

“I don’t have any cadet stories,” Kosy said, “but I do have one from my first year of residency.”

“I hope it doesn’t involve medical malpractice,” Maz replied.

“Oh, only if a fellow intern impersonating a corpse qualifies as malpractice. I swear, I’ve never jumped so far in my life.”

As she began going into the details, I focused on Maz’s eyes while he looked at her diagonally across the dinner table. Sitting as I was, at the head of the table, it wasn’t at all difficult reaching out with my psionic tendril while his attention was on her.

At first, I felt some resistance, like I was bumping into an invisible barrier, but then his curtain opened. Josefeen was rubbing her ankle against his, playing footsies, in effect, beneath the table.

«What are you doing after this is over?» I could sense her telepathically asking.

«I thought you were angry with me,» Maz replied.

«Anger is like zinc,» she shot back, ever the flirt.

Distraction, indeed.

With his attention divided between Josefeen and Kosy, I was able to tiptoe right into his mind, and as with Reggie’s, once I was inside, a vast network of connections stretched before me. It was like a spider’s web, each strand I touched yielding a memory. But where to focus? I glided my psychic tendril from one strand to the next, procuring flashes in my own mind, mostly images of people and fish.

«There’s something I don’t understand,» Maz was sending to Josefeen.

«There’s a lot you don’t understand.»

«Why is it I’m no longer able to get into your Captain’s head, when back at the reception, I had no problem?»

«His skullcap was on the fritz.»

A skullcap was a subdermal psi-shield¹, basically what that lawyer had. She’d anticipated his question and so had her answer ready to deliver without a moment’s hesitation, and I could even sense that he believed her.

¹ See the 3rd footnote in Chapter 48.

But I was still rather annoyed. Here I'd thought I could trust Maz to shield us from psions during that reception, never imagining that he himself was one. It made me want to rip out a few of his neural connections, like I'd done to Reggie, but I stuffed that errant thought back where it belonged, imagining how bad it would look if the SPA Director face-planted on the table.

Therefore, I remained careful as I gently brushed my psionic tendril across more of his neural threads, each time eliciting additional memories. Then I found one that interested me: a sign that read "Doggy Style". It was that vargr nightclub, the one that burned down.

But what was it doing here?

In the memory, he was walking into the club and asking to speak with someone named Lerza.

"Let me get this straight," Maz said to the vargr once they were alone. "You actually think you can blackmail me with this garbage?"

Lerza was a vargr of rather impressive girth. He owned the club, and they were in his office, a room where he'd sexually assaulted countless dancers, a fact Maz knew because he was inside Lerza's mind, just as I was inside his.

"Blackmail's a strong word," Lerza replied with a toothy grin. "Think of it instead as you rub my belly, and I'll rub yours."

"No offense, but I don't need a belly-rub. Whatever Vardok told you is rubbish." That was a bold-faced lie, but Lerza wasn't telepath or any other sort of psion so far as Maz could tell.

"So then you didn't ask him to procure a kilo Psychobenethal?"

"I have no idea what that is. Whatever he told you, I'm sure he was probably drunk at the time."

"I'm sure, then, you won't mind me passing this information along to the proper authorities."

"I could care less." Maz shrugged, inwardly terrified.

Psychobenethal, after all, was a known psionic performance enhancer, one that had been produced long before the Suppressions, and as with most old inventions, the patent containing its formula had fallen into the public domain. Furthermore, although it couldn't be made with common substances, there were plenty of worlds where those substances existed in great enough quantities that its manufacture was difficult to control.

In any case, Maz had been fishing around for a new source, which was how he'd located Vardok in the first place.

"Does the Starport Governor know you're a psion, trading in psi-enhancing chemicals?"

"Utterly false and defamatory. If you ever spread such slander, I'll sue you so hard you'll wish I killed you instead."

The vargr behind the desk sniffed the air for a moment, making Maz wonder if Lerza could smell his fear.

"Wouldn't it be easier for you to just do me a favor?" Lerza asked.

"Favor?"

"All I want is for the HPSS to get off my back."

Apparently, the police had been charging Lerza protection money ever since his business had fallen under joint Imperial/local jurisdiction. The beat cops initially told him he could continue with the gambling and prostitution, but he'd have to pay them to look the other way. Since then, however, they'd kept raising their take. Unfortunately for him, Maz had no control over the HPSS, and as High Port Director, he had no business going to the Starport Governor to ask him to intervene in some minor dirtside corruption. If he did, it would only lead Lerza to assume that Vardok was telling the truth, which stupid, drunk vargrs had the tendency to do.

The most that Maz could do for himself would be to buy some time. According to what he'd seen in Lerza's mind, there was a recording of Vardok shooting off his mouth, which was sitting on a local data cell just down the hallway behind a locked door. Lerza didn't back up the data offsite, because that would make all the prostitution and so forth open to hackers, especially those working for the government. So all Maz had to do was to find someone willing to go into that room and destroy the data storage unit. Then he'd deal with Vardok.

"Look," Maz said. "What Vardok said to you... he's either mistaken or he's lying. I don't know which. But for the sake of not having to deal with you, I'll see if I can pull any strings. But I'll need some time."

"That's all I'm asking," Lerza said.

Maz, finally noticing my unblinking gaze, turned to look at me, and as per Josefeen's instructions, I immediately closed my psychic curtain and rubbed my eyes, severing the telepathic link. Josefeen's gaze met

mine as I looked up again, and she gave me a quick wink, Maz grinning from ear to ear as though amused by whatever telepathic conversation they were presently having.

“Are you fascinated by my aide, Maz?” I asked.

“Fascinated?”

“I’m sorry, but I have first claim on her. Forbidden to transfer off the ship too.”

“The Captain is very protective of me,” Josefeen said, “as I am of him.”

“Well, I do wish someone would be protective of me,” Maz said.

“I’ll be your protector,” Kosy said with a grin. “Stop picking on him, you two.”

I smiled or at least tried to. Onneri, meanwhile, glanced around the table with a smile that looked about as genuine as my own.

“So,” I said, “it appears the Countess is changing up unit assignments down below, moving the Navy out and the Army in. Any thoughts on that you’d like to share?”

“Oh, that,” Maz said. “They haven’t roped you into the latest political intrigue, have they?”

“They’re trying.”

“Well, do your best to stay out of it. The Countess...”

He went momentarily silent as the door slid open and the steward returned with our meals.

“...she and Admiral Karneticky... their relationship is a bit... I don’t know the word I’m looking for. Let’s just say... things could be better. A lot better.”

“So it’s entirely personal?” Josefeen asked.

“No, no,” he shook his head as the serving robot put our plates in front of us and refreshed our drinks. “A little over a century ago and going back several centuries prior, Plankwell Naval Base was out in the desert. It was the Army and the Scouts that shared the Imperial reserve south of Heron. The reason was civic unrest, riots mostly over environmental degradation. This had been an ongoing issue for centuries, so it was deemed necessary to have the Army right on Heron’s outskirts to quell uprisings. Of course, a good portion of the population looked upon the Army as an occupying force.”

“And what about now?” Kosy asked.

“Nobody remembers Jewell as it used to be. All those people are dead and gone. And since the bases switched places, there have been two more invasions. The last siege lasted somewhere in the neighborhood of three years. The local fleet got a bit of black eye over that.”

The local fleet had been decisively beaten by the Zhodani’s 6th Fleet of the 1st Rank. Not only had I studied the invasion, but I’d talked to several of those who were there. For them, it was either retreat or be destroyed.

“So Jewell’s population is holding a grudge?” I asked.

“No, of course not. But the Navy is not quite so well regarded as it once was. However, it’s apparently cheaper to service craft with the base so close to the city.”

“So then why does the Countess want to switch it back?” Josefeen asked.

He paused for a moment, perhaps thinking about that fire that his people no doubt caused when they went into the Doggy Style to destroy Lerza’s onsite computer.

“There have been several incidents,” he finally said, “incidents involving Navy personnel, and likewise, the local fleet’s performance, which I already mentioned... less than stellar... but I think it’s more that Jewellians no longer fear the Imperial Army. Indeed, people have complained the Army can’t do much to protect Heron being all the way out in the desert. The Navy, by contrast, might be more effective out in the desert. The base out there is much larger, from what I understand, and there’s room for all sorts of secret projects.” He smiled. “I envy you, you know. We don’t get to have any secret projects in the Starport Authority.”

“You and I could start our own secret project,” Josefeen suggested.

“What sort of secret project?” Maz asked.

“If I told you, then it wouldn’t be a secret, now would it?”

As Josefeen and Maz openly flirted back and forth, I started in on the main course of my meal, still pondering the state of things. This wasn’t just about the decaying relationship between the Admiral and the Countess, although that may have been the final straw. Yet allowing personal preferences to seep into the decision-making process regarding such matters was sheer madness, at least in my opinion, although nobody was asking me. Except, well, they kind of did, and I kind of told them so... during a party held in my honor, no less. I tried to imagine what I’d say if it came up at my next Promotions and Review Board. Well, I hadn’t expressed anything I didn’t believe, and what little I did say was doctrinally sound, at least to the best of my

knowledge, but it was impolitic to criticize the nobility, even when they were being stridently wrong. The higher up you went, the more important that became. I guess I had not fully internalized that yet, but this tour was turning into a crash course in Navy/Noble relations, with an emphasis on the crash.

“How’s the soup, Maz?” I asked, still keeping my curtain tightly closed. It didn’t require great effort, but it did require some. The difficulty lay in the constancy.

“Oh, I’ve certainly had worse,” he said with a smile.

He’d ordered a bowl of the Imperial Navy’s famous mushroom soup. It was an old standby that went back to the Civil War, ubiquitous to the point Navy personnel were sometimes called shroom-slurpers. Despite the derogatory nickname, however, Navy Shroom became a popular soup, and so there were numerous competing brands, each with a different blend of herbs and spices.

My own seared protein analog was quite good, along with the veg medly and mashed potuns. The doctor was focused on her green salad, and as for Onneri...

“What is that you ordered there, Onneri?”

“A SPIM omelette, sir.”

“Ah.”

SPIM stood for *Specially Processed Imperial Meat*, although some would say the S stood for *Suspiciously*. It was the cultured meat equivalent of genitalia and sphincters scraped off the slaughterhouse floor.² Copious quantities of salt were added to mask the actual flavor. To each his own.

After much talk, as we found ourselves finishing our desserts, I noticed Onneri fidgeting. Letting my psychic curtain come open for a moment, I could since he was wondering how he could get out of leading this walking tour of the ship Nizlich insisted he suggest. As the Chief Engineer, he was, of course, the most logical choice to lead it, but how was he supposed to get me to go back to the Fighter Pod only a couple of days after I’d inspected it? I couldn’t help but smile to myself as I considered the prospect of making them go through the whole ordeal of persuading me to join them. But then Josefeen beat everyone to the punch.

² Conrad commented out of character, “I for one am an aficionado of SoloRim SPIM, especially musubi and loco moco,” and I have to agree, as for myself, SPAM is a bit of a forbidden pleasure, but Conrad has so far portrayed Plankwell as being such a high-class foodie that I assumed Gus would harbor some strong opinions against various foods.

“So Maz,” she said, “as much as I’d like to take you back to my quarters for a discussion as to our aforementioned secret project, I’m guessing the Captain intends to give you a tour of the ship.”

“Oh, a tour? How nice. Yes, I’d like that very much. As for the... uh... secret project, perhaps later?”

“Don’t get your hopes up.”

“A tour sounds like an excellent idea,” I said, ignoring Maz’s slumping shoulders. “Although, I really like the Jackie, the fighters will always be my pride and joy. As luck would have it, one of my old squadron mates is onboard. Let’s start the tour over there. Who knows? They might even be more interested in ‘secret plans’ than Josefeen.”

At that, Josefeen cocked an eyebrow in my general direction. No doubt, she was trying to reach out to me telepathically, probably a warning about how life was harder for pimps than for captains, but sadly, I’d already shut my psychic curtain again, so whatever snarky comment she had in mind, it would have to wait.

* * *

I’d always disliked parties. For as long as I could remember, I’d had to dress up for these big, Plankwell family gatherings, and when I say big, what I actually mean is *enormous*. There were enough Plankwells on Rhylanor to fill a stadium. Over time, I got to know a few of them, but most remained these odd strangers, people I’d meet, hug uncomfortably, and then never see again. As weird as it was, at least it was equally weird for everyone. Much worse were the recitals, simulations, and amateur theatricals, little incubators of Plankwell fever.

“Do I have to go?” I once asked my father. That got me a stern lecture, one about duty to the Imperium and to upholding the honor of the Plankwell name.

“It’s important you know where you come from,” he’d said. “People either love us or hate us.”

People hated us?

I was just a kid. What did I know about Olav beyond all the good I’d been told he’d done? But Dad was right. As I got older, I encountered people who were either jealous of me or thought of Olav as history’s greatest unsung villain.

“The only reason you think you’re so important,” a classmate once sneered, “is because once upon a time some guy strangled a lady.”

“Olav saved the Imperium!” I retorted, immediately shutting down his friends’ laughter. “If it wasn’t for him, you’d all be speaking Zdetl!”

“Oh, please.”

“Be careful what you say!”

His statement was dangerously close to *lèse-majesté*, for to denigrate Olav was to imply the illegitimacy of Arbellatra as well as the entire Alkhalikoi dynasty. I was thinking of reporting him, which might have earned him a demerit, but a mutual classmate intervened.

“He’s was just messing with you,” she said. “Don’t make a big deal of it. It’ll make you look weak.”

Look weak? For defending my family name? But she was cute, so I decided to let it go. Some time later, she introduced me to the subversive literature that got me into such trouble with Dad. It explained in excruciating detail how Olav had triggered the Civil War, which in turn led to more wars, the 2nd Frontier War and the Denebian Bad War to name only two.

So I went into the Navy, which took me far from Rhylanor and all these parties, and now I was heading into my second party of the day. At the first, I’d alienated the Countess of all people, and that was before inadvertently injecting some of my pent-up rage into her daughter’s brain. What *faux pas* would I manage to commit at this one?

From its entrance, the fighter bay seemed unusually dark, and I braced myself as we entered.

“*Surprise!*” the darkness erupted. Indeed it would have been if I hadn’t been expecting it. Instead of the lights coming on, there was live video of my reaction projected onto three different bulkheads — no, make that four — the crew cheering, some chants of “Olav, Olav”, and a vast assortment of happy birthdays called out, at least one of them in Gvegh, followed by a nice, long howl. I squinted, looking around, my eyes still adjusting to the dim, reflected light. Someone, probably several someones, had gone all out, as they’d cleared the fighter bay and built an extra tier using maintenance lifts and the plascrete panels intended for emergency shelters. And was that a live band in the corner?

They began playing the first strains of “From the Dark to the Stars,” the semi-official hymn of the Imperial Navy Fighter Corps. And, yes, it looked like they were going to intermix the instrumentation with a choral performance as well, as three fighter wings worth of crew began singing the opening verse. Everyone else waited for the chorus, which was easier on the vocal cords.

In the cold, cold space between

There we brave few are seen

Riding the torches bright and free

In front we shall always be

The projections of me looking completely unsurprised switched to video footage from my career, both snippets of the official feeds — promotion ceremonies and such — as well as more candid shots. There I was, a much younger me, graduating from the academy, then arms deep in some maintenance frame, then getting my service medal after the Battle of Sting. Oh, and there was one of my favorite fighters followed by an image of Spooky and I drinking something on shore leave. They had shots of me coming aboard, talking with Nizlich during the first inspections. Oh, and they even pulled the footage from the memorial. Fa’Linto must have cooperated in this, because there was a feed from what I could only assume to be one of his marines. I appeared to be giving orders, two little perforations on my dress uniform’s tunic, while in the background, the two HPSS officers were laying on the floor, their hands cuffed to each other’s feet in a posture that defied common decency.

From the Dark to the stars

We rise

From the Dark to the stars

We ride

From the Stars to the Dark

They fall

From the Stars to the Light

We burn

I could feel a smile tugging at my lips as the projection returned to a live shot of me before transitioning to the Imperial sunbursts of the Navy and Marines, the lights finally coming on.

Maz, I noticed, was looking at me as though hoping my non-existent skullcap would malfunction once more. It was a visual reminder to keep my psychic curtain firmly in place despite the wave of surprise I'd thought I'd prepared myself for.

This crew was something else. They barely knew me, and already they were showing me that they saw and accepted me. That more than made up for the previous irritation. Indeed, how could I have expected anything on this scale? This showed resourcefulness, a certain disregard of protocol, and most of all, teamwork in pursuit of a common goal. They may have been battered and suffered a defeat, but they were rallying, and someone had used me and my reputation to accelerate that process.

As the choral group finished their closing notes, bringing the hymn to an end, I thought back over everything that had happened since arriving on board. Yes, I felt good about this crew.

I raised my arm, and the NCOs, though scattered through the crowd, called the crew to attention. Stefani, meanwhile, leaving nothing to chance, appeared out of nowhere and offered me a microphone.

"Happy birthday, sir. Would you like to say a few words to the crew?"

"Well done, Commander," I said, accepting the mic. It had a little red button on the side. I pressed it.

"Attention to orders," I said, my voice magnified over the PA. "On this day, I hereby bequeath two days of reduced duty. And in recognition of the extreme effort I see before me, I add an extra day. It is to my honor that I accept this celebration. It is to your honor in creating it. At ease."

The bay, though still silent, became noticeably more relaxed.

"I have been making my own judgment of the quality of this crew since arriving," I continued, "and I have to say, I have not found you wanting in any respect. I will also thank you for not playing the Plankwell March."

"Aw, sheezit!" a distant voice rang out. "Kill it from the playlist!" Laughter roiled through the crowd.

I fully smiled at that. “Ah, well... learning curves for everyone. I know you all expect a speech, and maybe you’ll get one after I sample the cake. I salute you, crew of the Jaqueline, my shipmates, my crew in arms. You really know how to make a captain feel welcome. Enough from me. Let the party continue.”

The bosun’s call to fall out was immediately followed by the drummer’s commanding beat, telling everyone it was time to shake a leg and get this party into gear.

Handing the microphone back to Stef, I turned to Maz and said, “Well, let’s find the cake shall we?”

“This way, sir,” Stef said.

The cake was awe inspiring. Sculpted into a scale model representation of the Jaqueline, there were allergen barriers between its various sections, the color patterns of the frosting corresponding to INS food service safe-eat guidelines. They’d even projected a guide sheet on the bulkhead behind the table from where it was being served explaining the types of cakes composing each section. Apparently the forward section included dentani tree nuts with sweet milk frosting, a personal favorite.

After fielding several greetings from command staff as well as crew members I hadn’t yet met, I ended up at one of the small tables situated in the corner furthest from the band, a generous serving of the bridge on my plate and a cup of what the spacehand pouring it assured me was an entirely passable grog. A small sip ensured I would not be finishing the rest of it, at least not if I wanted to keep my wits about me.

“You’re not having any?” I asked Stef as I dug into my cake.

“No, sir. I don’t eat sweets.”

“And no grog?”

“On occasion,” she replied with a smile. “But tonight I think I vill abstain.”

“Hello,” Dr. Willin said, sitting down beside us with a half-empty cup of her own. “Mission Accomplished,” she added, looking at Stef.

“Obviously.”

“Why do I get the feeling there was an attempt to maneuver me?” I asked. “Was I really so upset about the idea of a party?” I attempted a mischievous smile that, judging from their sidelong expressions, seemed to fool absolutely no one. I’d have been curious to know what Maz would have made of this, were he present.

Where was he, anyway? Oh, there he was talking to Josefeen, chatting her up and probably hoping she'd renew her invitation for them to undertake their little secret project. I'd already had a taste of psi-sex, so I could understand his impulse.

And there was Bim Marshall, my IISS liaison. The delay caused by the replacement of the exploration pod had shut down my hopes for any sort of near-term exit from Jewell. It was all very understandable, but I'd given him authority to act on my behalf, and now I was wondering if it was the right thing to do. Since Maz was presently occupied, I decided to risk letting my psychic curtain fall open in order to extend a telepathic tendril. Noticing my stare, Bim smiled and waved, thinking, "*Captain Bim or Captain Marshall?*" as he approached.

"Happy birthday, sir. I want to let you know that everything is going quite well, but the new pod's installation will take some time."

"So I am given to understand," I said. He was telling the truth, but there was definitely something else going on in his head. Unfortunately, I had no time to get beneath the surface, as I had to respond, or the whole encounter would seem quite odd to everyone present. "Scout Marshall, did it occur to you to check in with me when you initiated a major refit operation that would ultimately change our readiness status and departure scheduling?"

I could feel Stefani tensing up, but I kept my focus on Bim, and perhaps due to this, I could sense he'd rehearsed his next words in advance.

"I'm sorry, sir. You're quite right. I should have warned you about that earlier, but judging from the most recent inspection, there was never a choice. One way or another, for the safety of the ship and crew, the old pod has to be replaced. I'm sure you above all people would agree."

"Replaced, yes, but on a timeline I approve. I am sure there would be questions from the Scout Service were I forced to leave you, the pod and the entire scout complement behind due to your failure to confirm the upgrade with our revised timetable."

I could sense my words hitting him like a punch to the gut, but to his credit, he retained full control over his composure, showing no sign of the now knotting muscles in his stomach. Instead, he nodded.

“Sir,” he said, “I wouldn’t blame you one bit. I was hoping to talk to you about it at the Imperial Palace, but you’d left so quickly. By the way, sir,” he said, “I just want to say I thought the way you comported yourself at the palace was... well, it was absolutely perfect, including how you handled the apology. It was at once magnanimous, yet it also conveyed strength under professional self-restraint. In short, no one could have done better.”

This wasn’t the first time he complimented me to curry favor, but while I’d initially been impressed by his audacity, now he was laying it on a bit thick.

“What do you want, Bim?” I asked as I reached out with my telepathy, this time trying to fully dive into his mind.

“I... uh... well, I want the same thing you want, sir.”

He wanted his own command. He wanted his own ship. It hit me as a flash of insight, like I was downloading knowledge from his subconscious and laying it out on top of my own conscious mind to be instantly understood.

“Do as I’m telling you, Bim,” Scout Leader Ruurin had told him, “and I’ll make sure you’re on the short list for a surplus Scout Courier when you decide to retire.”

That was to be his reward for helping the IISS pull one over on the Navy. The pod we were in the process of ripping out was slated to be stripped for useful parts by General Products with the remainder to be scrapped. However, Martinsen was right. It wasn’t so damaged that it couldn’t be repaired, and so that’s what GP would end up doing. But in order to make it all work, they needed Bim to turn a blind eye to the fact that the Navy was letting go of a pod still worth, even in its current state, well over half a billion credits. Thanks to the documents that I’d given him the power to sign, as well as the IISS inspection report, the pod would be considered a near-complete loss. But with a little bit elbow grease, it would be repaired and would eventually be repurchased by the Navy at a later date. Of course, General Products wouldn’t charge the Navy full price as if it were brand new. That would be unethical. The Navy would receive a small discount due to the inclusion of “refurbished components”.

In other words, everything would be done legally. Nonetheless, IISS and GP were clearly scheming behind the Navy’s back. But the upshot for Bim was that he’d end up with his own ship, albeit on loan, whenever he

decided to muster out. The IISS would even service it for him. It was every scout's dream, and here it was being offered to him on a silver platter. How could he possibly refuse?

"I'll talk to GP and put pressure on them, sir, and I promise you, I'll speed things up. In the end, sir, we all want the same thing."

I shut down my probe and closed my psychic curtain, considering my Scout Liaison for a long moment.

"I doubt very much you want what I want, Bim. Commander Nizlich, we are going to reassess the need for scouts on this ship. Halt the purchase of the new pod. Inform GP that they are to continue dismounting the one they are working on. If you receive any attitude, assure them that the captain has come across a worrying development and is taking steps to correct the issue."

"I don't understand," Bim said, flush-faced. "What worrying development?"

"You, Scout Marshall, are the worrying development. You are dismissed from the ship, you will have to the end of the shift to clear your personal items and remove yourself. Failure to do so will result in more formal measures, including an accounting audit with the Quartermaster's Office."

I was fairly sure I was within my rights, I could dismiss anyone from the ship. Navy and Marine personnel could challenge it, but Scouts could not, serving entirely at the pleasure of the Navy. I was displeased that my attempt to develop better relations with the other service was undercut by simple greed and avarice.

Bim, his bottom lip trembling, managed a salute before turning and making a hasty exit.

Any chapter title suggestions?