a spectacular sight: a stadium-sized space, filled with perfectly

straight rows of desks where agents sat in front of computer monitors, poring over pages after pages of writing. Here and there, agents clustered around a monitor, discussing the story on the screen amongst them. Every now and then one of them would get up to stretch his or her legs, pester one of their friends, and maybe go and get some refreshments from vending machines that stood along the walls.

The rows of desks stretched from wall to wall and were interrupted only by narrow walkways. On the floor, several faded painted lines indicated the age rating of the files to be found in the rows. There seemed to be no end to them: Gaspard even noticed stairs leading to a second floor near where he stood.

A spy suddenly rose from his chair clutching his hair and screamed at the top of his lungs: "THE STUPID! IT BURNS!"

He ran off to the exit, gibbering insanities all the while. The man sprinted past Bulldog and Gaspard, calling for somebody, please somebody give him Bleepin or something and ohgawdtheawfulnessitburnssobad. An agent nearby called out: "I got him," as she donned a clawshot before chasing after the man.

"Somehow, this fills me with confidence and motivation," said Gaspard.

"That's rule number one: always keep Bleepin handy, lest your brain explodes," said Bulldog, striding across the centre lane. Several spies looked up from their work to glance at the newcomer, talking among themselves. As they stared, Gaspard wished he could turn invisible.

When they were halfway down the lane, Bulldog stopped and gestured down a row on his right. "See that? That's your spot right there." He pointed at an empty station sandwiched between another two workspaces, one surrounded by neat piles of books, the other littered with empty pizza boxes, greasy old rags, a toolkit, and a disassembled radio. Both stations were unoccupied, their owners presumably on Action duty. The only things on the junior spy's workstation were a battered keyboard and an equally abused computer monitor upon which were taped several scorched drawings of the Sub Rosa with obscene captions.

Gaspard made a mental note to ask for a new computer as soon as he was back from his mission. The computer was scary, in its own weird way.

The duo continued their walk. Bulldog led Gaspard all the way across the room to a set of frosted glass doors labeled "Action Division". A smaller, removable sign below read: "Current investigation team: Green". Gaspard was once again awed by the sight beyond the doors: the room he was in was just as large as the Sorting Room but instead of being filled by desks, a maze-like mass of generic grey office cubicles occupied the space. To Gaspard's right, a counter run by a sleepy hylan woman dispensed weapons and gear to spies who were going out into the field. To his left, an office with large glass windows was occupied by a group of agents who were all watching a video feed with concern. Suddenly, the feed blacked out and one of the agents scrambled towards a portal generator, mashing the buttons with haste, and

threw himself into the portal as soon as it opened.

“What are they doing, sir? I thought Intel avoided rushing into ‘fics like that,” asked Gaspard, gesturing towards the office.

“That’s our search-and-rescue crew. They’re agents on loan from the DIA’s Special Response unit,” explained Bulldog. “We got them shortly after we noticed a growing trend of spies being stranded or incapacitated in the field and not having a partner to help them out. All of ‘em said it was caused by the Ironic Overpower. Dangerous thing, that... Anyways, all you have to do is call for help using the earpiece you’ve been issued– what, you don’t have one? Check your pouch, it should be in there. Ah, you have it? Good. Now stick it in your ear. So as I was saying, just give SR a holler and they’ll be there to help you out.”

Oh, good. At least I can call for help, thought Gaspard. *Well, that makes me feel somewhat more comfortable.*

“So, let’s go and find your cubicle. It will be your base of operations for whenever you will be working in Action: you’ll type reports in it, wait for new missions there, and if you’re especially lucky, chat with the other agents that share the cubicle,” said Bulldog, leading Gaspard towards the entrance to the maze of cubicles. A handwritten note hung on a cubicle wall at head height, reading: *“Abandon all hope, all ye who enter here”*.

The pair walked on, navigating the twisted corridors formed by the cubicle walls. From what Gaspard could see, the cubicles were originally intended to be organized in neat rows. As time went by, more cubicles were added to the room, blocking off the original pathways and forming a convoluted maze instead. Handwritten signs hanging at eye level gave nicknames such as “Lothlórien Street”, “Highway 17”, and “Ponyville Plaza” to the pathways. Bulldog finally turned into a small alleyway labelled “Stupidity Lane”, counting down cubicle numbers as he walked on. “3425... 876... 72π... 2142... Ah, here we go. Cubicle number 5294. Go on in.”

Gaspard stepped into the cubicle before him. A Console and portal generator occupied the entire far wall of the cubicle, the former occupied by an Arabic man browsing a fic on the console screen. A table was pushed up against the left wall, the large chest used as a bench stowed underneath it. The right wall harboured a makeshift bed upon which the man whom Gaspard recognized as Angus was snoring away, facing away from the cubicle’s entrance. Bulldog cleared his throat and said: “Nasir, here is Agent De Grasse. He’ll be part of this cubicle’s team now.”

Nasir swiveled around on the mini-fridge he was using as a seat, rubbing his eyes. He seemed to be in his mid-twenties, with short black hair and a pair of glasses perched on the end of his nose. A moustache sat on his upper lip, just as bushy as the eyebrows above his brown eyes. Without a word, the Arab man stood up, closed the gap between him and Gaspard with two large steps, and peered down at the junior spy. He stood there, as still and expressionless as a rock before giving a quick nod and extending his hand to Gaspard. He shook the hand with a: “Pleased to meet you, sir.” and waited for a response. Nasir nodded again but remained silent

and returned to his seat in front of the Console, turning his attention to the screen once again.

“Did I do something wrong, sir?” asked Gaspard to Bulldog.

The senior agent chuckled and took a step towards the doorway. “Naw, he’s always like that. He only talks when he absolutely needs to. Don’t worry about it. Anyways, this is where I leave you. Your mission is waiting for you, and I’d hate to get between you and your first assignment. Oh, before I forget, here are your papers. Make sure to have them filled out,” Bulldog said as he deposited the manila folder on the table. Gaspard wondered if he really meant it. “Good luck out there, Gaspard. I’m sure you’ll do just fine.” And with that, the spy stepped out of the cubicle.

Gaspard stood there for several seconds, unsure of what to do next. He had always worked with a partner (albeit temporarily), and the prospect of going into a fic with no backup was intimidating. It was Nasir who finally pulled the agent out of his reverie with a quiet clearing of his throat. The man had prepared the fic coordinates and disguise while Bulldog had been talking to Gaspard, and was now offering him a halberd and a stapled document.

“Oh, thank you sir,” said Gaspard, accepting the weapon and papers. He skimmed quickly through the first page of the stack. “This is the transcript, right? Thank you very much, sir. Okay, what do we have here... Zeldafic set in Twilight Princess. Recommended disguise: Castle Town guard. Oh, that’s what the halberd is for? Thanks again, sir. Fic sent to Action because SPaG looked okay... What kind of reasoning is that? You have to look at the story and characters, not just the spelling...” Gaspard browsed through the document for another few seconds, then stowed the transcript into his Adventure Pouch. “All right, then. Let’s do this.”

Nasir nodded and pressed a button on the Console. A blue-edged portal appeared to the right of the machine, leading into the Generic Grey pre-fic world. Holding the halberd tightly, Gaspard stepped into the greyness, his clothes and appearance quickly morphing into that of a Guard, complete with chain mail and armour. He groped his lower back to ensure that his Pouch was still hanging from his belt and turned around just in time to see Nasir wave him goodbye as he closed the portal.

Gaspard took a deep breath to steady his nerves and looked into the distance as the world was slowly coming into focus. What dangers awaited him in this version of the Zeldaverse? Was he going to go insane? Would the Sue see him? How could he escape? Come to think of it, how do you deal with having your cover blown? Mass neuralyzation? Call for backup? If he screwed up, he didn’t know what department would want him. Janitorial, maybe. Or the Cafeteria. At any rate, he would never live it down.

Despite his worrying he still had a job to do, and he wasn’t going to shirk away from the Duty. If there were any problems, he’d deal with them when they’ll appear.

And with that, he cleared his mind and leaned on his halberd, patiently waiting for the fic

to start.