

After Bim departed in disgrace, both Cmdr. Nizlich and Dr. Willin remained conspicuously silent. While I was certainly within my rights as Captain to tell him to get off my ship, from their point of view, it was apparent they viewed his dismissal as somewhat abrupt and perhaps even vindictive. Yes, there would now be an extended delay in leaving port, but as he'd described it, this was largely unavoidable. In any case, my psi-curtain was closed, so I couldn't sense exactly what they were thinking, but their silence spoke volumes.

"Commander. Doctor," I said, getting up from the table. "I apologize for bringing a cloud over the celebrations. Please continue to enjoy the goodwill of the crew. I am going to make a circuit of the room to show the flag, as it were, before retiring. It has been a very long day. Doctor, I'll be making an appointment tomorrow as per your request. Until then."

I nodded to Stefani and then made my way toward the nearest crowd of spacers. Soon, one of them noticed their captain's approach, and after saying something to the others, the rest quickly turned toward me, nervous smiles all around, as none of them knew me beyond the fact that I was their new captain and a Plankwell to boot.

"Sir," one said, "happy birthday." Oh, if only it were.

"Thank you. It's an honor to be celebrated by you all."

I pretended to smile and stuck out my hand, letting each of them introduce themselves. This, in turn, brought more, the groups on either side of us seeing their new CO shaking the hands of officers and enlisted alike, accepting their well-wishes proffered as a matter of courtesy. Some tried particularly hard to ingratiate themselves, and I could sense the differences in temperament between them without opening my curtain.

"Ensign Dugek, sir. It's a true honor to have a Plankwell descended from Olav as my Commanding Officer, and I very much look forward to serving with you."

I maintained my fake smile and moved on, not wanting to explain how I really felt about Olav. And although I was curious if any of these people were psions, I didn't dare open my curtain and risk one of them finding out I was one too. In any case, I was already reeling with what I'd already learned about certain other people and so didn't relish the idea of things getting even more complicated. Likewise, there were so many

hands to shake that I doubted I'd remember more than a few of their names. Under such circumstances, what good would it have been to open wide and learn all of their innermost secrets? No way my brain could ever retain it all. Their names alone were beyond my capacity.

Hence, even with my curtain pulled tightly over my — my psionic eye, essentially — blindfolding me to whatever I might have gleaned as I moved further into the crowd, it was all essentially a blur of faces. My initial intention had been to shake only a few hands and then nod to the rest, but once it started, everyone had their hand out like a feeding frenzy, and I didn't want to be rude, so in this way, I slowly made my way around the perimeter of the bay, shaking hands and taking in the sights of my crew's laughter and dancing, people yelling to each other over the general din, which, of course, only made things even louder.

"Petty Officer Meminaa," one guy said, drawing in close to me, almost eyeball-to-eyeball, and holding my hand for a bit longer than was normal. Then it was on to the next.

Finally, I spotted the iris valve through which I'd entered, and rather than continuing around the main hanger, I took the opportunity to duck into the corridor at which point I stopped shaking hands and just nodded and waved, walking past a long line at the same fresher outside which I'd dressed down Spooky only three days ago. She'd mentioned some maintenance problem, something minor, and I'd chewed her out in front of Stef. Where the heck was Shish anyway?

Oh. Right in front of me.

"Happy Birthday, Combo."

"Don't you start, Guber." She knew how I felt about birthdays.

I pulled her over to the side of the corridor to get out of the way of the line to the head.

"Walk with me. I have some things to ask you." Having another officer walking with me put me more in the persona of doing work, so the crew naturally gave us space as we headed toward the spinal transport tube. Unfortunately, there was a substantial line outside the pod's exit, and with only a few capsules running back and forth, it was sure to be slow-moving.

With the way back to my quarters effectively blocked, I felt a sudden stiffness creep into my neck, and Spooky made one of her enigmatic half-smirks.

“Phoenix Nest¹ is flight personnel only,” she said. “As an ex-pilot, you’d be welcome provided you don’t pull rank.”

Phoenix Nest? That had to be the pilots’ lounge. Every ship that carried fighter squadrons had one. And yes, pulling rank while blowing off steam was definitely frowned upon, but it was a culture to which I was well accustomed. As for her calling me an *ex-pilot*, it was the first time anyone had referred to me that way, and it stung perhaps a bit more than it should have.

“Lead the way.”

As we headed back the way we came, I asked her, “Are they always like this? The crew I mean?”

“Could you be less specific?”

I glared.

“So... enthusiastic. We were never this chuffed for a new captain, and yes, I know there was a war on.”

“Oh, you poor dear. Did somebody give you an ass-hickey?”

“Look, I more or less expect this from the public, but this crew is something else.” Walking by several of them, I realized that what I was saying could be construed as critical. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate the enthusiasm, but... what was the last captain like?”

That was a dangerous question, but if I couldn’t ask Spooky, who could I ask? I half-expected she’d tell me to quit being a baby and just accept it as my due, being that I was of the high and mighty Plankwell clan, after all. But she was also aware of my feelings about Olav, who I’d once told her was my least favorite family member.

By now the corridor was too crowded for her to give me an honest answer, but we were already at the entrance of the Phoenix Nest, so we went inside. An autoserve was manning the bar along with a wiry, red-haired guy who looked like he might be blitzed from the way he was laughing with the people across the counter.

The place was worn but clean, and all around the bulkhead ran a narrow shelf with empty bottles. As per regs, each was secured by a polymer band in case of loss of gravity or sudden maneuvers. My best guess was

¹ Named in honor of Michael Cule’s zine in *Ever & Anon*.

they were souvenirs of every port the ship had visited. Not every pilots' cantina had a row of bottles, but pretty much every ship I'd ever served on had a similar tradition of one sort or another.

As I surveyed the space, Spooky pointed out a gap on the starboard shelf, not far from the door.

"Two of them were apparently wedged in a bit tightly; too close to each other. When we came under fire and the ship was struck, they must have collided. The Algebaster Ale bottle broke into five pieces. The bottle formerly containing McKinney's Thanberian Rum is barely nicked."

She looked rueful. I could tell that, friendship or not, she was thinking twice about her next sentence.

"The crew wants to go back to Algebaster to complain."

Algebaster, a Jump-5 from Jewell, introduced issues, not the least being proximity to Cipango, an active forward Zhodani base. I understood she was re-iterating the crew's desire to get one back on the Zhos for their sneak attack and thought about what kind of storm could be ignited if I returned the favor, say by attacking a Zho picket in their front yard.

"I'll take it under advisement."

"What'll you be having, Cap'n?" the red-haired guy asked as soon as we bellied up.

"I'll take something surprising, please. It's been a day, and I could use a kick-me-up²."

"Ah... okay. What about you, Spooky? The usual?"

"Sure. Cap'n, this is Rage. Rage, this is Combo."

"Combo?"

"That was his call sign back when he was one of us."

"Oh, you were a fellow zoomie? Nice!"

"Hey, Rage!" a bearded guy yelled from the other side of the bar. "Where are those dippers?"

"In the microwave where I left 'em! I'll be right back. What's the matter with you? Can't you see who I'm talking to?"

"Who?"

"The birthday boy, jackass."

"It's somebody's birthday?"

² A pick-me-up but with faster effects.

“His call sign isn’t Jackass,” Spooky clarified for my edification. “But it might as well be.”

“It’s your birthday?” The guy got up from his seat. He was big and broad, especially in the shoulders, and as he approached, his eyes narrowed and he frowned. “Oh shit. Captain, uh... happy birthday.”

“You’re drunk,” Spooky scolded.

“No, I’m not. Although my judgment may be impaired.”

“Sir, this is Stallion. Stallion, this is Combo.”

“Stallion,” I said.

As we shook hands, his eyebrows squishing together as he looked down at me, I racked my memory, but nothing memorable about the Stallion call sign came to mind. Still, he was a big guy, almost at the limit for fighter pilots. I guess he liked squeezing into cockpits or he ran the roomier heavy fighters or long endurance pickets.

“What’s your ride Stallion?” I decided to satisfy my curiosity.

“Rampart,” he answered, adding “sir” after a pause. “So your name is Combo?”

“No, you Jackass,” Rage interjected. “That’s his call sign.”

“Stop calling me Jackass! Who do you think you are? My wife?!”

“You’re married?”

“Oh, hell no. Do I look stupid?”

“Ah... probably better I don’t answer that.” Grinning, Rage deposited a metal tumbler within reach and winked at me as he popped a tablet into it. The red liquid in the cup began to bubble, and tiny wisps of steam rose from the gently roiling liquid. “There ya go, Cap’n. Bilbroth and grum, with a Navy MilStem-235 for the kick.”³

“So if you have a call sign,” Stallion said, “that means...”

“He’s one of us,” Spooky finished the sentence. “Or, at least, he used to be.”

³ Conrad suggested the drink, presumably making up all of its ingredients on the fly. He wrote, “MilStem was one of the standard stimulants for fighter pilots. Oddly for a military drug, it tasted like juicy fruity berries. Bilbroth was a component of the fighter long endurance meal packs, and grum was... some kind of alcohol...” (<https://groups.google.com/g/plankwell-pbem-s1/c/j3lOfqVa7a8/m/cQvn68G0AAAJ>). To me, grum sounds like a type of rum, perhaps one fermented with grapes and molasses, or basically rum-wine, if that could even be a thing. Normally, in this sort of situation it would be the GM’s job to determine what the bartender serves, but if the player has a good suggestion, it’s always been my personal inclination to run with it.

“Used to be? Well, the high command did warn me not to free-ride⁴ the Jacky.” They mostly laughed, all but Stallion, who looked at me in such a non-expressive way that I momentarily wished I’d left my psi-curtain open so I could sense what he was thinking. “It may have been a while since I was in the hot-seat, but I think I remember how it goes.”

I tilted my head back and took the shot, Rage’s kick-me-up hitting the back of my throat like a sweet suckerpunch.

“What birds have you flown?” Stallion asked.

“The FL-128, the RF-128, the FF-77, and I spent a lot of time in the FF-81,” and those were just the Ramparts. I named several other fighters, but finally finished up with my true love, the FS-126 Fury Light Strike Fighter.⁵ I had spent so many hours in that cockpit, I could still feel the location of all the manual controls. The Furies were designed for high speed attack runs and had an extra fusion rocket for radically altering their trajectory. Their secondary role was as a screening escort, so they had solid sensors and enough computing oomph to set up a secondary missile screen around whatever elements the squadron was escorting. The sweet bonus Spooky and I had been working on was to set up a distributed scanning array, using the entire squadron as sensor nodes and therefore multiplying its power and resolution, which would help us determine exactly what we were looking at.

“There was this one time we were flying escort on the Vice Admiral’s pinnacle,” I said. “She was coming over for an inspection of the Valkryie. It was immediately after the Battle of Rhylanor, so there was space junk essentially everywhere. Anyway, we were focusing on each piece of debris, just seeing what it was and if there might be any intel value, and then all of a sudden my tac grid lights up. It turned out the zhos had dropped a torpedo emplacement designed to look like a piece of space garbage.”

“Eight ship-killers,” Spooky interjected. “If it hadn’t been for us, the Valk would’ve been shredded.”

⁴ Fighter pilot slang for disengaging from the formation control net, usually without permission, to engage in risky maneuvers.

⁵ Conrad had initially called this the “SF-126 Furious Light Fighter,” later referring them as Furies, but SF didn’t show up on <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Fighter> as a valid fighter classification, although FS did — it denoted a Strike Fighter — so I changed the name to the “FS-126 Fury Light Strike Fighter,” which I think more or less captures what he was proposing. As usual, I was trying to incorporate what he was giving me, but I thought it worthwhile to do a little research and try to fit the idea into the existing Traveller literature as closely as possible.

“And Vasilyev would have had to find a new Vice Admiral,” I said. “But we ended up shredding the shredders. Fortunately, we had enough depth in our formation that there was time.”

“How close did they get?” Stallion asked, putting his empty glass on the bar and turning his head to Rage. “Hit me again.”

“Too close to the Vice Admiral,” Spooky admitted.

“How close?” he repeated the question, obviously wanting the details.

“They got close,” I confirmed before giving him the specifics as clear as I could remember. She’d taken awhile to come aboard after they’d docked, and we were all joking that she’d probably needed to change her pants. Brown stains in the buttocks don’t exactly inspire confidence in leadership. But hopefully she was just writing the speech she’d soon be giving when she came aboard, promising to put letters of commendation into each of our service jackets, which I have it on good authority she actually did, being that I ended up with a combat command ribbon.

“Oh shit.” Stallion laughed, taking his drink off the table and downing it like it was water. “That *is* too close.” He turned his head. “Hit me.”

“You’re taking these a little fast,” Rage warned him.

“What are you, my mother? Just hit me.” Rage poured the drink, some sort of hard liquor by the looks of it. “That’s the thing about torps masquerading as flotsam,” Stallion said. “They make it so you have to treat every piece of space junk like a credible threat.”

“If they maneuver,” Spooky said, “they give away their location, so their only chance is to wait until the enemy comes to them. We just flew close enough to trigger their activation script.”

“I’m pretty sure our scans triggered them,” I said. “But once they activated, they locked onto the two biggest targets.”

“Yeah, well, fortunately for you, their onboard computers probably figured a squadron of Furies wasn’t worth their time,” Stallion said, downing whatever it was he was drinking. “Hit me.”

“You’re going too fast,” Rage warned him again.

“There’s no such thing as too fast. The Captain, uh... Combo will back me up on that, right sir? See, I remembered your call-sign. I think that proves I’m a thousand percent sober.”

I smiled, and gauging my reaction, Rage shrugged and poured, but then I rested my hand on Stallion's upper arm, keeping my voice steady so as to convey the same conversational tone we'd been using so far.

"There *is* such a thing as too fast, Stallion, and I have seen the smeared bulkheads to prove it. A good pilot knows when to listen to the sensors and when to return to base." My other hand snaked out to snatch away the shot glass, and I drank it down, letting the liquor, whatever it was, scald the inner lining of my throat. "Thanks for the birthday drink."

I turned to leave but then pivoted back. "I have had a long day, but you all need to take advantage of me not being around to enjoy the celebration. Thank you for the party."

Then I turned again and made my way to the door, nodding to the few who greeted me on my way out, but I kept my pace steady, as though I had important business. To my surprise, the last of these was Commander Nizlich. She must have just come in as I began leaving, or maybe she'd been standing there for some time, watching my interactions with the crew.

"If you have a few minutes...", she said.

"Do we need privacy? Walk with me."

The sight of the two most senior officers walking together would no doubt deter anyone else from attempting to intercept me, so as we walked, I opened my psychic curtain and looked toward her, catching sight of her eyes as we walked, all in the hope of getting a wee taste of what she was bringing me. That plus Josefeen would no doubt want me to practice a bit.

All I picked up, however, was a snippet of the conversation between Nizlich and Dr. Willin after I'd left the table.

"What was that all about?" Kosy has asked.

"I don't know," Stef had answered, "...yet."

Of course, the line was still there in front of the pod's exit leading to the spinal transport tube, so she turned the opposite way, leading me to a row of four doors along the left side of the corridor, and selecting one seemingly at random, she pressed her palm to the electric lock, and the door opened, revealing a couple, a man and a woman, in a state of semi-undress. It was a sensor station, big enough for two people, and they obviously thought it a good place to make whoopee.

“Out,” Nizlich said, and they scurried like their lives depended on it, collecting their clothes on the way out and getting hooted and laughed at by all the people standing in line down at the other end of the corridor. No doubt, they’d long remember the day the Captain and XO walked in on them. It would make for a nice story, but for right now, they were mortified and humiliated, especially the woman who tried covering herself as she ran off.

We entered the now vacated room, and Nizlich turned to me as the door slid shut.

“It’s turning out to be a nice party,” she said with the ghost of a smile. “But this thing with Bim.... You want to tell what’s going on?”

“Bim exceeded the parameters of the assignment. It was a test and he failed.”

“A test?”

With her eyes focused so intensely upon mine, it was a situation where I could have burrowed into her brain, but I didn’t have time. I needed to think of what to say. I knew she wanted more, but I was unwilling to complicate the issue more than it was already.

“Look,” I finally said, “I knew it was a risk when I gave him the authority. I have feelings about Scouts in general, but was willing to learn. When I dug into the financials and spoke to the shipyard’s crew and some... er... individuals on the planet, he had overrode qualified opinions and pushed the cost of the project. I confirmed the information and decided to cut to the quick. No reflection on the crew, but whatever relation Bim had with the previous captain, he decided to try for advancement in a time of change. My error, my fix.”

For a moment, she just stared at me with a pensive expression, but rather than continuing to explain, I waited to see what she would say. That she was confused was plain to see, and I could telepathically sense her trying to put the pieces together. She knew of Martinsen’s argument with the IISS engineer. She was the one who told me about it.⁶ But how exactly was Bim *pushing the cost*, and what did it mean for the pod replacement? And most importantly, what did her captain know that he wasn’t willing to tell her? Did it have something to do with his secret stash or the out-of-body experience he’d claimed to have had?⁷ No, she wouldn’t bring that up. Not now and not ever.

“Is there anything you’d like me to do?” she finally asked.

⁶ See the 2nd page of Chapter 25 in A&E #573.

⁷ See the end of the 3rd page of Chapter 33 in A&E #581.

If not for the Milstem-235 in my system, I probably would have been ready to pass out, but being in such a tight space with her while a military upper was coursing its way through my brain, I couldn't help but recall how much of her I'd seen, particularly while she'd been in the shower, and so her question, while perfectly innocent, provoked thoughts that I had to immediately shove to the side.

"That is something I should be asking you," I said. "This has possibly been one of the craziest days I have ever had, and it being my birthday just added to the fun."

Stefani, of course, said nothing, as I had not answered her question at all. I took a moment to focus my thoughts. What did I want her to do?

"We need to be a warship again, not a limping casualty. Keep our readiness up as much as you can. See if any other pods in the yard are mission ready, but work up scenarios when we depart with a short load. Let's set up a status meeting tomorrow morning with the command crew and see if we are free enough from the yard to do some underway trials and drills. After, of course, my gift of time off expires."

"Sir," Stef said, shaking her head, "we can drill the crew, but my understanding is we are now stuck here for seven weeks."

"Seven weeks is ludicrous. It's a damned interchangeable pod system." Although I kept my volume in check, I applied all the annoyance of a captain stymied by physics and an implacable bureaucracy that gets paid whether or not I'd get what I wanted.

"Sir, the only way I could see us being operational sooner would be to tell G.P. to stop the severing and reattach the old pod they are currently removing."

Which, of course, would scream of command incompetence. I wanted to correct my misstep with Bim, but it seemed to have gone beyond the point where I could arbitrate it away. Relations with the local squadron made it unlikely to get any help on that front. What if I just threw more money at it?

"Can we set up a meeting with Engineering, the Yard and GP and see if we can't expedite things? I mean more than we are already doing?" *There must be something I'm missing.*

"I'll arrange it," Nizlich said.

“Good. In the meantime, we can focus on the fighter wing, as they are our only mobile element. We can drill them against the gunnery section. And see if the base needs any support for boarding inspections or anything Marine related. I hate to keep Major Fa’Linto’s people on ice during all this.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“I would of course, welcome suggestions from you and the senior staff as well,” I added.

She nodded, her thoughts swirling behind a cool facade of professional composure.

“I’ll put together a report,” she said. “Is there anything else, sir?”

“No. Thank you, though. I think I need a solid night of sleep. Could you do me one last favor and scout if the coast is clear? I want to get back to my cabin as quietly as possible.”

“Of course, sir,” she said, opening the door and stepping outside. Then she just stared down the corridor, her mouth falling open.

Exiting the sensor station, I couldn’t help but notice the line that had been piling up at the pod’s exit was now gone, and the iris valve to the spinal transport tube was wide open. Indeed, two crew members were presently exiting through it, but there was no transport carriage waiting to receive them. As we walked over, we could see them floating down the dimly lit tunnel. Obviously, there was no gravity and no personnel carriages anywhere in sight.

“Bridge,” Stef said into her wristcom, “who opened the STT?”

“Lt. Shepherd, sir.”

Stef’s gaze flicked upward, visible tension in her neck as she said, “Connect me to Lt. Shepherd.” Her wristcom’s status light went from green to yellow and then to green again. “Vhy is the STT open?”

“Uh...,” Manda’s voice came through after a moment. “Sir, uh, the fighter pod was overly congested, sir. I took the personnel carriages offline, so it’s perfectly safe.” This was followed by the whooshing noise of what sounded like a toilet flushing somewhere in the background.

“I expect it to be closed again in vun hour. Understood?”

“Yessir.”

Nizlich tapped the red button, closing the connection, and motioned down the tube in the direction of the ship’s bow.

“Shall we?”

“I really hope all the carriages are offline,” I said as I stepped across the gravity shelf onto the narrow ledge just inside the tube. Off in the distance well beyond the floating duo, some of the crew appeared to be doing impromptu acrobatics, spinning and twisting, showing off their zero-g moves. Back when I was in my twenties I’d done much the same, but I’d found that as one got older, zero-g became more disorienting. Even now, standing motionless while planning my next move, I could sense that weird feeling in my innards.

Please don't let me barf in front of my crew.

I’d have been fine in a vacc suit or seated in a fighter, but wearing only a regular duty uniform, the lack of gravity made me feel almost naked. Fortunately, the air was circulating, so if I did miscalculate my trajectory and end up floating in the middle of the tube, the air current would eventually nudge me to the edge. I reached out for one of the emergency handholds and swung out of the way to make room for Stef, who launched herself to the other side of the tube, stretching out her arms to brace for impact. She’d aimed for a handhold but missed, however she managed to snag it on the rebound, her hand catching it just in time to prevent her somersaulting backwards.

“That didn’t go exactly as planned,” she admitted with a grin.

Well, at least I wouldn’t be the only one who looked like a total noob.

I braced for launch, aiming for a handhold toward the bow, and then pushed off with my feet, nice and easy.

So far, so good.

I looked over my shoulder to see Stefani push off as well, cutting across my course from behind and with a little more speed so that we’d arrive at our next stops simultaneously.

Navy training for traversing zero-g spaces called for maintaining control in *short* hops, and I was certainly not feeling my youthful adventurousness for long, one-shot traversals. The problem was that over a larger distance, a small error in course could end with you flailing wildly for a handhold just out of reach. Plus, I was still unfamiliar with this ship and crew. Better to be careful than show up to my promised MedBay appointment with a head wound and possible concussion.

The training came back to me as we zig-zagged across the tube again and again. Stef was also making fewer errors. For myself, however, hitting my targets with near perfect accuracy gave me a rush of

exhilaration, and my stomach no longer felt quite so queasy. Was this the MilStem-235 working its way into my brain?

Just then, a hatch on the tube's ceiling opened, and one of Technical Division's spider-bots crawled out. It had the advantage of small magnetic pads on the ends of its legs, so it could walk along the tube's inner surfaces.

"Shelob," Nizlich said, "still vorking in the pipe box?"

I wouldn't mind vorking you in your pipe box.

Who thought that?! Somebody was up there. Either that or Shelob had a dirty mind.

"What's wrong with the pipe box?" I asked.

"Oh, it's probably just checking the auxiliary cables or doing maintenance on the PA cannon. One day we'll get Shelob talking, but for now, its brain is focused on its job."

I paused to watch the bot making its way to wherever it was going while I reached out with my psychic tentacle. Somebody was definitely up there. I could almost smell them.

I gauged the distance and kicked off to the ceiling hatch the spider-bot had crawled out from. Sticking my head up, I found myself looking at a crewman. He was vargr. It was Ghoerrg, one of Faeng's associates from the recent Captain's Mast.

From the way he was floating in the cramped maintenance tunnel, I could tell there was no gravity up here either, and he had some sort of controller in hand, one with a video interface, so he could see everything the robot was seeing. That meant he'd seen me coming, so he'd had a moment to think, but what he was thinking about was....

"Oh, uh... hello sir," he said. "I was just up here doing some maintenance."

"Indeed."

I pushed the telepathic probe. I didn't quite know how, of course, except for the fact that I'd done it before, so I just stared into his eyes and extended my psychic tentacle as far as it would go.

"Yeah," he said, wanting to look away, but he was afraid that if he did, it would expose the fact that he was nervous about the four remaining skuubis he was hiding up here — well, two actually, as the other two he'd just put in his pocket. The last two were secreted within the housing of a power converter. He'd come up here

to check on them and make sure the various maintenance personnel who had pipe box access didn't disturb them — or worse, discover and steal them. And while he was here, he'd decided he'd grab two for a personal mission, which was to cheer up Manda and maybe be the rebound guy she clearly needed.

"Hey, what's with the toothy frown?" he'd asked when he found her glaring at all the people waiting to get into the fresher. Of course, he'd asked the question in Gvegh, which she technically knew, but there were so many different variations, and the fact that they were from different colonies didn't help.

"Huh?"

"What's the matter?" he'd tried again in Anglic.

The way she looked at him, he could tell he was about to get it for something he'd done wrong. Being that she was his direct supervisor, he'd seen that look plenty enough to be able to recognize it instantly. But instead of chewing him out over some mistake he'd made, she turned away.

"Not now," she said. "I'm a Naezaengoz."

Naezaengoz? It literally meant a *broken egg*. I, myself, understood the metaphor, as I'd once encountered a vargr who'd used it. Since Manda obviously wasn't mortally wounded, it could only mean that she'd been emotionally shattered. But Ghoerrg didn't know that. This was the problem with Gvegh. There were too many dialects, too many idioms, and far too much slang. So as she'd walked away, he'd followed, watching as she'd opened the STT and issued the order for the personnel carriages to park themselves and switch off after depositing their current passengers.

"What do you mean, you're a broken egg?"

Ignoring him for the moment, she'd turned to the small crowd of crew members who'd been waiting for a carriage. "Go on. Consider it practical zero-g training. And don't vomit in the tube, or you'll have to clean it!" Then, as they were leaving, she'd turned back to him. "The captain shit-canned Bim."

"Aengagh?" That was the nickname he'd given that tree climber. It meant *smooth-tongue*, which given that Bim's main skill was flattery, seemed a pretty good fit. Plus, Manda had remarked human males were gentle lovers⁸, so there was a double-meaning. "What'd he do to get himself shit-canned?"

⁸ The implication here is that Bim and Manda are romantically intertwined. As with almost everything in this campaign, this was determined randomly. It stemmed from an out-of-character discussion I'd prompted at the end of the Chapter 50: "Before we press on, I thought it would be a good time, at the end of this 50th chapter, to discuss the campaign out-of-character. Are you both still enjoying it or is it getting tiresome? If you want to continue, where do you see it going, and how would you like to proceed? Are there any

“You think he tells me these things?! It’s some sort of Navy/IISS garbage. Whatever’s going on, the captain blamed him for it.”

“Yeah,” Ghoerrg repeated, wondering if he himself was about to get shit-canned. *Ugh! Why’s he staring at me like that? And not saying anything! Gotta crap out some technobabble so he goes away.* “I noticed there was a small issue up here with one of the 2700’s feeders, but it was just a conversion unit. Everything’s okay now, sir. I got it squared away.”

Ugh.

An involuntary shiver passed through me. Was it his unease I was picking up on, or was it me suddenly feeling dirty for scrounging around in his brain rummaging through his private thoughts? Whichever the case, I now knew far more than I wanted about the pack dynamics of my vargr crew. What would it have been like if I’d been an active psion on the trip back from the misjump? Better Gvegh might not have been the only thing I picked up on that trip.

“Yes.” I nodded. “As you were, spacer.”

I pushed off the hatch to rejoin Stefani. Anticipating her question from her raised eyebrows, I did what every captain must have done at some time, changed the subject to avoid an issue.

“So, zero-g training in the STT seems like a thing worth following up on,” I said. “Maybe incorporate it into a damage control drill? Or do you do that already?”

That seemed a safer topic than my apparent paranoia over potential saboteurs.

Any chapter title suggestions?

suggestions you have? This is a test of a new methodology for roleplaying, after all, so let me know your honest opinions.” Both Timothy & Conrad opted to continue, and each of them sent some ideas for various plot developments. One of the ideas Conrad suggested was “an against the regulations special relationship amongst the senior staff (NOT involving Gus).” I wrote down the names of the various crewmembers, assigned a number to each one, and randomly determined which two would be romantically involved, and it ended up being Bim and Manda. It’s a somewhat awkward pairing due to the fact that one’s human and the other’s vargr. But is it against regulations? Well, I’m not so sure. They’re not in the same line of command, so it probably isn’t against the regs. But whatever. Close enough.