

“*What now?*” Both Sidara and I thought to ourselves as she and Josefeen followed close behind. Such was the strength of my psi that I could essentially “see” the Countess’s camera crew with their multiple lenses trained on our backs as we walked away. It was almost like having eyes in the back of my head, except I could sense Helena’s displeasure, despite the fact that she kept a neutral expression.

It was the Countess, I suddenly realized, who’d directed the Imperial media to go after the HPSS, to paint them as incompetent. This apology, taking place at the Imperial Palace, was clearly a statement to Jewellians that she was in lockstep with the Navy. But, behind closed doors, that wasn’t the case. She’d been openly derisive of Admiral Karneticky, essentially demanding he move Plankwell Naval Base out into the desert. As for me, I’d said or at least thought some things at her ---

«*Not the most diplomatic of things,*» Josefeen interjected as we reached the turboporters and each got into separate capsules. Then the door slid shut, and I selected Iota Eight from the electronic menu, which, despite the fancy name, was just the transpex-domed rooftop of a gigantic parking garage.

On the way, I reflected on how I’d effectively scorned the Countess, asking if Her Excellency intended to use Olav to march on Capital. It was a ridiculous notion, of course, and underscored my contempt for the AI. There’d been some contempt for her as well, or at least anger over how I’d been buffeted, used and maneuvered, which I conveyed to her quite clearly. During that part, I was essentially the polar opposite of Captain Ironface, but it was entirely telepathic, even as I injected my anger into Alise. I’d caused her dramatic reaction, I realized, just as I’d somehow provoked Captain Masa back in that parking garage, in that instance without even trying.

A security robot met us outside the gravpad, removing our security collars as the launch emerged from underneath. Sublieutenant Jimenez was already preparing for takeoff.

“Back to the ship, sir?” she asked.

“Back to the ship.”

«*You do realize the Countess is a powerful person, don’t you?*» Josefeen’s voice echoed in my head as we strapped in.

«At this stage of the game, we all are powerful in different ways. Yes, the Countess has political power and down the well, she is a force to be reckoned. Out in the dark, I wield a different kind of power.»

«Yet you decided to unleash your rage not in jumpspace but inside the Imperial Palace.»

«Nobody unleashes anything in jumpspace unless they want to draw in the Black Ships¹. In any case, it's my birthday. I'll rage if I want to.» I decided to change the subject. *«You knew the nobles were psions, didn't you.»* That one piece of intel I'd gleaned from Alise was a surprise only to myself.

«Not all nobles are psions,» Josefeen replied, *«but the most powerful usually are. If not, they have psions around them pulling their strings.»*

So we and the Zhodani were not so different, after all.

«What's your evaluation of the Countess's motives, pitting the Army and Navy against each other?»

«It's a good question. Give me a day to dig into it.»

"Lt. Sidara," I said, breaking the silence.

"Sir?"

"Compose a report to Mr. Faulk, summarizing what you saw and heard."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Let me read it before you send it off, so I can attach any personal commentary that might be necessary."

"Aye aye, sir."

Looking directly into her eyes, I could sense her giving herself an internal pat on the back. She'd recorded the entire thing, I realized, and though it would be impolite and therefore imprudent to leak the audio to Faulk, she fully intended to reference it to maintain accuracy. As far as she was concerned, I'd done exactly as he'd bid, showing no emotion and communicating only minimally and as required by protocol.

Josefeen looked at her and then at me.

«Am I influencing her now?» I asked. *«Psionically, I mean.»*

«It wouldn't surprise me.»

«Are you immune to it, or do I have to watch myself around you as well?»

¹ https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Black_Ship

«No unshielded mind is immune. Until you've been trained, you'll need to be careful, particularly with your emotions. Some minds are more susceptible to telepathy than others. As for Miss Francine,» — Josefeen took another long look at Lt. Sidara — «all I can tell you is she's got the hots for you. Don't tell me you haven't sensed it.»

«I'm sure I am old enough to be some sort of parental surrogate. I'm sorry she feels this way, but I am not messing around in the ranks.»

Whatever itch I might have had got scratched with Kaz, and I wasn't about to disrupt morale by playing favorites. Love me or hate me, everyone would get treated equally. That, at least, had been my long-standing practice, and I was determined to stick to it now. Of course, I'd never been telepathic before. Knowing what people actually thought about me was sure to be more than a little disconcerting, not to mention my Intel officer being a dyed-in-the-wool psychic succubi.

«You could mess around without messing around, you know. Think of it as practice.»

«I'd prefer to practice on people other than my crew. I need to rely on them, not expose them to potential brain wiping. You may have managed to cauterize your sense of responsibility and morality, but I still have some attachment to mine.»

She bit her bottom lip, and I detected a wave of hurt feelings intermixed with anger. Perhaps I was being overly judgmental, but the idea of having to repeat on Lt. Sidara what I'd just done to Reggie was enough to make my blood curdle. And even if I avoided "messing around" with people's minds as a conscious act, this aptitude I apparently had at influencing people subconsciously was sure to be trouble. Maybe I could shield up and isolate myself.

«Stick your head in the sand and hide. That's a great idea, Sir.» Josefeen was, of course, smirking. «You do realize the report your new favorite lieutenant is going to prepare for that lawyer isn't going to include anything about what actually happened between you and the Countess.»

«Faulk lives in the world I used to live in. He has to go by what is said out loud. Unless he's a psion too?»

«Doubtful.»

Out of the corner of my eye, I sensed Sidara pivoting her gaze from me to Josefeen and then back to me. She must have noticed us staring at each other.

“Did you have a question, Lt. Sidara?”

“Uh... well, Sir... I was wondering what you want done with the six crew members in the brig.”

“I have not forgotten about them. Captain’s Mast. Schedule it for later today, after I have had a chance to review the case.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Given what I knew had happened from Reggie’s memories, I was prepared to go with *Acting Under the Influence Causing Grievous Property Damage*. Looks like my goodwill account was going to take another hit. Depending on their testimony, some might take a reduction in rank. All were going to be restricted to the ship regardless. This was another issue. I knew what happened from Reggie’s point of view, but the crew had choices, and they had been made... poorly. I was also interested in what they’d say about how they were treated by the locals.

I sent a text message to Nizlich, informing her of my imminent arrival and asking if the crew had a surprise ready for me. Better forewarned than ambushed. Sidara, meanwhile, was looking at me again. I glanced up, meeting her gaze, and behind those eyes, I could sense her wondering if there was something going on between her Captain and his well-endowed administrative aide. Back at the turboporter terminal outside Faulk’s office, when I’d mentioned how Lt. Abbonette had to agree with me, she’d thought nothing of it, but now seeing us staring at one another, Josefeen biting her lower lip, she was almost certain she’d detected sexual tension.

“Is there something else, Lieutenant?”

“Uh... no, sir. I just wanted to mention that if you’re too busy, you could appoint an OIC².”

«*I just love how she’s trying to make time for us to fuck.*» Josefeen smiled.

Memories of Josefeen in succubus-mode as well as Commander Nizlich in the shower both sprung to mind, and I hurriedly drew my psychic curtain, trying to keep my composure. Josefeen, meanwhile, broke into a fit of giggles, Sidara’s confused frown only making it worse.

“Sorry,” Josefeen said, “I was just... remembering something.”

² Officer in Charge of a nonjudicial punishment proceeding.

“It’s a bit early in my tenure to be off-loading duties,” I answered Lt. Sidara. “In any case, I am curious to hear what happened down there firsthand, and I need to check their behavior against my first impressions.”

“Aye aye, sir,” she said, glancing back to Josefeen who by now was wiping her eyes.

Cleon only knew what Sidara would make of all this, and I reopened my psi-curtain to focus on her as she went back to looking at her slate. I couldn’t discern what was displayed, however, because she wasn’t actually reading it. Instead, she was still wondering what was going on between me and Josefeen.

What’s so funny about appointing an OIC? Maybe they take turns being OIC behind closed doors? Ew! Stop it! That’s perverted and ridiculous!

«Yes and no,» Josefeen’s whisper reverberated across the psychic ether.

Sidara, however, was deaf to it, wondering to herself why it was that men always seemed to prefer the crazy ones. Unfortunately, she’d never been successful in the romance department. She was too studious, too serious, unlike this woman across from her who could laugh over a memory and who’s giant breasts no doubt afforded her all the male-attention any female could ever want.

I’ll bet that’s why he chose her to be his aide.

She looked up, catching us both staring at her, and both of us quickly averted our eyes. Sidara wiped her nose, worried there might be something hanging out.

This was getting me nowhere, and my paperwork was still backing up. I turned to my slate and called up the approvals list, things that had been done by others on their authority and just required a sign off. Meanwhile, I pulled my psychic curtain firmly closed. I didn’t need Josefeen interrupting my train of thought as I skimmed through the lists of replenishment items, routine maintenance and departmental exercise reviews. I needed to get in tune with my ship and crew, and the time-honored Navy way was to snoop through all the minutia and wait for a web of connections to form.

The Navy had experimented with limited AI programs in the past, which was how ship computers had ended up with their personalities, but the brass preferred a sophont’s hand on the actual wheel, so to speak. With my new knowledge, I couldn’t help but wonder if it was because living captains and crew would be more susceptible to psionic interference. But the Zhodani were extreme users of warbots, semi-autonomous killing

robots. That seemed like a solution when warring psions went after each other, to have troops not susceptible to psionic interference.

A return message suddenly appeared from Commander Nizlich. “Surprise birthday party to follow your dinner with the Highport Director. It’ll be in the fighter pod. He already knows.”

He already knows? So he’s in on it. I checked my schedule. Dinner was set for 1800 hours, which left me about six hours.

“One-eight-seven to Jaqueline, acknowledged,” Jimenez’s voice drifted out from the cockpit. “Proceeding to P.A. number 1.”

We’d apparently gotten permission to dock, the “P.A. #1” probably indicating the forward port side airlock. I listened for the familiar noise of metal biting against metal as the locking clamps did their thing. Then the seatbelt light switched off and the doors slid open.

Back in my own domain. More or less.

Josefeen’s whisper of a smile made me wonder if my curtain was slipping, so I re-imagined it, this time drawing it shut even more forcefully.

“Thank you for the smooth ride Jimenez. Lieutenants?” I motioned for Josefeen and Sidara to disembark ahead of me, in contravention of the usual order of things. I wanted to see if there was a welcoming party, and I was not disappointed. Commander Nizlich was there along with a variety of deckhands and petty officers all saluting as a bosun piped the *Captain aboard*.

I should have known that any opportunity would not be missed by the ever-resourceful Nizlich. At least she had limited it to the junior crew, who rarely had the practice of greeting senior officers. Leave it to her to combine a greeting with a training exercise. I walked to the precise point where the Navy deemed the line of demarcation (and had helpfully painted it on the deck in yellow) and turned a crisp salute to the side party. I then stepped over the line, marking that I was back in command. Both of us being in the same place made it simpler, although I did note the senior petty officer updating the log.

“Just the person I wanted to talk to,” I said to Nizlich.

“Company dismissed,” she said in a low, even tone, everyone immediately scattering without a single “Happy Birthday” well-wish to their new captain. “Vhy the Bravo-Nine-Nine?” she asked as soon as we were alone. “Vhat happened down there?”

“The Countess decided the optics of the two HPSS security contractors apologizing to me in person was valuable to her in some way. Given that I was being directed to re-enter the presence of known hostiles, I thought better safe than sorry. Was Major Fa’Linto unhappy I didn’t get shot again?”

“Um... I’m sure I wouldn’t know about that, sir.”

Though she maintained a neutral expression, there was now a slight blush. The love/hate relationship between the Navy and Marine Corps was somewhat of a running joke. If they didn’t have a pool on when the senior Navy officers were likely to get themselves in trouble, I’d be very much surprised.

“I was overly cautious,” I admitted. “Or it might have been a case of over-enthusiasm.”

“Over-enthusiasm, sir?”

“For the rules, Commander... unless you or the tribunal turned up anything.”

“The Admiral’s staff told us that if there is to be a tribunal, it’ll be the home fleet that conducts it.”

Meaning Karneticky wanted to keep this from going any further. I pressed my lips together.

I could only fault Nizlich to a point. Technically, I was right in my assertion that as the ranking representative of the 213th Fleet, I could trigger all the ancillary investigations I wanted. Practically, however, the local fleet simply had better resources and connections for fully ramping up an investigative tribunal. Likewise, it was the general practice of visiting captains to defer to the local forces when it came to such matters, unless, of course, there were extenuating circumstances.

“Did you gather the intel I requested?”

“Ve are still in the process, sir, but early indications are those guards vere following standard procedure.”

Standard procedure. That’s what the HPSS representative had said to that reporter on Channel One, that they followed *all pertinent regulations*.³ Therefore, to indict them for high crimes against the Imperium would be to indict the local government as well.

³ See the 5th page of Chapter 44 in A&E #592.

The power centers of Jewell's labyrinthine bureaucracy must have been getting increasingly annoyed. It would be interesting to learn what they were saying to each other and what plots they were no doubt hatching. But were I to deploy intelligence-gathering assets against an Imperial world, against civilians, no less... well... if discovered, then claims about my overreach would be pretty easy to substantiate. Nizlich could have authorized use of such assets during my absence, but she probably considered it doing me a favor by not digging deeper into what was obviously a political minefield.

"Send the data you've collected to Lt. Sidara. I am sure she will let me know if there is anything there we need to work on."

"Aye aye, sir."

Though I was still learning my way around the ship, I could see Jimenez had docked at the airlock closest to my quarters, and on the short walk it took to get there, I wondered if perhaps sweeping this incident out of sight wasn't such a bad idea after all. Certainly, that's what the powers that be all seemed to want. Granted, I could stand on my points and expose myself to greater scrutiny, but taking one for the team even in the face of actual physical violence would likely get me better cooperation in the future. And now that Naval Intelligence was sucking me into its schemes, I didn't need the public scrutiny a tribunal would bring.

Once back in my quarters, I stripped off my dress uniform with an unexpected dryness in the back of my throat. I'd dutifully made my appearance at the palace as requested — i.e. ordered — but I'd also lost my temper, at the Countess no less. No doubt she could send a message to Admiral Vasilyev, complaining about my court manners, and that would be it for my career. But would she? The offense had been telepathic and so there was no loss of face. Although Kaz has been guilty of far less.

It was probably due to that damn psi-enhancer. It clearly lowered my inhibitions, as whenever I took it, some subconscious rage I harbored deep inside wormed its way to the surface. If not for that moment of venting, I'd be now escorting Lady Alise to some swanky, Silver City nightclub. Better that didn't happen, I reconsidered, as I could just picture myself trying to dance in full dress and a bulletproof vest.

I tossed my dress uniform into the laundry chute and hung the vest in my closet alongside my shipsuit, throwing on a regular duty uniform instead. Based on the instructions I'd given Nizlich three days ago, there was technically a one-in-eight chance of a zero-zero drill (zero atmosphere, zero gravity) sometime during the

next eight hours⁴, but I very much doubted she'd run the drill without giving me a heads up. In the unlikely event she did, I'd be scrambling for an emergency vacc suit along with everyone else, but to wear a shipsuit to a birthday party would be a bit... well... it would look weird, and it would also broadcast to the crew that a zero-zero was in the mail. And considering that we were in port, surrounded by the bulk of the 112th Fleet, well, a zero-zero in such circumstances was a bit on the strict side, although this was the Imperial Navy, and I had to admit, it would be a great way to cut short my birthday celebration.

I couldn't help but snort as I checked myself in the mirror. Only if I wanted to be resented for the next several years. There was a delicate balance between captain and crew when it came to drills, and I'd not been here long enough to build up any credit save for that bequeathed by my association with Olav. The Marines might like it that I called them out on a retrieval mission, but I doubted they thought any better of me for putting myself in the position of having to.

I exited my quarters, determined to find my way to the bridge on memory alone, and though the corridors weren't empty, I didn't encounter anyone wishing me a happy birthday. Perhaps Nizlich had explicitly instructed them to *not* remind their new Captain another year has passed. And if so, was this wise? Well, we hadn't been through anything together. Not yet. So all they knew of me was that speech I gave, and, of course, they knew of Olav's speech, and perhaps they saw me on the morning news, if they were paying attention to it, being quoted as saying that Olav the android was, in effect, the reincarnation of Olav hault-Plankwell.

Should I publicly disavow this? I was misquoted, after all. Oh, but that would irk the Countess like nothing I'd done prior.

I turned right at the T-intersection, and the short corridor to the main bridge was there on the left, exactly where I expected it to be. With some small satisfaction, I turned left and let the auto-scanner take stock of me. Then the iris valve twirled open, revealing the wide, rectangular chamber with its numerous holographic displays and the captain's chair — my chair — positioned at what was more or less center stage. Someone was presently sitting in it. It was that sublieutenant Nizlich had introduced at the end of my initial tour.

"Captain on the bridge!" someone called out, causing him to leap from the chair almost as sure as if he'd been jolted by a shock baton.

⁴ See the final paragraph of Chapter 15 in A&E #563.

My practiced eyes took in the scene. All stations were manned, and there was the normal bridge chatter one would expect for a ship under repair. No alarms were currently in effect, but a swath of amber on the forward screen marked work being done. I assumed it to be related to the scout pod replacement. Likewise, the line of amber on the weapons board told me there had been little progress on the fusion barbettes. As for the crew themselves, they wore a mix of shipsuits and regular uniforms, mostly the latter, so it was doubtful word of the upcoming zero-zero had leaked.

“At ease,” I said, mentally noting the location of the nearest emergency vacc suit locker. “Status report?”

“Nominal, sir,” the sublieutenant said. “However, the general recall you ordered is still in effect. A construction crew from GP is also on board. They’re decommissioning the Exploration Pod.”

“You are relieved,” I said, sitting down.

“Aye aye, sir. The Captain has the Conn.”

“I have the Conn,” I said. Not that we were actually going anywhere.

I opened the armrest’s earbud compartment, put them on, and then activated the chair’s holographic interface, my status board lighting up with the current duty roster, the operational readiness model, and, of course, my personalized, computer-generated “To Do” list, the very existence of which sometimes made me wonder who was really in charge. Nonetheless, I eased back into the command chair and just let it all soak in. Finally, I was back where I belonged.

Feel free to suggest a chapter title: