

I had a theory about the vomit.

«No.» Josefeen shook her head. «*It had nothing to do with morality or your sense of honor.*» My thoughts and feelings had been intertwined with the Canon's, and, as far as Josefeen could tell, I simply preempted him due to my comparative lack of experience with vertigo and more generally being shitfaced.

«*You aren't as used to having your brain scrambled as he is.*»

I'd yanked out his memories, just pulled them out like weeds. Technically, they were still there, but I rendered them inaccessible. Hopefully they'd emerge only in fragments or in dreams. This was what Josefeen was taught at the psionic academy, and our minds were still linked, so for the moment, at least, it all made sense.

«*Partial mind-wipes are often accompanied with anxiety, paranoia, dizziness, and a general sense of unease.*»

Partial? Did that mean there was such a thing as a *non-partial* mind-wipe?

Josefeen's eyebrow arched ever so slightly. «*We call it brain-rape and skull-fucking for a reason.*»

"Is he going to be okay?" I asked, looking at the Canon, snoring softly in my gravbed.

«*I don't know,*» she silently replied.

"You don't know?"

«*We literally did psychic brain surgery, Gus, so, yeah, I don't know what he's going to be like when he wakes up.*»

Again, I felt sick to my stomach. I didn't want this. But I'd had no choice.

We couldn't let him go walking around with the knowledge that an Eye of God was in the Imperial Navy's possession. Fortunately, his desire to touch it as well as his trust in me led him to seek my favor — me of all people — but it was a risk I couldn't take. If what I'd done to his brain over the past few hours was so brutal as to change his entire personality, what might have happened if I'd allowed him to touch the psi orb?

«*It would have fried him, and he would have gone mad... even more mad than he already is, which, unfortunately, is saying something.*»

“I’ll be fine,” the Canon mumbled. “I’m fine.” He reached up his hands and rubbed his eyes. “Where am I?” he asked, blinking, and then he stared at me.

“Do I know you?”

“Yes.” I tried to smile.

“Captain Plankwell is a difficult man to drink under the table, Your Grace,” Josefeen said, “but we were delighted you tried.”

“Oh....” he winced. “Son, unless you have a cast iron liver, I would strongly recommend you go find a medical clinic and get your blood filtered.”

“Your Grace, can you walk?” Josefeen asked.

“Of course, I can walk.”

He could, although not terribly well. I winced as he left my quarters, Josefeen promising to escort him to the nearest shuttle and arrange for his safe conduct back to Jewell. “And by the way, Captain,” she said on the way out, “happy birthday.”

I glanced at the clock. “03:25” glared back at me. I stripped — mostly, anyway — and practically fell into bed.

<Beep> <Beep> <Beep>

My eyes snapped open, and as I glanced at the clock — it was already zero-six-hundred — there was the briefest flash I’d been in a dream. “You’re going to have to wait,” someone was saying. Nizlich? But it was already gone, evaporating so fast I couldn’t hold onto any other details. The bed’s built-in alarm clock, meanwhile, was giving me a headache, or perhaps I’d already had one while I’d been sleeping. I stabbed at the cancel button with my finger but somehow missed it, not once but twice, and finally resorted to yelling — “Jacky! Cancel alarm!” — adding another layer of pain to my apparent hangover.

Blessed silence ensued, and as I lay there, I wondered why I’d stripped off only the bottom half of my uniform. I picked at the little holes where the stunner’s barbs had hit me. Next time I’d spring for the mendware option. It could self-repair little things like this. Bullet holes too, although I supposed if I was perforated with bullets, the long-term condition of my uniform would be the least of my worries.

As I forced myself to get up, impressions of the previous evening still scampered through my consciousness. What Josefeen had called the *ways of the succubus* basically amounted to taking advantage of an unconscious victim. Watching her take control of the situation and seeing how little his mind meant to her, I realized the rumors I'd heard about NavInt were based more on truth than fiction. Crossing them would no doubt be, at best, career suicide. I'd apparently been given some latitude due to my recent activation, but I could imagine that might not last much longer, particularly if I gave them any resistance or became troublesome.

An image of the Canon giving a little baggie of snacks to Lt. Shepherd flashed to mind.

I sighed and pulled up my schedule and message queue.

There was a priority text from Martinsen, my chief engineer: "Are we still committed to launching in two days?" And my first meeting of the day was with Lt. Francine Sidara, ship's counsel. After that, I wanted to do a review of our transferred spacers and decide the extent of their administrative punishment. But first I had to deal with this blinking item, a priority voice message from Nizlich.

I tapped it.

"Sir, I'm sorry if there's been some misunderstanding on my part, but there's a team here from General Products. They insist they're authorized to replace the Exploration Pod, but sir, if I let them go ahead, this will obviously conflict with our departure timetable. Swapping pods takes considerable time. Again, sir, I'm sorry if there's been a mistake on my part, but I need you to tell me what you want done."

Oh, right. The damn pod.

And having to meet with the ship's lawyer wasn't exactly the birthday present I'd been hoping for. No doubt, there would be some sort of inquest relating to the interdiction. Sometimes you ride the bureaucracy wave, and sometimes you get swept beneath it.

"Jacky, record for Nizlich."

I took a moment to order my thoughts. Nope, I was going to need some painkillers and possibly a few choice stimulants. But then, of course, I'd have to explain myself to Dr. Willin.

No thanks.

“Commander, I apologize for the confusion. Give GP whatever they need to get started, and file an amended departure plan. I half-expected GP not to be ready to start, and we could have scored a non-compliance on the contract. But they are here, and we still need the pod. Make the amendment, match the expected replacement time for the pod, and give them full expedited access. Accelerate anything remaining that can be expedited while in dock. We are the Navy, and we can change our minds when we *frelling* feel like it. Plankwell out.”

I went back to bed and closed my eyes, wondering about the derring-do and exploits of all the fictional Navy Captains I’d seen on the three-vee growing up, all of that ripping of shirts and wooing of local ladies. None of those shows ever depicted the hours spent filling out forms, approvals, and the various minutiae of the administrative side of a captain’s life, like when you make impulsive decisions that need to be walked back later to keep even great chaos from forming. I half wanted a Zhodani deep strike to occur so that I would have a better reason to pull in the ropes and power off into the dark.

Be careful what you wish for, a soft voice whispered somewhere within my mind.

«Josefeen, is that you?»

But there was no response. I’d been dozing. It was a dream. Nothing more.

I pulled myself up and stumbled towards the fresher, hoping a shower would get me going. Time to get a new day started.

And it’s my birthday! Joy!

In the shower, I couldn’t help but wonder at what point even my internal thoughts had turned sarcastic.

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“Captain,” Lt. Sidara said as she entered. *Don’t salute. He doesn’t like salutes.*

“Have a seat.” I motioned toward the chair Reggie had been in when I more or less took psionic scissors to his brain.

“There are a few items on the agenda,” she said, sitting, “so what would you like to tackle first?”

An image of me flashed through her mind: me and the Snuka grappling in the Marine Pod's gym. That and the image of me standing in front of her, all flushed and sweaty, had been ping-ponging back and forth between her ears the previous night while she'd stayed up late prepping for this meeting. Likewise, she'd kept replaying a soundbite of me telling her to make an appointment through normal channels. That whole bit about how I would "be sure to give your concern the appropriate attention at the appropriate time" struck her as particularly noteworthy, given that I had just declared Martial Law a few hours previously. But then there was my final dismount: "As you were, unless you'd like to see me pummeled some more." *Rash yet self-deprecating*, she'd written in her notes, wondering how that combination might manifest in front of the County's Magisterial Court.

"The Magisterial Court," I answered, taking in her thoughts — she was a particularly loud thinker. "That one probably takes precedence."

She nodded, thinking, *at least we're on the same page*.

"The local JAG office referred me to a High Court attorney, someone familiar with County procedure. His name is Bilem Faulk, and he's agreed to meet with us but only in person. He's in Silver City. Planetary airspace regulations prohibit us going directly, except with a special invitation from the Countess herself, which brings us to item number two," she said, handing me a piece of paper. On it were written the words, "Can I gracefully get out of the summons?" She wrote the question on actual paper because paper was harder to hack, and my question was clearly sensitive enough for me to encrypt it.

"Aside from being the ship's legal counsel," she continued, "I'm also the acting protocol officer. So to correct your terminology, it's not a summons; it's clearly an invitation, and so yes, you can say no. As for the graceful part, that's more interesting, but the question I would first ask is, why do you want to?"

"Well, for one, I am not about to expose myself to civilian authority on the planet again. Will this attorney meet with us at the starport or the Naval Base?"

"I'll check." She made a note on her legal slate.

"There's another reason," I said. "A few more, actually."

"Go ahead."

“Each time I’ve been invited to meet the local nobility, I’ve been saddled with... uh... local issues.

Reviewing a tech replica of my ancestor, for example, or escorting a scion to a business meeting because said scion was misbehaving.”

“Oh?”

“I believe the former incident made the news.”

“I see,” she said, writing the words *Prior News*, which I knew not because I could see the surface of her slate but rather because I could see the words in her mind as she wrote them. She’d been watching and reading all the news broadcasts about the interdiction and the events leading up to it, but she hadn’t bothered looking at anything that happened earlier, so she didn’t really know what I was talking about.

“I had to apologize to said scion,” I explained, “for perceived harm done by said tech replica to prevent the local admiralty from losing face.” My reception seemed very long ago, even though it’d only been what... four days? “Then there’s the whole matter of my being the target of potshots by someone in the civilian authority operating with or without the knowledge of said local nobility.”

“Potshots?”

Cool it, Gus. Cool it.

“I don’t know what to call it. All I know is that I don’t place much faith in the current nobles to act in a manner that befits a healthy exchange between the Imperial Navy and the Emperor’s lieges.”

I was perhaps being a little full of myself on this point. But, in my mind, at least, my oath of duty to the Emperor put me on par with the nobles, even if my own person did not warrant the same. I had been disrespected a number of times, and it was wearying. Duty, however, did not care how tired you were, only that the job got done.

“Review for me what this invitation is again,” I continued, “and the possible repercussions for declining, accepting grudgingly, accepting gracefully, and accepting but accompanied by full or partial honor and/or body guards?”

“It’s an invitation to an informal sit-down with the Countess. There will no doubt be witnesses, but the press is not invited, so you’ll be able to have *as private* a conversation with Helena Stavelot as one is ever

likely to have. Most importantly, it means she wants to talk to you, which is a good thing. At least, Mr. Faulk thought so.

“The repercussions for declining is you lose whatever favor you might have gained had you accepted her invitation. Accepting grudgingly is right out. If we were in a position to threaten the Countess, then perhaps, but I don’t see that we are, so if you accept, it should most definitely be done gracefully.

“As for being attended by a military guard, you’d have to get permission. Certainly, given what happened with the HPSS, it might be warranted *if* you were going to Heron. But Silver City is outside the jurisdiction of the HPSS. And their security, from what I understand, is extremely tight, so tight *I’m* even allowed to accompany you. The invitation is for you alone, and there’s no time to file a request for a plus one. Best case scenario is they let me wait for you in the shuttle while you get me a guest pass at the palace, so we can go together to Mr. Faulk’s office. But if you’d prefer I try to arrange a meeting at the starport, I’ll do that.

“Whatever you decide, sir, you need to decide ASAP, as Seventeas will start in around three and a half hours.”

This is what happened when I let my schedule get in front of me.

“Acknowledge the personal invitation gracefully and with thanks, and file a flight plan. We’ll use one of our shuttles, and you will be on board, so if we manage to get a meeting with Mr. Faulk, we’ll take it.”

I considered my workday uniform and sighed. I was going to have to break out the other dress uniform I had on hand. If I needed to accept gracefully, an underhanded snub by dressing down would not work in my favor.

“Jackie, message to Lt. Abbonette: Dress uniform and report to Lt. Sidara for a trip down to Silver City. Jackie, send message. Anything else, Lieutenant?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“What?”

“Shattered windows.”

“Shattered windows?”

“Due to some sonic booms,” she said.

Ah. The percussion at the stadium. No doubt, the locals were plenty peeved.

“We’ll discuss it on the way down.”

“Aye aye, sir,” she said, then turned and left, taking that as a dismissal.

“Jackie, message to Commander Nizlich: I am afraid duty takes me down to the surface once again, an invitation from the Countess. Proceed as per usual operating stance. Jackie, send message. Jackie, message to the head of security: Can you get someone to my quarters with some low profile body armor for me suitable for a possibly contested diplomatic visit? Time is of the essence. Jackie, send message.”

I smiled at the last one. Never stop testing the crew. Maybe they had something that would be of use if things took a turn for the worse. Alternatively, I could go in with my psionic guns blazing.

I thought about the psi boosters that had formerly been in my not-so-secret stash. Did I dare?

«Josafeen? Should I re-boost for this visit?»

But there was no reply. The booster’s effect was already waning. I used my wristcom to call her.

“Sir, I just received your message.”

“Do you think, uh...” — the ship’s computer was no doubt recording the call. I could switch to encrypted mode, but that would just raise Blodder’s curiosity, and Nizlich did say she was good at her job — “do you think maybe we should bring that thing the Admiral was so interested in, just in case?”

“I’ll be sure to bring it, sir,” she replied after a moment’s hesitation. “I’ll bring them both.”

Both? Oh. She didn’t know if I was talking about the booster or the orb. “Very good, Lieutenant,” I said and closed the connection. I still wasn’t sure what the psi orb was or what it could do, but it was usually better to have something you didn’t need than to need something you didn’t have.

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“SCTC to IN Launch. You’re authenticated and cleared to land at Iota Eight. Please turn over your flight controls.”

“Acknowledged,” Sublieutenant Jimenez replied, turning the flight console over to Silver City Traffic Control. In her mind, however, she wasn’t too happy about them not trusting her to land.

How I knew all this from the back seat had to do with the *vitamin injection* Josefeen had given me. The moment the psi-enhancer hit me, I could sense everything Jimenez was hearing, seeing, and even thinking and feeling, all despite the fact she was outside my field of view. Hence, I felt her hands drop to her sides, and I could see through her own eyes as the airborne city slowly expanded from a small dot to overfilling the cockpit's window, its multitudinous towers and domes illuminated by floodlights and gleaming against the night sky.

Lt. Sidara, of course, thought it strange her Captain was staring off into space, and injecting his vitamins rather than taking them orally was even weirder, but she understood she was too low in the pecking order to question such things. In any case, she was more concerned about the potential meeting with Mr. Faulk as well as the numerous calls the Naval Base had received from lawyers as well as other annoying individuals threatening to sue the Navy over damages caused by the recent percussion incident. The Base helpfully forwarded these messages to the Jaqueline, suggesting settlements be reached on behalf of the 213th Fleet, "or else it could cause the Navy bad publicity."

I instructed her to send the Naval Form "Redress of Collateral Damages, Non-Combat, to Aligned Noncombatant" and to make sure we noted the exact timeframe of the low-altitude sonic booms, as there was a subsection requiring the applicant to upload proof said damage occurred within the stated time frame give or take five seconds.

That's devious, she thought to herself but said nothing.

"We'll pay the damages out of the Captain's discretionary budget for goodwill and public relations," I told her. "Also forward notices to local building inspectors of claims paid. If the windows can't take a little boom, then I suspect shenanigans. Fight bureaucracy with bureaucracy, I say!"

"Aye aye, sir."

Prior to departure, she had me sign a form, letting the locals know I was bringing two assistants and requesting the appropriate number of guest passes, but she held out little hope of the request being fulfilled on such short notice. Jewell was known for its pollution and its bureaucracy, and it was arguable which of the two was more intractable. So it came as a surprise when, as we landed, Lt. Sidara looked up, eyes gleaming. Her skullcomp had just informed her that the additional guest passes had been approved.

I get to go into the Imperial Palace? And meet the Countess? Wait until I tell Mom and Dad!

“Sir,” she said, “I just received word...”

“About the guest passes?”

“Yes.” *How did he know?*

“I had a feeling,” I said. They must have realized it was my birthday and didn’t want to start off on the wrong foot by not letting me bring my two aides.

«I love birthday parties,» Josefeen sent with a smirk, already knowing how *I* felt about them, particularly my own.

We soon landed, and as we filed out, I again noticed how stiff turning and bending had become with this bulletproof vest under my uniform. Although made of lightweight, interlaced ceramic links, the vest was still bulky enough to make my tailored dress jacket tighter than usual. It was a small price to pay for personal safety, however, particularly since I still didn’t know if the attack in Heron was a random event or part of a larger campaign.

Once we stepped onto the landing pad, a security robot fitted us with visitor collars and then directed us toward the turboporters. Oddly enough, I had fewer worries about the metal collars and robots than I’d have had if Silver City’s security was being handled by humans. Did this mean I had more faith in automated security? It was something to ponder.

“Lt. Sidara, contact Mr. Faulk and see if he’s available on short notice. Let him know we’ve been invited to meet with the Countess and would be happy to meet with him before or after our appointment.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

While Sidara was checking in with Faulk’s office, I sent a quick message to Agidda: “Just landed in Silver City for Seventeas. If you’re here, let me know if you’d like to meet.”

Never pass on allies in the house of your antagonist.

The thought stopped me short. Did I really consider Countess Helena Stavelot my antagonist? An impediment, perhaps, but antagonist was one step from opponent and two steps from enemy. She was the representative of the Emperor, and as such, she deserved respect. That was why I was twisting through all these silly hoops.

Speaking of hoops, I reviewed the message from Kaz. I doubted I'd be in any position to help her, but if I was offered a boon for my birthday, well, that would be a useful thing to do with it.

«You'd waste a noble favor on a piece of ass?» Despite being merely in my head, the tenor of Josefeen's voice carried a certain tartness.

«There's noble favors, and then there's noble favors with obligations. I would rather firm up someone who did right by me than give this Countess another hardpoint to tug on.»

I immediately regretted my ill-phrasing as Josefeen's imagination began conjuring censor-worthy images to go along with my statement.

"Sir," Sidara said, turning toward me, "Mr. Faulk says we can come in now."

Rescued by the lawyer.

Feel free to suggest a title.