There are moments that define you - brief snatches of time that remain frozen in your memory forever. Regret. Slivers of hope. That mishmash of pride and mortification when you conjured the courage to ask the prom queen to dance and then she, not her date, punched your lights out. This is what you remember when other people ask *when did it start?* or *what led you to greatness?* or *at what point did you stop looking where you put your feet, and decide to step off a cliff?*

Here.

It’s right here.

1: Collect Calls at the End of the Universe

I’d like to meet the asshole who decided it’s okay to call somebody while they’re hibernating. That’s the whole point of hibernating, isn’t it? To not talk to anybody? I mean, why the hell did I drop 50k to take an eight-month nap if I wanted to get interrupted?

“Answer,” I snarl at the blinking yellow light that appears in the middle of my dream. It obscures the strippers and the cotton candy. The call connects with no video. This is okay, because the strippers are likely sexier than whoever’s sticking their nose into my subconscious. “What the fuck do you want?”

“Rick Stern?”The voice is male, human, polite.

“Yeah, who’re you?”

“This is Paul Chippers.”

I’m confused. Paul Chippers the media mogul? Quintillionaire don’t tend to call washups like me. And even if they did, they have people to do that. Hell, their people have people, and those people have people. There’s supposed to be a whole army of people’s people between me and this guy. That’s just the way of things. It’s for my protection, and not the other way around. Economic titans like Paul Chippers play by a different set of rules than the rest of us. He’s in a realm where us mere mortals get trampled as a reward for standing around and looking dumb.

“I’ve got a proposition for you,” he says.

I open my eyes and find the ceiling of my sleeping tube a few inches away. Yep, I’m in the same place as when I fell asleep. Hotel rooms have been getting smaller for centuries – hard to believe people used to get their own bed, bathroom, and a bureau for their shit. Nowadays, you get a sleeping tube and, if you’re in a real posh joint, a complimentary breath mint. I look down and see the tops of the transparent air bladders buffeting my torso. I’d lift my head to get a better look, but there’s another one covering my scalp like a full helmet. It feels like my face is stuffed in a nylon balloon that has helpfully moved clear of my mouth and nose and jaw, so I can communicate with the outside world. Completely unnecessary, what with cranial implants allowing two-way communication without speaking, but over the centuries of providing hibernation services, the SleepPlex discovered a sharp increase in customer satisfaction when people didn’t awaken to the sensation of being smothered.

I’m on a short hop. Eight months. I think *sleep data* and a whole slew of it slides in from the left-hand side of my vision. Transmitted directly into my visual cortex, the images and charts display in such a way that my brain thinks it’s floating about six inches in front of my face. This is a little disconcerting considering the wall of the tube is closer than that. Years of use has acclimated me to the weird sensation of seeing things beyond the edges of physical spaces. I glance at the charts that depict various bits of trivia about my sleep experience and focus in on the timer that shows when I’m supposed to wake up. I’ve been asleep six months. A lot can happen in six months.

I can hear Chippers breathing on the other end of the line. Which means he’s not using a cranial implant like I am. I wonder if he’s using an ear bud or if he’s got a special person standing next to him who does nothing but hold one of those phone things I’ve seen in historical vids.

“What’s this proposition?” I ask him.

“I want you to put together a team for me. I need a coach.”

“Are you talking spaceball?”

“That’s right. The Cup. The Andosians are in a building year.”

“So are we. ‘Cept we’re building up a general population instead of a team. Have you been watching the news? There’s a war going on.”

Not that I really know anything on the subject. If I were the kind of person who trolled the public news streams, I’d know all about it. I’d be sick with information. The kind of helplessness you get from data overload. When you glut yourself with all the news reports, all the firsthand accounts, even the rumored technical specifications of the Edochian mothership that popped into Sol earlier this year– oh, it’s 2857, in case you’re wondering – and blew up Earth, and then laid waste to the completely surprised human fleet assembled around the planet. So here I am on Pronos, as far away from all that bullshit as I can get, sitting in near-suspended animation and waiting for the universe to calm down.

“Truce, my friend,” Chippers says. “There’s a truce. In most places, anyway. Somebody’s decided that the Spaceball Cup would be a great effort toward normalizing relations with the other races.”

“And I see that somebody has no idea what spaceball is,” I observe. “Are we talking about the same sport?”

“Yes.”

“Spaceball.”

“Yes.”

“Where the object is to maul the other team.”

“Isn’t it to score points?” Chippers asked.

I snort. “Yeah, but only after the mauling. Scoring points is like cuddling after you’re done fucking somebody. I don’t do it because I like cuddling, but because if I do it convincingly enough, I get to have sex again. Same thing with spaceball. If I score enough points, people think I’m great. Then I get to beat the shit outta somebody else.”

“I’ve never heard anybody explain it that way before.”

“I’m pretty good with the metaphors.”

“That’s great. Get our spirits up in a time of darkness, let everybody know that humans don’t quit, ever.”

For fuck’s sake, somebody save me from this guy. “Find someone else.”

“Everyone has turned me down.”

My arm itches. I have an overwhelming desire to scratch, amplified by my immobilization. “What about Lester Bimms?”

“Dead.”

“Bummer.” It’s not. Lester’s a dickhead. Was. “What happened?”

“He stabbed a referee at an exhibition game before the war. With a straw, of all things. He died in prison, something to do with food poisoning.”

Lester only drank from an iron straw with holes in it. He said if he could suck his fruit juice through that, he’d have lungs powerful enough to scream his players across the goal line. An interesting idea considering the same players operated in the vacuum of space. It didn’t shock me that he’d tried to kill a bee – we called refs that because of the yellow and black blinking stripes on their exosuits. Bee harm was everyone’s wet dream.

“What about Plono Reeck? He’s a good coach.”

“The Andosians passed a law prohibiting their citizens from playing or coaching for the opposing races. Plono almost beat them during the last cup tournament. He scares them a little bit, I think.”

Plono would have won, too, if his quarterback, a wiry young man from the Rim Colonies, hadn’t lost his bearings and dropped out of the pocket into the path of the Andosian linebackers. The largest intact pieces they found after that spectacular collision were his exosuit’s gloves and a thigh plate.

I rattle off five more names.

Chippers has answers for all of them. “I’m retired,” I try.

“You’re only forty.”

“I got banned from the league. The bees won’t let me near an arena.”

“But you weren’t arrested. You didn’t do any time for it.”

“Only ‘cuz everyone agreed the guy had it coming. I pleaded temporary insanity and won.”

“That was on primetime. Fifty trillion people saw you shoot him.”

“The fucker was stinging my guys every chance he got,” I say, referring to the real reason we called spaceball referees bees. Penalties involve getting shot with low-yield EMP rifles that temporarily immobilize the offending player. I’d rather be sodomized by a Brakkan tiger than be helpless in a spaceball arena. Brakkan tigers have three dicks. Barbed. “Even the other team thought he was out of control.”

“You did sleep with his wife.”

“I didn’t have a choice. Veeni women are sirens, and I’m not just saying that. They croon at you and it’s all over.”

“What was it like?”

“I still have nightmares about it. Look, I can’t coach.”

“What if I told you I got the Spaceball Referee Association to lift the ban?”

“I’d say you were snorting hooda dust.”

Chippers laughs. It’s fake laughter, the kind when the person is offended but they don’t want to let you think that they’re offended. “Well?” he asks. “What would you say if I got them to lift the ban?”

“The SRA’s letter was pretty explicit. Permanent ban.”

“It’s lifted, if you coach for me.”

I nearly disconnect right then. Some little voice in the back of my head whispers dreams of greatness and glory. You’d think I’d have learned by now to ignore that voice. It’s usually the one that gets me into trouble.

I try to tap a finger, but my hands are engulfed in air bladders that keep my arms stable during slumber. I still dream, and dreaming people tend to thrash around. So, I settle for flicking the inside of my teeth with my tongue. I look back at the sleep data and see today’s date. This cycle’s season starts in two weeks. We must be talking about next cycle. He couldn’t possibly be thinking of this cycle. That’s crazy. “This is for next season, right?”

“Nope. This season.”

“Holy shit, I’m the last person on your list, aren’t I?”

“Yes.”

“How much am I going to get paid for being at the bottom?”

“Five hundred grand.”

“You’re joking. Spaceball coaches earn at least five million for fielding a team.”

“Most coaches don’t cost four million in bribes to get reinstated.”

“Oh.”

“Your contract includes fifty million if you win the cup.”

Winning the cup is a very big ‘if’. I’m sure Chippers wouldn’t be sticking his nose into things – media mogul and all. Still, I don’t need some manager trying to tell me what to do. “I run the team my way.”

“Done. Just win.”

“Support?”

“No expense will be spared.”

“Except my salary, of course.”

“That’s the deal.”

“I’ll need a mobile practice field. Full size, not one of those half-courts.”

“Won’t be an issue. When and where do you need it?”

I think about it. Then I make the first in a long string of shoot-from-the-hip decisions. I tell him where I want the field.

There’s a pause, and then Chippers laughs. Hard. Real this time. “Oho. If you’re doing what I think you’re doing, this will be a cup tournament to remember. To be on the safe side, I’ll arrange a security contingent to go with the field.”

Even though I know the season starts in less than two weeks, I smile. Too little time to put together a team, train it, win twelve regular season games and reach, let alone win, the cup tournament. I smile all the same. It’s an opportunity I’d be an idiot to pass up. “Okay, Mr. Chippers, you got yourself a coach.”

“Excellent. Welcome to Chipper’s Clippers, Rick.”

“Wait, what? That’s not the name of the team, is it?”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Jesus Christ.”

Modeled after gridiron football, the ancient sport still played in atmo by teams too poor to afford exosuits, spaceball evolved over the centuries into a serious cash cow for advertising conglomerates, sports apparel manufacturers, and medevac companies. Teams are composed of quarterbacks, linemen, tight ends, pass receivers, defensive linebackers, special teams, and even a kicker. The goal is to score touchdowns and field advancement is measured in downs, though instead of just one hundred yards, the field is now a kilometer in length. Players trade pads and cleats for reinforced ulenium exosuits. Assault and battery is allowed, even encouraged, and hardly any game ends without a maiming or suspicious death.

Before I exit the sleeping tube, I call an old friend, someone I know I can count on in a tight spot. I’m in a vise. I let the call ring twenty times before I pay the extra fifty credits to override. I’m rewarded with the image of a sixty-year-old man doing the horizontal tango with a girl a third his age, in full motion color. It’s like a space wreck – I’m revolted but I can't tear my eyes away. That’s the downside to cranial comm implants. I really can’t look away. I could’ve ended the call to make the nightmare stop, but fifty creds is fifty creds.

“Bucky,” I manage to shout. “Answer your damn vid.”

The girl shrieks and Bucky yells, “Goddamn it, Rick. Can’t a man get laid without you peeping over his shoulder?” He rolls off the girl, giving me a great view. Bucky’s wrinkled face appears in the way.

I consider him the best defensive coordinator alive, though you wouldn’t know it to look at his record. He lost more than he won, a statistic I blame on faulty players. If he had guys crazy enough to do what he wanted, he’d win every game. Good thing I know where to find people like that, but Bucky isn’t going to be happy about it. “Bucky, if you would just get the comm implant, I wouldn’t have to—”

“You know I don’t do that fucking implant shit,” he snaps.

“I saw your balls flop back and forth. I can’t un-see that. I’m gonna need a shitload of therapy.”

“Well, what’s so goddamn important?”

“Get yourself together and meet me in Freehaven. I need your help to put together a team.”

“Early to be looking at next year, ain’t it?”

“It’s late. We play in two weeks.”

Bucky snorted. “Right. I thought you was banned. And aren’t you supposed to be in a freezer?”

“I was, on both counts. Paul Chippers is the money, and he swung a deal.”

“Chippers? The rich dude. Deal? What kind of deal?”

“Lots of bribes.”

“And why are we meetin’ in Freehaven, of all places?”

“Because most of the players I want to hire are there.”

Bucky spat on the floor. Indoors, outdoors, he doesn’t care. The universe is his spit cup. “From the clans? From the fuckin’ clans? Are you out of your fuckin’ mind?”

“I need a team that can beat the Andosians. They’re telepathic. Every player knows what all his teammates know. I want to overwhelm them with the most brutal offensive line I can get on short notice. The clans are the place to get it.”

Instead of expensive wars, the pirate clans on the Rim settle most of their territorial disputes with games of spaceball. No holds barred contests sans referees. Victorious teams usually win not by score, but by being the only ones left standing at the end of the day. Nobody hires clan players because the personal injury insurance rates cost more than their entire roster. They don’t have Paul Chippers footing the bill.

“Well, if you want crazy, then you picked a helluva place to get it. It’s in the water out there. How long I got?” Bucky asks.

“I’m still Pronos, and I’ve got a couple of stops on the way. Say, two days?”

“I can do that. What’re we called?”

I tell him.

“Aw, fuckin’ hell, Rick.”

2: Getting the Band Back Together

I take a shuttle over to the Pronos Penitentiary Facility, a penal colony built on the southern pole. We’re talking right on top of the damn thing, too, so cold my dick shrinks to the size of my pinky toe upon exiting the shuttle.

I find the man I’m looking for on a long list of pending transfers, and arrange for a room to brief the prisoner. He comes to the room escorted by six nervous guards. I say nervous because the human tank standing between them can probably eat a shock stick and shit out a light bulb. Crazy Eddie is seven feet tall and weighs over four hundred pounds. I can’t remember if he has a surname. After looking into eyes that hold more than a hint of madness, I decide Crazy is an apt first name for the best pass blocker in the Universe. It’s rumored he can teleport, but of course only when no one is looking. Crazy Eddie refuses to use an environment sleeve inside of his exosuit, thereby making any breach of the protective shell fatal. He says it allows him to move faster. I figure he just doesn’t like the suit sock. The sock is a one-piece jumpsuit that regulates all sorts of physical things but has the tensile sensation of wearing a blanket of squirming worms. So yeah, gross.

“I know you,” Crazy Eddie pronounces as soon as the guards leave the room. “You’re that mad bastard who shot a bee a few years back. How come you’re not in here with me?”

“I got off with community service,” I say. “What’re you doing in here, Eddie?”

“Mix-up.”

“Always is.”

“I knew you’d understand.”

“I need you to play for me, Eddie.”

“In case you haven’t noticed,” he says, gesturing at the walls with hands larger than my head, “I’m kinda stuck here.”

“What’s the buyoff set at?” I ask.

Crime has a price. Oh, I’m not talking about the sociological costs, or the victim’s pain, or that kind of shit. Crime has an actual cost, in credits. Prison companies design their detention centers to be so nasty that you’ll sell your own mother to get out of one. Sort of a store with products you don’t ever want to buy, and with no exits. Ever hear people ask if the rich can do anything and get away with it? Well, if they’re rich enough, then the answer to that question is a definitive yes. Yes, they can.

“Half a mil,” Crazy Eddie says.

“I’ll have you out of here in twenty minutes.” I pause. “If you want to play, that is.”

“Hell, yeah. Who’s running the team?”

“Me. I got the ban lifted.”

“How’d you manage that?”

“Paul Chippers is backing the team. Know who he is?”

“Doesn’t he own a couple of big companies?”

I nod. Slow, so he won’t get confused. “That’s right, Eddie. I’m going to put some traveling expense credits in your account. After you’re released, get to Freehaven by Wednesday. We start then.”

“Two days is all I get?”

I don’t want to give him even that, but I’m sure as hell not going to travel with him. “How long is your sentence?”

“Ten years.”

“What would you rather have, ten years or two days?”

He thinks about it. “I guess I’ll take the two days. What did you say the name of the team was?”

“I didn’t. You don’t want to know, Eddie. See you in Freehaven.”

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My next stop isn’t really a stop. It’s a Hail Mary, shot in the dark, pee in the middle of the night without turning on the lamp in the lavatory and going by sonar, whatever you want to call it.

I find a charter pilot and pay her ten large to haul my ass out to the Fleet training grounds on the other side of the Pronos solar system. The pilot isn’t crazy about flying near Fleet Marine starfighters armed with live shots, but she’s crazy about spaceball. Once I tell her who I am and what I’m doing, she forgets that we were heading unannounced into a shooting range.

“I can’t believe I’m flying with the real Rick Stern,” the pilot says for the hundredth fucking time since I stepped onboard. Her name is Luci.

A half-dozen starfighters buzz us. I see cannons and missiles all over them and my stomach lurches.

“Don’t you have to send some code, so we don’t get blown up?” I ask.

“Oh, don’t worry honey, I won’t let anything happen to you,” she says, and then mashes her hand on her control panel. The starfighters even out in front and somebody came over the intercom and tells us to follow them. Luci wiggles her fingers at me. “See? Magic fingers. Bet you’re wondering what else they can do, eh, big boy?”

We dock with the local station and I disembark from the ship into the not-so-welcoming arms of the Fleet Marines.

“Luci said she had priority cargo,” the guy in charge says. “Who’re you?”

“My name is Rick,” I say. “I need to see Laura Rivens.”

“Are you expected?”

“Nope, and I’m trying to keep it a surprise.”

The marine shakes his head. “First, Miss Rivens is not fond of surprises, and two, she works in a restricted area. I don’t think you qualify as authorized personnel.”

“It’s Mrs.,” I tell him.

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s Mrs. Rivens. She’s married.”

The marine frowns. I watch the guy’s fantasy evaporate from his eyes. “What?” he asks. “Who’s the lucky guy?”

I give him a lopsided grin. “That sorry bastard would be me.”

Laura and I met back when I was the coach for the Helios Hawks. She was in charge of the exosuits, making sure they were combat – I mean, game – ready. We had the usual whirlwind romance, ending up with a drunken wedding neither of us remembered and I was sure didn’t mean anything. We made a great team, with me devising clever plays and her blurring the lines between legal and completely immoral suit mods. We would’ve made the cup that year, but then I slept with somebody I shouldn’t have, shot a bee, and discovered Laura was sincere about the whole married thing. I got banned and she was gone.

Mrs. Rivens arrives on the hanger deck eight minutes after I tell the Marine who I am. First time in two years I’d seen her, and she looks just as mad. She stalks right up to me, her black hair bouncing on her shoulders in that nice way I’ve always adored and punches me square in the mouth. Put her back into it, locked her wrist, the whole ninety meters. My legs disappear at the hip. I don’t remember hitting the deck, but there I am, staring at the gray plating and wondering why the hell I didn’t expected that.

“Hey hon,” I say, checking my teeth with my tongue. All there. “Nice to see you, too.”

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing here?” she shouts at me. “No, don’t tell me. You’ve got some harebrained plan to make a quick credit, or some shit. You need me to build you something that will never work, not unlike our marriage, I might add. Why don’t you take your fucking sorry broke ass back to whatever rock you climbed out from under? Leave me the fuck alone.”

She kicks me in the stomach. I was just getting up, too. Laura pulls her foot back for another go and I decide once is enough, thanks.

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It’s sometime in early 2840 and I’m about to have a really bad day. I’m hazy on the exact date. I know I’d just turned 23 but thank God it wasn’t my actual birthday because it would’ve made that day into a real shitty one for the rest of my life. It starts out pretty good, though. I wake up from a dream and find the girl who was in it doing exactly what I’d dreamt she’d done with my morning wood. Come to think of it, after comparing all the mornings I’ve experienced since that one, it’s fair to say that day started out absolutely fucking incredible.

Her name is Mandy and she dates spaceball quarterbacks. We’ve been together three weeks, ever since her ex-boyfriend got creamed and I went from backup QB to the real deal. Finally. You’d think that in a universe this big there’d be enough spaceball teams to accommodate all the players. But no, somebody still has to get their goddamn chest cavity crushed to advance your career.

Along with my promotion I also got the quarterback’s suite. I get my own bunk with my own shower and enough room to stand up without banging my face on a bulkhead. It even has a window overlooking the field – not that there’s anything there, this being space and all. But it’s nice to peer out and imagine how I was going to obliterate the team we’re playing today. Some upstart from the Rim called Momma’s Bunch – a sure sign of no sponsors and shitty suits. I see us flying in tight formations while the Bunch flounders around. I see me there in the pocket. Launching the ball even as their linebackers close in, watching them adjust course and shoot past me. My long-range optics sees the red streak of the spaceball caught in the end zone, adding yet another TD to our ever-increasing score. Then my eyes roll up in my head because Mandy can do amazing things with her tongue.

Right after that my great morning rolled off a goddamn cliff.

The suit technician assigned to me that day didn’t have his coffee, or breakfast, or a morning blowjob, or whatever the guy needed to set him on his feet, because he nearly breaks my hand putting on my suit.

“Jesus, Mike!” I shout. “My fingers go in one hole each, not all in the fucking thumb!”

All motion in the fitting room stops dead. It’s a big room. Thirty people are stuffing themselves into suits. Lots of technicians and robots and tubes and wires and hissing oxygen. Enough electronic whizzbang equipment to build a whole starship. They all freeze. I can feel terror ooze into the room. A soft creeper along the floor that’s invisible but if it touches your foot, you’re a goner. Injuring a quarterback before a game means somebody is going to die. Always happens. Don’t ask me why. It’s just one of those things.

“Would you all stop fucking staring at me?” I say to them. I wiggle my fingers at them. “My hand is fine.”

The room jumpstarts back to frenzied activity. It’s a little forced.

I gave Mike the finger. “Try not to break it off, asshole.”

Mike shrugs. “Whoops.”

The game starts with a shitty snap and awful field position and it seems like it takes us all goddamn day to march down the field and score. That touchdown costs us the entire first quarter and three of my receivers. Momma’s Bunch are animals. I mean, it’s normal to have collisions, but these fuckers seem like they’re in a demolition derby instead of a spaceball game.

Turns out, demolition is all they’re good at. When they get the ball, we intercept it on the first play.

Intercepting a spaceball, a tiny, little fucking ball in the vastness of the arena, means one of two things. Either you can be in the right place at the right exact time and should be buying lottery tickets, or the offensive coordinator for that team is a moron. And he’s serious about it, because it takes real skill to fuck up like that.

So, I zoom back out onto the field, call the play, take the snap, and look for my receiver who is supposed to be where my playbook says he’ll be *aaaaat right now!*

He isn’t.

I check the little green dots on my suit’s heads-up display that show me where everybody is. My receiver’s callout box is flashing red and indicates that he’s in three different places. His suit’s emergency medical suite is having a real hard time keeping the biggest chunk of him alive.

Then I notice that there’s a green dot behind me, and it belongs to one of my offensive tackles. That is not a good place for him to be. Through the big gaping hole in my offensive line charges two Momma’s Bunch enforcers. Oh, the real term is linebackers, but in spaceball, these guys are the enforcers. They have one job, and one job only. Fuck up the quarterback.

My suit has an inertial dampener, so when they crash into me I hear the dull screech of metal on metal rather than feel it. We go end over end, and I can tell from my HUD that they’ve grappled me. To this day, I can remember the words that slice through my head.

*fuckfuckFuckFuckFUCKFUCKFUCK!!!!!!!*

Here’s why: it’s tough for referee cameras to tell what’s happening between suits that are stuck together and careening through space.

I hear more metal screeching. Then the hull breach alarm klaxons go off, great loud screams in my ears that go well with my own screams. One enforcer has an ulenium cutter and it passes clean through my right shoulder.

My arm goes flying.

The enforcers push off of me. I can hear them laughing on the All-Suits Commlink. It’s where players taunt each other during the game. We tell each other how many times we’ve fucked the other guy’s mom, his girlfriend, and his baby sister who’s not even out of grade school yet. There are things you just don’t say to people, not without expecting to get shot, and the ASC hears all. Okay, okay I might have said some unflattering things about the other team. Everybody does it, sure, but I didn’t say anything that warranted this kind of treatment.

My suit’s medical package knocks me out while the internal shield system closes off the big hole in my suit. I end up on a hospital ship next to the recent team quarterback, who’d gotten a new ribcage to replace his shattered one. I get a new arm. Sure, the cybernetics are seamless. I have nerves and skin and even fingernails that grow, but it doesn’t work quite the same. Sometimes I still wake up in the middle of the night and can’t feel anything past my shoulder. Not interested in experiencing that sensation anywhere else on my body, I decide to retire from playing.

I never see Mandy again.

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So, I’m really careful not to crush all her toes when I grab Laura’s foot and yank her off her feet. The sound of her butt smacking off the deck is very satisfying. I pull her leg across my stomach until she’s straddling my chest. I sit up and cover her mouth before she can say anything that I’d regret hearing.

“Before you try to bite my fingers –” I start, she tries, I grab her hair and pull hard, she stops. “I’m not broke, I’m coaching again, Paul Chippers is the money, and he’s written me a blank check to win the Cup. So, I need a suit expert, and you’re the best. Always have been, always will. You can hate me if you want, and I’m sorry for that, but I need you. Name your price.” I let go of her.

She stares at me for a bit. “Ten million.”

“It’s yours.”

“And a divorce.”

“Sure,” I say, a little disappointed. I just let her beat me up, after all. But whatever, okay, anything to get her to sign on.

The corner of her mouth twitches. Laura rolls off me and stands up. I follow, a bit slower. “Is that a yes?”

“I’ll think about it,” she says over her shoulder, already walking away.

“Then I’ll see you in Freehaven,” I say.

She stops. Turns around. Stares. “That has got to be the craziest, stupidest, most asshole thing you’ve *ever* cooked up. The clans? The fucking clans? I might as well say no right now and save myself the trouble. All they care about is the size of their dicks and how many virgins they’ve fucked at one time.”

Always a classy girl. “I need crazy,” I tell her. “No, more than that, I need off the wall, one step away from an asylum, homegrown fucking psychotic. There’s only one place to find people like that, people that play no holds barred spaceball and crawl out of the arena alive. One place. Freehaven.”

“Yeah, if you can point them all in the same direction,” she says.

“I believe that’s what you call a ‘coach’ these days.” I dust off my pants. “Anyway, if you feel like you’re up to it, I mean, if you haven’t gotten rusty or anything, or you’ve lost the touch, I understand, and I can find somebody else to–”

“Do you want another fucking punch in the mouth?”

I grin at her. “See you in two days.”

3: Because Why Not?

Every retired coach keeps in their head the roster of their dream team. Hand-picked players who by themselves may not be stars but put together will give opposing teams a serious case of the willies. I think I’m alone, though, in the idea that I’ll find my quarterback in the form of a sex robot named Kissy Kissy.

The Altara Gate Pleasure Palace has seen better days. The small, automated space station hangs a few dozen kilometers from the Gate. It’s nearly lightless and completely deserted. The Gate itself only opens for authorized traffic and even with the truce, very few ships have clearance to use it. Credits are hard to find here, which is why I’m having so much trouble explaining to the station AI that I don’t want to use their services. I just want to talk.

“Kissy doesn’t do the talking bit,” the holographic AI says after I tell it what I want. I stand alone in the barren lobby. The only point of light in the darkness is the glow of this naked chick in front of me.

“Look, I want to hire her.”

“Then place your palm on the credit pad and we’ll get this show on the road.”

Chippers was only able to swing a two-hour pass for me on the Gate network, and the minutes are slipping away. Luci wasn’t available for this leg of the trip, mumbling something about hating Gate travel. I’d found another charter to fly me out here, some old couple named Timothy and Gladys. They weren’t impressed with my destination. They’d made it clear to me that they weren’t going to test the two-hour boundary, and if I took too long “would leave behind my sinning self to rot.” Which would be perfect if I were rich. I’m not. Hell is being broke and marooned in a Pleasure Palace. “Fine.” I pay the 300 credits, jump on the gravity pad, and in three minutes I’m standing in a small room with a robot with huge tits.

Kissy is lying naked on the bed. She looks real except for breasts big enough to tear the chest off a normal human woman. Some guys love this shit, but I don’t. To me, banging a robot is like having sex with a toaster. I like real skin, real sweat, real grunts and real boobs.

“Sheila downstairs says you want to talk,” Kissy says, stretching her legs in opposite directions. “I hope you want to do more than that, it’s been pretty boring around here lately.”

“I’m here to hire you–”

“You did already. Clock’s tickin’.”

“I’m here to hire you to play quarterback on my spaceball team.”

Kissy closes her legs and stands up in a graceful motion that defies gravity. Her boobs don’t move at all. No bounce, no jiggle. I can’t stand that. She comes over and reaches for my belt.

I step back. “I’m not here for that.”

“You into guys?” she asks. “I got some attachments.”

“Nope, I just like my women real. No offense.”

Kissy pouts. “Oh, you’re one of those.”

“Those what?”

“Racists.”

I stare at her. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You don’t want to have sex with me.”

“And that counts as racial disparity?” I demand. “Just because I don’t want to bang you doesn’t mean I’m against robot rights. I really don’t care either way, if you really want to know.”

Kissy sits back down on the bed, crosses her legs, and puts her hand on her knees. “You say you’re into women. If you didn’t know I was a robot–”

I gesture at her tits. “Really?”

She shrugs. Her breasts shrink to normal size. Man, I want to be able to do that with my gut.

“Are you attracted to me now?” Kissy asks. “I know you’re going to say yes, but now that you do know I’m a robot, you don’t want to have sex, so that means you’re racist.” She gives me one of those looks that says *settle in for the long haul, buddy, we’re going to be here awhile*.

I don’t have awhile. I have an hour to convince this sex robot-turned-philosophy major to quarterback. I start to wonder if she’s worth the trouble. Give me convicted felons any day. “Look, Kissy, you’re right, I don’t want to have sex with you. I might have had I not known you were a robot. But I didn’t come all the way out here on a two-hour Gate pass – which is half over, I might add – to debate basic personal liberties of those who cannot legitimately be called people.” Her eyebrows climb halfway up her forehead. I plow right on. “In my book, you need basic emotions to go with those basic liberties. For one, you need to be able to hate. Liberty isn’t all that great if you can’t take it from somebody else you despise. Two, you can’t have hate without love, which is pretty close to the same thing. You spend the same amount of time thinking about somebody. Learning about them. Understanding them. Then you try to get them to do what you want. If you love them, you want them to ignore all your issues. If you hate them, then you want them to die. So, I guess, that’s where they’re different, and I had a point I was trying to make but I forgot.” I pause and draw a deep breath. “I need a quarterback for my spaceball team. I saw the promo vid you did all those years back. Most everybody thought it was a joke, but I saw some real sweet moves. You’d make a great player. So, how about it?”

Kissy blinks. She opens her mouth to speak, closes it, and says, “I’d like to meet the woman who fucked you up.”

“If you’re serious about that, come out and play for me. My wife is in charge of the exosuits. She wants a divorce.”

“Really? Why would she want that?”

Sarcasm. Fantastic.

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I get the look of death from Gladys when I escort my new quarterback onboard their transport plane. Kissy is wearing a nearly transparent teddy. Timothy has a hard time not staring.

“Your bunk is in the back on the left,” I tell Kissy. “I think Gladys would appreciate it if you wore something a bit less revealing.” I smile at Gladys, thinking I might win some points.

Glady’s expression gets even more stony. Didn’t think it was possible.

Kissy glances at Gladys, who’s wearing black pants and a black jacket buttoned up to her chin. “You shouldn’t wear such confining clothes, my dear,” Kissy says. “A woman’s body is beautiful and is meant to be celebrated. For instance, that jacket looks positively stifling and is doing nothing to show off your breasts. Are those real? I would *so* love to have real tits.”

I groan. “Oh, for Christ’s sake, Kissy –“

Gladys jumps out of her seat so fast I think I’m under attack. “Don’t you take the Lord’s name in vain on my ship,” she shouts. She whips around and shakes her finger at her husband. Gladys’ index finger is longer than normal, as if decades of finger shaking has somehow elongated the digit. “And you,” she continues, “I told you to clear all our destinations with me before we take on clients. You knew we were coming here, didn’t you? You knew.”

Timothy looks helpless. Either he’s really dumb or he’s looking through his wife’s head at the opposite wall, waiting for the storm to subside. I’ve employed the technique plenty of times. When Gladys looks as if she’s running out of steam, Timothy stands up and turns to Kissy. “You’ll find everything you need in your stateroom, Miss. Mr. Stern, perhaps it would be best if you escorted your friend to the rear of the ship.”

I grab Kissy’s elbow with my cybernetic hand, press down hard enough to get her attention, and steer her aft. Thankfully, we get our own staterooms. I push Kissy into hers and duck into mine, the steel door closing off her. “Wait a minute, you never said your arm was–”

I’d just sat down to take off my boots when there was a banging at the door. I open it and find Kissy wearing a smart pantsuit. “Your monthly nanocloth fees must be huge. I only get a few options to choose from. Is there anything you don’t have?”

Kissy pushes past me. She plants her hands on her hips. “You never said you were a cyborg.”

“Whoa. Easy throwing around the C word. It’s just my arm, not like its half my body. I still got all my major organs.”

“So, you’re part robot, and you still won’t have sex with me?”

“Kissy. I’d like to get a few hours’ sleep. I’m not spending the entire trip to Freehaven arguing about this.”

“But you upgraded yourself to be more like us – “

“GODDAMN IT, IT WASN’T MY FUCKING IDEA. It’s not like I walked into a chop shop and traded it in. A linebacker took it home as a souvenir.”

She cocks her head at me. “Freehaven, you said?”

“Yes. That’s where we’re going.”

“Well,” Kissy declares, “at least there will be lots of people there who will have sex with me.”

“What is this obsession with me sleeping with you?”

“Everyone wants to have sex with me. You don’t. I don’t understand why.”

It hits me that she’s right. Sex is what she was made for. Everyone she met had wanted only one thing from her. Ever. Until today. “I think I know why,” I tell her. “You were told you had a purpose. That you were made to do it. You’re the best at it, even. But here’s a guy standing in front of you who doesn’t want you. But you’re the best, how could he not? Is it you? Are you broken? Am I on the right track?”

Kissy nods. She looks vulnerable, for a robot. But I’m tired and I think strange things when I’m on the edge of sleep. “Look, Kissy, you might think you were made to have sex, but I think you were made to play spaceball. I look at you and see something different than everybody else. I see you hurling the ball to the end zone from a star system away. I see you taking the enemy’s blitz and turning it into a cheese grater. Some people see big tits when they look at you, Kissy, and I hope you keep them toned down when we’re out in public, by the way, but in my opinion, you were made to be a weapon. You are going to fucking destroy the competition, and I can’t wait to unleash you on the battlefield.”

“You really think that? You’re not just saying it to make me feel better?”

“Kissy, the sex job was only temporary. Spaceball is your destiny.”

She smiles and kisses me on the cheek. “Thank you,” she whispers in my ear, and then practically skips out of the room. I blink as the door slides shut behind her. My brain attempts to make sense of what just happened, but in the end, I give up and drop onto the narrow bunk. Deep thoughts should be left to deep people with deep pockets. Yet, one thought chases me to sleep.

*A weapon…hmm…*

4: Don’t Mess with Mall Security

Originally an impromptu trading post, six hundred years and a Rim War has transformed Freehaven Outpost into a ring station four kilometers in diameter, with 25,000 semi-permanent residents and an annual traffic of over two million starships. The more recent war with the Edochians has left Freehaven Station largely untouched. While it does straddle eleven clan territories and there are ample shipping lanes nearby, even the Edochians are hesitant to stir up the pirates. The clans do very well fighting amongst themselves. If the last time they fought a common enemy was any indication, they should be allowed to kill each other without distraction.

I wave goodbye to Gladys when she and Timothy drop us off, but she doesn’t wave back. Not even after I smile at her. I’d always gotten good mileage out of that smile. Instead, she wrinkles her nose at me leaves without another word.

“That was the most uptight woman I’ve ever met,” I say to Kissy as we stand in line to get processed. Mostly, station security only wants to know if you’re carrying any big guns. Not little guns for killing people – though they’d confiscate those, too – but big ones that blow holes in the hull. Or explosives. Security always gets excited about explosives. Kissy is still wearing her pantsuit, and hope the teddy won’t make an appearance when we meet-

“ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?” Laura shouts from across the room.

All eyes flip to her, see that she’s pointing, and then sweep in that direction. They are confused, though. Nothing out of the ordinary. I would’ve expected burning clowns with an announcement like that. Maybe if I don’t make eye contact she’ll go away.

“I know you can see me, you piece of shit,” Laura yells. She’s just beyond the processing checkpoint and still has her luggage over her shoulder. “You drag my ass all the way out to this shithole, then have the fucking gall to show up with her? I take it that’s the fucking cum dump tramp you traded me in for?”

The crowd goes silent.

I cover my face with one hand and stare at my wife through my fingers. She glares at me with her hands on her hips, hurt and rage burning in her eyes – and something else. A glimmer, a twitching of the corners of her lips – that bitch! She’s fucking enjoying this!

I shrug, and then raise my voice so all can hear. “Sorry, babe,” I say, “but you won’t swallow.”

Have you ever heard two hundred women gasp all at the same time? Followed by the low rumble of as many men chuckling and outright laughing? I think it’s the start of an exquisite symphony, but I don’t get to hear the rest of it. While I stand there grinning like an idiot, I discover that Freehaven Security didn’t do a very thorough job searching my wife’s person. She’s suddenly holding a palm-sized kinetic pistol.

BANG!

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Do yourself a favor and don’t get shot on Freehaven. Actually, I take that back. If you do get shot, make sure you die. There’s only one hospital on Freehaven. Its patients are all poor handlers of explosives, bad hackers, and the slowest draws after somebody’s been called a cheater. The service is pretty good, they’ll patch you up quick and get you back on your feet in an under an hour, but it’s depressing to be in the same building with so many underachievers.

Bucky is waiting for me when I check out. On his arm is the same girl he’d been with when I interrupted him yesterday. She looks bored. Bucky looks harassed. I point my chin at the girl. “Who’s this?”

“This,” the girl says, “is Bucky’s manager. You want to hire my guy here, then you go through me.”

I stare at her. My neck seems stuck and it takes a while to rotate my head at Bucky. “What. The. Fuck.”

The girl waves her hand in front of my face. “Over here, big boy. Let’s talk money. You obviously need Mr. Williams and I think ten million is a good starting point for our negotiations.”

I ignore her. “Bucky. Explain.”

“Mr. Stern, you gotta pay attention. You can catch up with your friend when we’ve settled on his salary, so why don’t we – hey. You can’t—”

The rest of her sentence is garbled. Might have something to do with my hand on her face. “Explanation. Now.”

“Easy, Rick,” Bucky says. “She don’t know you, and it was my idea, yeah? It was my idea. I’m no good with money and she keeps me from going broke, you know? I thought it a good idea to get an agreement, you know, up front, ‘cuz we’re backed by Chippers and I say take him for as much as we can get. Never know if we’re gonna make it past the first practice, the clans aren’t exactly dependable, you know? I’m sorry. Would you please take your hand off her head? I seen what you do when you’re really pissed, and I love her face just the way it is.”

“Your idea, eh?” I let go of the girl and shake my head. This is too much for one day. “I can’t believe this shit, Bucky, I just got out of the hospital and you’re out here with your fuck buddy-turned manager—“

“We’re getting married.”

“—trying to hit me up for – what? To her? Bucky, how long have you known her?”

“Love at first sight, man,” Bucky says, hugging the girl. She hugs him back and glares at me.

“Didn’t know your dick could see through your pants,” I retort. “You’ll get five hundred grand to start, five million if we win the Cup. Deal?”

“Sure, Rick, whatever you say, that’s good for me.” The girl elbows him, frowning and shaking her head. “Janine, that’s good. Please, for the love o’ God, don’t push it. The last time I saw him this pissed he shot somebody on the vid, live to the fuckin’ Universe. He’ll do it here in the hallway with less than ten witnesses, no problem at all.”

I nod at Janine and let the matter drop. I really don’t mean to be such an asshole. I realize that I’m taking out all my anger at being shot by Laura on my friend’s fiancé.

“Where’s Laura?” I ask.

Bucky shrugs. “Dunno. Mall security grabbed her right after she shot you, so I guess she’s still over there.”

“Huh? What were they doing there? We weren’t even close to the mall.”

Connected to the station via two tramlines, the mall contains all of the legal commercial elements in Freehaven. Malls are fully automated mobile consumption behemoths. They show up, connect via a universal umbilical, and then provide a one-stop shopping experience for crap that people don’t need but seem to badly want. Shithole stations on the edge of the Rim might see a Mall once every couple of years. Freehaven’s mall appeared a month after the station went online and never left.

“They took over station security during the war,” Bucky says. “The clans figured the Edochians wouldn’t have an excuse to come a-knockin’ if Fleet kept their wet noses outta clan business. Mall security don’t need paying, neither, so it works out for everybody.”

“Did Laura resist?” I ask, a bit too hopeful. Malls have their own rules, and their robotic sentries have a habit of shooting first.

“Nah. Went quietly, I hear.”

I rub my shoulder where the bullet went through. It itches. Nanomeds doing their work. I’ll have a scar for sure. “Well, let’s go bail her out. Then she’ll owe me for a change.”

“Doubt it, Rick. She’ll twist around so it’s your fault. Women, they’re masters at it. Ouch! Dammit, Janine, no kidney punches!”

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I’m not a fan of Malls. They’re so retro. Every time I feel like it’s a museum and I’m the exhibit. The idea that people used to congregate with other people in a building filled with stuff nobody owned yet is bizarre. If I want something I just browse the ‘Net for it with my cranial implant, sort results by price, quality rating, and proximity to my current location. I might even see a video of the thing being used by a regular person just like me. My purchase shows up a few hours after I buy it, not bad considering some stuff can be on the other side of the universe. I can do all this without talking, without moving, without even opening my eyes. And even though I haven’t had a permanent residence for almost two years, the InGalEx shipping guys always know where I am. The days before micro manufacturing and tracking implants must have been the fucking Dark Ages.

I feel like malls know me better than I do, and that scares the shit out of me. I know me really well, and I don’t need anyone else having that sort of insight. The science of targeted marketing isn’t even science anymore, it’s embedded in the bedrock of our existence, one of the cornerstones of the intergalactic economic foundation. Everything I buy is recorded. Everything my parents ever bought is recorded. The toys I liked to play with as a kid, the clothes I wore most often, the airbike I wanted for ten fucking years and could never afford, my ‘Net activity, everything I’ve ever looked at, bought, sold, lusted after, and fondled is tracked, categorized, and analyzed. The mall knows what I’m most likely to buy and shows me those succulent and sexy things on every available surface. Yes, even the floor. I’m looking at my feet right now, and beneath them is an ad for the latest nano-boot add-on. Damn, those look nice. I’ll have to pick up the mod next time – *shit!*

“I can’t stand this place. Where’s the security office?”

“How the hell should I know?” Bucky replies. “I ain’t never really been too keen on looking for robots with guns, Rick.” Janine nudges him and whispers something in his ear. “What? It’s where? Oh. Rick, security’s over there under the escalator.”

“How do you know that?” I ask her.

“What, you gonna actually talk to me now?” Janine asks. “Not going to crush my face?”

I throw up my hands. “Never mind. I don’t want to know how you know. I’m trying to like you because of Bucky, but you’re not fucking helping, for chrissakes. No, don’t talk. I’m sorry I said a goddamn thing.”

Janine was right about the security office being under the escalator. I know this because the business end of a pistol appears in front of my face immediately upon opening the door. Not a sleek pistol, either, one of those sexy jobs that could’ve been made in a vibrator factory. This thing looks industrial with wires, blinking lights, scraped metal along the barrel presumably from being used as a club and/or a spear. An ominous humming sound indicates that I’m just one electrical signal away from having a canoe for a head. Guess I should have knocked.

“State your business,” a mechanical voice says.

I look around the gun and see a mall security droid. Its voice issues from a speaker in its neck. Its face is was without features, just smooth silver metal over a brain wired directly into the Mall’s surveillance mainframe. More than a few fools have assumed that the droids can’t see very well and have paid a steep price for that mistake.

“I’m here to see my wife.”

“You are Richard Stern,” the droid says. What the mall knows, the droid knows. “Your wife, Laura Rivens, is being held for questioning in the shooting of—“ It pauses. Typical robots can perform 100 teraflop operations per nanosecond, so it’s not every day that you get one that actually pauses to process information. “Richard Stern. You.”

“That’s right. Can I see her?”

“You may, but the suspect will only be released if the charges are dropped.”

“I haven’t filed any charges.”

“Unnecessary. The suspect discharged a firearm within Freehaven. That is illegal.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

“Shooting another person is not illegal?” I was taking a bit of a chance here, trying to get into a legal argument with a mall droid, especially one that still has its gun shoved in my face. Apparently, this is how they conduct civilized conversations and I had to agree. The threat of imminent doom does wonders for your manners.

“There is no law barring assault with a ballistic weapon on Freehaven.”

“I’m sorry … What?” No law against assault with a ballistic weapon? No wonder Freehaven was the Wild West Yonder.

“Since the possession of firearms is illegal on Freehaven, laws against shooting people are redundant and take up time and space.”

“What’s the punishment? A fine?”

“Five years in a medium security penal facility.”

Five years, eh? I suppose I should be honest and admit that I took a moment to ponder the idea. I only ponder serious subjects, and this was seriously tempting.

*She did shoot me, after all.*

*But I need someone to run my suits!*

*There must be somebody in the clans who can do it.*

*I’m going to get blamed for sending her to prison.*

*She smuggled in the gun!*

*I’m going to get blamed.*

*She shot me!*

*I’m going to get blamed.*

*It would be so funny to see her face on the way to prison!*

*She’ll go to prison, blame me every day, and then the first day she gets out she’ll find me and cut off my nuts.*

Hmph. Well, when I put it that way, it’s a no brainer.

“Who has the authority to drop the charges?” I ask.

“The owner of the mall,” the droid says. “This never happens.”

“Who owns this place?”

“The Freehaven Mall is operated by the Chipper Media Conglomerate.”

“Well, that certainly makes it easier,” I say. “Call Paul Chippers and tell him that Rick Stern needs him to drop all charges against Laura Rivens. Oh, and while he’s at it, he might as well give me and anyone I want amnesty while we’re out here. It’s going to be a rowdy bunch, and I don’t have time to come down here and let you stick that cannon up my nose every time somebody takes a dump on the floor.”

The robot doesn’t say anything for a bit, and then it replies, “Your request has been placed. You may see the suspect while you wait, if you wish. It could take some time.”

“You’re not going to convict her until we hear back from Chippers?” I ask.

“She will stay in holding until your request is processed.”

“Which could take a while.”

“That is correct.”

“Hmm... Are you going to feed her?”

“It is not our job to make suspects fat and happy.”

Laura looks pissed when they let me into her holding cell. I suppose if I were chained to a table and forced to watch targeted marketing on every surface of my cell, I’d be angry too. Not just the walls, floor, and ceiling, either. Ads for cheap lawyers, penal colonies – low-risk prisoners can sometime choose their hells – even rescue squads promising escapes from jail with only a 85% chance of a gory death, flit across the table and benches in the room. Malls never pass up the opportunity to advertise to a captive audience.

I sit down on the bench across from her. “Hey, babe, I’m working on getting you out of here, so don’t worry.”

She leans forward in her chair and fixes me with one of those *I wish you were bleeding out from multiple stab wounds* sorts of stares.

I smile at her. My smiles always work. “What’s wrong?”

“I wouldn’t be in here with me, if I were you,” she growls.

Normally when a woman growls, I get a rising in my nether region. The only thing rising this time was the hair on the back of my neck. I look down at her hands and see white knuckles. She’s shackled to the table, but Laura is an electronics expert and I wouldn’t put it past her to pick the lock. I realize then that my self-awareness is kicking my self-interest in the ass. With cleats. I stand up and back out of the room, you know, the same thing you do when you’re trying to get away from a cobra.

“She’s really mad at me,” I say to Bucky when I get back out into the hallway.

“How mad is mad? As mad as when you slept with that Veeni?”

I turn to Janine. “That wasn’t my fault. You know how Veeni woman affect human men, right?” She shakes her head and gives me the same disapproving glare that all women seem to know at birth. “Well, it wasn’t my idea,” I tell her, and then to Bucky, “I wonder if there’s a way to ask Chippers to delay her release a bit.”

“How long?” Bucky asks.

“I dunno, a week maybe?”

Bucky grunts. “I didn’t think you were in there that long.”

“I get the feeling she’s been saving it up for a while now … what the hell is *she* doing here?”

Kissy Kissy is standing at the end of the hall chatting with one of the security droids. If anybody can chat with a faceless, emotionless robot, it’s Kissy. Maybe they have secret handshake or something. She finishes with the droid and starts toward us.

“Um,” Bucky says, “I think she was Laura’s one call.”

“What?” I turn and shout at Kissy, “She called you? What the fuck for?”

Kissy’s smile makes me nervous. She steps past me into the holding cell, and then closes the door in my face.

“Now I’m really confused,” I say.

The soundproofed cell door seems to be interesting stuff, because I can’t take my eyes off it. What the fuck are they doing in there? What possible reason could Laura have for calling Kissy? Maybe they’re plotting some horrible death for me, when I’m not expecting it and about to achieve a great victory. That’s usually how it goes with women – you do all this work to get to the top of the mountain and then they push you off a cliff. They say it’s their duty as women to keep us from getting too sure of ourselves. I say they do it because they think it’s funny.

The door opens a crack and Kissy sticks her face out.

“Well?” I ask. “What’s the story?”

“She wants you to apologize.”

“Huh?”

“What you said to her was hurtful. She was mortified that you said such things in public. You should say you’re sorry.”

“Didn’t you hear what she said about you?”

“I’m a robot. You can’t hurt my feelings. She isn’t. Apologize.”

Do you ever get the feeling that you’re drowning, even though there’s no water? I fold my arms across my chest, feeling mutinous. “She started it. I’ll apologize if she does first.”

“This isn’t the school playground. Say you’re sorry.”

“You’re right, it isn’t. This is clan territory. Apologizing for no goddamn reason when I was fully justified for saying what I said is grounds to get you shot. And that happened already. So when you get down to it, I think I’ve paid my debt to society, thank you very much.”

“She said you would react this way. She demands an apology. If you find this too onerous, you can also find yourself a new suit expert.” Kissy pauses. “And a new quarterback.”

Personally, I don’t think anyone should ever experience sheer rage followed by sheer panic in less than three seconds. “WHOA. Fine, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that I should have laid down on the deck and let her walk all over me. I’m sorry I tried to grow a spine, it won’t happen again, or at least not so publicly annoying.”

Kissy raises her chin. “That will be sufficient.”

Rage to panic to elation. Sparkles appear in my vision and my breath rattles. “Great! Tell her what I said, and as soon as Chippers sets her loose, we can get out of here.”

“Not so fast,” Kissy says, raising a hand. “You must apologize at least as publicly as you humiliated her. A station-wide broadcast will be fine.”

The memory is hazy, but I’m pretty sure I fainted at that point.

5: Scraping the Barrel

“…and to conclude this lengthy and long-winded account, I, Richard Stern, do hereby apologize for the rude and uncoo – unclo – whatever word that is – thing I said to my wife.”

I toss aside the pad I’m reading from and point my finger at the station technician responsible for broadcasting my apology. He’s trying and failing to keep his chortles to himself. “Listen, buddy, keep a lid on it. Or else I’ll have you blacklisted from watching spaceball games for the rest of your life.”

The technician turns red and gulps air, his eyes doing a sort of dance while watering. He fails to keep from giggling. He jumps to his feet and bolts from the room. I can hear him laughing through the wall. I suppose I should be lucky he didn’t do it while I was groveling live to the entire fucking station.

I look over at Kissy and Laura, who are both sitting near the door. “Am I done now?” I ask. “It’s been a long day and I still have to talk to the clans.”

Kissy had been watching me the entire time without blinking. I’d never noticed it before, but she didn’t blink. You’d think that if you were given eyelids to increase the illusion of humanity, you’d use them to blink. But then again, that argument also supports the mimicry of farting, burping, and making ridiculous expressions during sex. Maybe no blinking isn’t such a bad thing. Come to think of it, I wish I didn’t have to blink. All those punches I would’ve seen coming.

Kissy nods. “The apology was sufficient.”

“Yeah, that was okay,” Laura adds. “Barely.”

I caught an ever so slight twitch around Laura's eyes. If I hadn’t been studying their faces while ruminating about the ability to blink, I might've missed it. I’d seen that twitch before – often. It showed up whenever she was fucking with me. I noticed it after we first met, back when our interactions started with light conversation, progressed to teasing, and ended with extreme heavy petting. Laura’s sense of humor is a bit obscure, and she takes great joy in making me dance to her tune. I used to like it, especially when I got sex out of it. Not so much at the moment. So how is she screwing with my head now? It occurred to me that I wouldn’t have apologized under normal circumstances. I’ve always been the sort who gives incoming blitzes the finger, so why was I letting these two push me around? Did somebody slip something in my drink? Drugs could – *aha*!

“Your behavior was unacceptable,” Kissy goes on. “From now on, we will expect you to – ”

Laura puts a hand on Kissy’s arm. “There’s no sense in continuing.”

“How do you know?” Kissy asks.

“His jaw drops and he inhales when he figures something out.”

“That’s right,” I say, standing up. “You know all my secrets, especially medical ones that are restricted except to my spouse. Like, say, which drugs I’m administered while undergoing surgery to remove a fucking kinetic round.”

I access my hospital records through my ‘Net implant. The smorgasbord of medications used during the operation scroll across my retinal optics. I filter out everything except those with mental and emotional side effects. Yep, there they are, two drugs that require five tongues to pronounce correctly – separately they’re benign, but when combined can produce enhanced empathic reactions. Basically, I turn into an emotional rollercoaster for a few hours after surgery. I was an aggressive maniac when I almost crushed Janine’s face. Then I turned into a spineless wimp when confronted by my wife and her goddamn robot sidekick.

“Out of curiosity, how far were you going to push it?” I ask. I try to keep my voice level. I’m not giving her the satisfaction of knowing exactly how pissed I am.

Laura arches an eyebrow and grins. “Well, we’ll just have to see next time, won’t we?” She and Kissy left.

Could I get away with killing them both? I stand there for a long time, arguing with myself while waiting for the side effect duration to elapse. I need my spine and my brass balls for where I’m going next.

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An hour later I’m eighteen levels down into the guts of Freehaven, to visit the KornerStone. I have Bucky in tow, sans girlfriend. It’s not that I don’t think Janine can’t handle herself – I know she can’t – it’s that I only want to keep track of two people down here. I include myself in that number since I have a gift for fucking my way into embarrassing situations.

The word ‘KornerStone’ is scrawled across the wall above an old hull breach. Jagged metal points in all directions from a ten-foot-wide diagonal rupture in the hull plating. The station has since expanded to twenty-six levels, but the nineteenth ring must have been in a hurry because nobody ever repaired this crack in Freehaven’s ass. I make my own skin crawl trying to imagine what it must have been like for those caught in this compartment. The howling gale of escaping atmosphere, vacuum sucking at your limbs like a voracious monster, the knowledge that you’re about to die – *yeesh*. I have the luxury of living in the era of mandatory emergency shielding, so breaches like this aren’t as scary. Back in the day, though, this hole led straight to Hell.

The thump of bass and the muted cacophony of techno music seeps through the walls. As with all bars of this one’s repute, two men without necks stand outside.

“You lost?” one of them grunts. The goon has a long, angry scar running across an eye socket occupied by a cybernetic implant. Not the good kind that looks and acts like a real eyeball, but the cheap black-market kind that looks as if somebody stapled a camera to his face.

I lean back to look him in the eyes – eye – without cramping my neck. “I’m in the market for some spaceball players. Know any?”

Camera Head snorts. “Lots. Good ones, too, not the wimpy fuckers League teams are fieldin’ these days.” The other bouncer taps him on the shoulder, and Camera Head barks, “I know what yer gonna say, Josti, and I’ve told ya a fuckin’ billion times already. Martin Bosky spends too much time floatin’ in the pocket and lookin’ pretty, and not enough time connectin’ with his receivers. I really don’t know why you’ve got such a big fuckin’ hardon for that guy, I really don’t.”

Josti holds up a meaty finger as thick as my wrist. “Bosky’s only been in the League for a year,” he rumbles. “Once he settles down he’s going to demolish the opposition.”

“Yeah, if he don’t get hisself killed first. Or get someone else killed, and then earn hisself a blood feud and get killed that way. I hate fuckin’ prima donnas.” Camera Head turns back to me. “Go on in. This is a long-standin’ argument with no end in sight. Besides, I know who ya are and if yer lookin’ for players here, I think I’m gonna have to buy a season pass.” He winks at me with his good eye, though I can’t tell if it’s just a regular blink. “Good luck.”

“Thanks.” I push Bucky in front of me and into the KornerStone.

The bar is a lot bigger than I’d envisioned. It spreads left and right before terminating thirty meters in both directions at huge metal slabs welded to the station’s pressure hull. The air is smoky, and I catch a heavy whiff of voopus. The hundred or so patrons in the room are mostly human. I pick out a couple of Andosian mercenaries sitting at the bar along the far wall, three Veeni, even a Nokkran. I’m surprised to see one here. It wasn’t too long ago that our races were trying to wipe each other out. It’s why I was in a sleeping tube two days ago.

A few eyes swivel in our direction, size us up, and return to their drinks, stories, black-market deals, and job interviews. Bucky and I separate, and I find an open stool at the end of the bar. The seat is covered with vomit. I hook my foot around a leg and push it away. The metal feet scrape against the plated flooring. The bartender, a grizzled old man who looks as if he traded most of his body parts for robot replacements, glances up from wiping a glass. He doesn’t move in my direction. I know what’s next and dip a hand into my pocket.

“That’s my seat,” a tinny voice says behind me, followed by the squawk of a mechanical translator that doesn’t understand most of what was said.

I look over my shoulder. The owner of the voice and translator doesn’t need a stool. Nokkrans don’t have legs, just seven-foot-tall blobs with coarse hair, bulbous red eyes, stumpy arms, and brains the size of my fist. Brains, plural. Twelve of them. Most Nokkrans don’t use all twelve at the same time, but the few who do are smarter than humans and have territorial aspirations. Nokkrans are weird. Just don’t get the average ones mad. Whatever their brains are lacking in intelligence, Nokkrans more than make up for in the production and focus of sheer rage. I turn around and raise my hand with the item from my pocket.

I shake it. It rattles. The Nokkran’s eyes flare wide open.

“Super Pez?” I ask, offering one of the super-sweet sugar candies.

The Nokkran’s head bounces up and down in its version of a vigorous nod. Nokkrans don’t metabolize sugar like humans. Ingesting small amounts of sugar induce waves of pleasure for them. A Super Pez isn’t a small amount of sugar. To a Nokkran, a Super Pez is the equivalent of ten orgasms in a row. Lucky fucking them. I click the dispenser once. The plastic head – a Mall Security droid, I said they advertised everywhere – tips back and pops a small Super Pez tablet into the Nokkran’s greedy palm. The alien slurps it up and waddles off in glucose heaven.

The bartender is shaking his head when I turn around. “First time I’ve ever seen someone bribe a Nokkran.”

“It wasn’t a bribe. Payment for the stool.”

“What can I get you?”

“Spaceball players.”

I get a frown in response. “Are you sure you’re in the right place for that?”

“Yep, this is the spot the travel guide said.”

“This isn’t a tourist destination. Asking questions in here can get you killed. Or start a brawl. I don’t give a shit if you get killed but fighting in here is expensive on the furniture.”

I gesture at the bile-covered stool. “Yeah, ‘cuz you’re spending a fortune on the décor. You want to point out somebody to talk to, or am I going to have to wing it? No, don’t answer that. I don’t have time for you.” I put both hands on the bar, push down to test its strength, and then hop on up. I’m careful not to kick anybody’s glass as I straighten.

“What the fuck?” the bartender says.

I activate my practice field implant. It amplifies my voice over the thumping bass and the small scuffle that’s breaking out in the corner.

“Listen up, everybody,” I shout. “I’ll keep this short. The name’s Stern and I’m putting together a spaceball team. I need the nastiest players I can find. Tryouts are in two days, at a mobile practice field I’m having brought in. Think you’re the best gladiators in the arena? Come out and prove it. Play for me and you’ll receive a hundred grand for your base pay, plus bonuses for fucking up the enemy. See you in two days.”

I jump down off the bar amid a growing buzz. Something pokes me in the chest. I look down and see a large finger, follow it back to a big fist, a thick arm, and finally to a very large man. By the way, a handlebar mustache on anyone taller than two meters and weighing over 250lbs pretty much equals eternally grumpy. The guy is wearing a bright pink shirt and khaki shorts, with a necklace of what looks a lot like human teeth. But smaller. Baby teeth? Oh, Jesus.

“I can’t believe they let you in here with that outfit,” I say.

The man smiles. “I own the joint,” he growls.

Pink should not growl. Unless pink is pussy and – well – that shouldn’t growl, either. It’s okay for a woman to growl, if she’s on top and working some primal sexual angle that has a big payday for me. That’s definitely okay. I guess what I’m saying is that guys wearing pink shouldn’t – fuck that! Guys shouldn’t wear pink, period.

The growing noise in the bar pulls my thoughts away from pink. Shouts. Angry shouts. I pick out several comments that typically start fights ending with the use of a firearm. It occurs to me that I have made a teensy mistake.

“Did you mean all this shit you just said?” Pink Shirt shouts in my ear.

“No, I came all the way down here to bullshit a bunch of clansmen,” I yell, “because I had nothing better to do and I really wanted to get my ass kicked. Of course, I meant it.”

The man grabs my head and pulls me close. Closer than I ever want to be to a pink shirt and human teeth on a string. “Then you do an ad blast,” he roars. “Advertise your shitty tryouts on the ‘Net. Why come here and start a whole shitload of blood feuds?”

From the angle my head has been bent, I have a terrific view of the bar. The two guys beside us start shoving each other. The group beyond them has already pulled out knives. The Andosians are trying to get out of the room before the real fighting starts. The Nokkran is in the corner, shaking in euphoria.

I’m trying to figure out how to salvage a truly unsalvageable situation when I hear a whooping from the other side of the bar. War cries? I jerk away from Pink Shirt and climb through the crowd to see what horror I’ve wrought. I’m ready to see blood spurting all over the walls.

No blood. No fighting. Even the knives are disappearing.

The bar has several pillars holding up the ceiling and Kissy is hanging upside down from one of them. She’s wearing sheer black panties and tall, black fuck-me boots. Her titanic blow-up boobs have found the nearest clansman and are vibrating any murderous thoughts he might be having right out of his skull. One guy tries pawing at her. Emphasis on *try*. She hooks her ankle around the pillar, arches her back in such a way that qualifies her for the circus, and then reaches down with one hand and lifts the man off the floor. Everyone around him groans, and it’s not until the guy is two meters above the ground that I figure out why. Kissy’s grip is very strong and by the look on the guy’s face, she has more than just his belt clenched between her fingers. Ouch. Kissy drops him and nobody interferes with her after that.

I wonder what she’s doing here. It’s mighty convenient that she shows up right as things are getting out of hand. Maybe she can go only so long without swinging half-naked from a pole. Do female androids have body clocks, too? What little timers do they have in there, anyway?

I send Kissy, *What are you doing down here?*

Kissy lifts her chin and manages to look imperious while executing a spin maneuver that defies gravity. *I followed you.*

*What for?*

*I knew you were planning on coming down here, and if you were annoying like all the other times you open your mouth, I figured you might need a diversion.*

*Annoying like all the other* … *I think you’ve been spending too much time with Laura, Kissy.* When she didn’t answer, I ask, *So, how much longer are you going to be? I’d like to get some sleep here at some point and don’t want to wait all night.*

*Unlike you, I can take care of myself. Don’t hang around on my account.*

I decide that standing around and trying to figure out Kissy’s intentions is too much effort. I signal to Bucky and we make our way to the door. The crowd has turned from violent to horny, and can certainly go back to violent, but I agree that Kissy can take care of herself. Next time, I’ll take Pink Shirt’s advice and do an ad blast. I do, however, stop at the door and amplify my voice one last time.

“By the way, everybody, I’d like you to meet the quarterback.”

6: Making Deals with Devils

I wake up to discover my first death threat of the season. Surprising – not because I’d gotten a threat. Coaches get them all the time. I’m a little taken aback because I’ve received one before the season’s even started. I gauge how my team will perform by the frequency of threats and the method by which I’ll meet a sticky end. One threat a week means I have to fire somebody or ‘disappear’ a player to motivate everybody else. Conversely, if I get one a day and they all involve violent ends with power tools, we’ll win more than we lose. One an hour? Pack your bags, we’re going to the playoffs, baby.

But I’ve never gotten a threat before our first practice. Never hand-written and left on the floor outside my sleep tube. I suspect it’s a good sign. I know the note is for me before I even read it. Nailed through the paper is a Veeni mifi knife. They’d stabbed the metal floor with the powered monofilament blade and then removed the power cell, leaving it stuck there. This is an expensive threat. Mifi knives aren’t cheap.

Decorating the hilt are the clan colors of the bee I shot during the last game of my career. My ocular implants are designed to magnify tiny objects at long distances, namely spaceball players out in the middle of space. Reading a note on the floor isn’t difficult.

‘Step into an arena and we will cleanse the universe of all you hold dear.’

Veeni are big on threatening a victim’s friends and family. Just killing somebody is too easy. Even if they draw it out into something painful, even if it lasts hours or days, that isn’t good enough. Veeni feel that living the rest of your life with your loved ones’ deaths on your hands – that’s much, much worse. Trouble is, most everybody I care about died when the Edochians obliterated Earth. Oh, I suppose Laura is on the list, but I think I’d feel sorry for the dumb schmuck who goes after her. She can take care of herself.

This isn’t my first death threat and I’m not about to touch the knife – could be poisoned – but I can’t just leave it in the floor plating, either. Somebody might come along and touch it and die and I’m not that much of an asshole. I’m still trying to figure out what to do when Pink Shirt comes around the corner. He’s Orange Shirt today, and he still has his macabre necklace on. He sees the knife in the floor and stops.

“That for you?”

“Yep. First one of the season. I’m trying to figure out how to get it out of the floor. It might be poisoned, or something.”

“I can help you with this.”

“Really? Last night you would’ve thrown me out of your bar had I not left. Now you’re willing to help me with this? What gives?”

He shrugs. “Kinda impressive to get a death threat so soon in the season, gotta respect that. Plus, its simple. You help me, I help you.”

“You’re wearing a necklace of teeth. What do you need me for?”

“You’re going to have two young women at your tryouts tomorrow. The tournament will be a great place for them to bury hatchet, so to speak. They should stop fighting. It’s getting in the way of business.”

“Well, spaceball is a great place to settle scores,” I say. “But one or both of them might not survive a single game, much less bury any kind of hatchet.”

Orange Shirt shrugs. “In the ground, in each other, doesn’t really matter.”

“Then why don’t you just kick them out of an airlock? Why go through the effort of having them play?”

He grunts. “And they call me cold.”

“I coach spaceball,” I say. “Players don’t have a monopoly on intelligence. Hell, some of them have trouble with regular utensils. Once in a while you get someone who thinks they’re better than they are. The arena usually takes care of that problem for you. If they’re reckless with the rest of your valuable talent, though, you have to take steps.”

“You’ve assassinated your own players?”

I give him a cold smile. I see the next myth about me forming in his eyes. This is more valuable than cleaning up a blood knife in the floor, more than making sure two yahoos get onto the team. This is fucking priceless. It’s not every day that you get to start a rumor about yourself, and the guy who’s going to spread it is someone of stature among the clan community. It’s like sprinkling the rumor with truth dust. By the end of the season, people are going to think I’d slaughtered an entire first string for playing grabass in the locker room.

“So why do I need to field them?” I ask.

Orange Shirt folds his arms across his chest and exhales through his mustache. “They are family.”

“What?”

“Nieces. From my brother. Can’t stand him. Family is everything, but I’d not be sorry if both of his whelps met, shall we say, unfortunate accident. Maybe take him down a notch. At least, there would be two new clanmasters, and I know the new ones would end the feud.”

“Two of the clanmasters are your nieces?”

“Those two, yes.”

“Those two. So you don’t just run a bar, do you?”

“Run it? No, Mr. Stern. I own it. And everything else on this station.” He looks down at the knife in the floor. “So, how about it? I take care of this problem for you. You take care of mine. Deal?”

It’s not something I can refuse, not now that I know Mr. Orange Shirt is Erik Jager, the pirate equivalent of a mob boss. No, that’s not the right comparison. If mob bosses all reported to the same mob overlord, Jager would be that guy. I suddenly feel light-headed and hope he doesn’t notice my heart trying to escape my chest through my goddamn neck. Veeni mifi knives don’t scare me. Spaceball arenas don’t scare me. My own wife and her idiotic idea about what’s an acceptable punishment for a husband who wanders off the reservation because his brain involuntarily switches off at the sound of a Veeni song, that doesn’t scare me. This guy, with his bright shirts, big mustache, odd jewelry, and the absolute authority to have me disappeared into god knows where with the flick of his right pinky – that scares the shit out of me. I don’t know what’s more frightening – me standing here talking to him like jus’ folks, or the fact that he’s asking for something. Guys like him usually take, take, take, and expect you to accept your unmolested life as more than fair.

I wonder how badly I’m going to take it in the ass for agreeing to this. But since I don’t want a brightly colored shirt and a handlebar mustache to be the last thing I see before death, I stick out my hand.

“Deal.”

I leave Jager alone with the knife before he asks me to do anything else and head out to the main concourse. My stomach rumbles at me and I look around for suitable food. I say suitable because while Freehaven offers a wide range of products to ingest, very few of them hold any nutritional value. Finding the odd shop that produces actual food, real edible matter that doesn’t cause random paralysis, sudden enlargement of various organs, or outright bleeding, is like a scavenger hunt where the reward is your continued good health. I know, sounds boring. Trust me, though, watch what you put into your mouth on Freehaven. It might be watching you back.

An incoming call light blinks in the corner of my vision.

“What’s up, Bucky?” I spot a vendor a few stalls down, hawking something green. Could be leafy.

“You didn’t tell me you recruited Crazy Eddie,” Bucky shouts in my head.

“I didn’t know you guys were friends.”

“Friends, my ass. He almost got me killed.”

I spot some green at the next shop and go check it out. Nope, not leafy green, pickled Andosian penis green. I gag and keep looking. “When? I don’t remember Eddie ever playing for you.”

“Well, it wasn’t in one of my games,” Bucky says. He sounds embarrassed all of a sudden.

Ah. Now I understand. “This was before the operation?”

Silence.

Yep, just as I thought. Bucky used to gamble. A lot. Some people are addicted to gambling. Bucky’s problem goes a bit further. He’ll gamble on anything. Bucky used to bet on the weather. Owed some nasty people a lot of money. But he had the operation, and now he’s fine. Sure, he twitches at the sound of rattling dice, but that’s better than death, right?

“I take it Crazy Eddie arrived?” I ask.

“Yes, he’s up in the Mall.”

“Doing?”

“I’m not his fuckin’ minder, Rick.”

“I take it he spoiled a bet for you. How much did you owe?”

“A lot. Over a hundred grand.”

“Jesus, Bucky.”

“Nearly lost both my arms to a shark named Milo.”

“He was going to take your arms?”

“Called it a fair exchange. I would’ve lost ‘em, too, if the cops didn’t show up.”

I pass a seller peddling secrets in earthen jars, and I don’t look back. Don’t trust anything in an earthen jar. Chances are it carries more critters than a microbiology laboratory. “Cops, Bucky? Usually they wait until after a crime.”

“They wanted him for something else. Now he’s serving fifty years for illegal organ trafficking, so I don’t have to worry about it. But I’m not happy about Eddie, Rick, not happy at all.”

“Can’t be helped,” I say. “He’s the best.”

“We haven’t even had tryouts yet. Speaking of tryouts, any word on the field?”

“I’m guessing it’ll get here sometime today.”

“So what are you doing now?”

“Now? I’m thinking food right now.” “What about Laura?”

“Thanks, Bucky, I was enjoying my morning right up until you brought her up. Can’t I go a few hours without you asking about my wife?”

“Well, it’s just that we still need suits. Can’t play much spaceball without suits.”

“They’re coming with the field. Was there anything else?”

“Nope. And can you not call me unless there’s an emergency?”

“You called me, but okay. Why?”

“Well, Janine’s got this look in her eye, and she’s not wearing any pants, so—”

“Goodbye, Bucky.”

I disconnect before I get a mental image that involves Bucky naked. *No, wait – shit!*

The fruit vendor I spotted is actually selling fruit. I even ask.

“Yes, this is real, honest-to-something fruit,” the woman replies.

“Where did you grow it?”

“I didn’t.” She has apples in a basket behind her. Big, red apples. Green ones, too.

“So, you bought them from somebody,” I say. “How much for two apples and a couple bananas?”

“No, I didn’t buy them from someone. Ten credits.”

“Ten credits it is.” She drops my purchases into a small bag with a logo that says ‘Fast Fruit, franchise opportunities available’ and hands it to me. I reach in and grab an apple from the bag. I shine it on my shirt. Can’t eat an apple unless you shine it on your shirt. It’s in the rules. “So, if you didn’t grow them and you didn’t buy them, where did they come from?”

“They’re the newest in bio-mechanical nano-agriculture. Real fruit constructed on demand using standard micro-manufacturing pods available everywhere. Are you interested in buying a franchise?”

My teeth press into the apple’s skin just as the rest of my body freezes in horror, the muscles in my back and upper neck seizing like an old combustion engine that’s run out of oil.

“You can keep going,” the woman says. “It’s real.”

I yank the apple away from my lips. “It’s not real. This didn’t come from a tree.”

“It’s an exact copy of one that did. If apples could think, it would remember coming from a tree.” She reaches her hand out. “May I?”

I give her the fake apple.

She puts it on the table and slices it open with a knife lying nearby. The two halves rock away from each other, just like a real apple. “See? It’s got seeds, and if you planted these in the ground, you’d get apple trees. Fake fruit doesn’t have seeds.” She picks up half and bites into it. It snaps like a real apple, and juice sprays just like a real apple.

“Huh,” I say. My stomach rumbles and this is the most palatable thing I’ve seen so far. Cloned fruit it is. I take my bag of fake fruit and wander away from the stall. I try a banana. It’s amazing.

The concourse has this huge observation window that offers a panoramic view of the stars. I’ve never understood giant windows on space stations. Like we need to know that we’re surrounded by emptiness and if there’s a problem we’re absolutely on our own. That said, I do like looking at the stars when I don’t want to be thinking, because I usually end up trying to count them. There isn’t room enough in my head for anything else but counting when there’s so many. So, I happen to be looking out the window when an Edochian cruiser appears. It doesn’t approach all easy-like from 10,000 kilometers out. No periodic announcements over the station’s vids warning everyone that this is okay, and nobody should panic. The massive vessel jumps into normal space less than a spaceball field away from Freehaven. You might think that a kilometer is really far, but the ship is twice that in diameter and ten times as long. One kilometer is too close. If you’re sharing a star system with an Edochian cruiser, you’re too damn close. The ship is huge and gray and awful and shaped like a submarine sandwich. I can see the vents along the bowline, the launch points for swarms of remotely piloted starfighters. Hundreds of cannons and missile pods litter the sides at seemingly random locations. Most ominous is the huge cannon situated beneath the nose. This cannon delivers energy bursts capable of cutting a Fleet cruiser in half. It happened a bunch of times at the fall of Earth.

That cannon is pointing right at me. Maybe it’s a trick of the light, but it seems like a bit of orange is glowing at the far end of the cannon’s darkness. I’m looking right down into the sleeping maw of Hell. If they fire it, I’ll be ash. I won’t even get a chance to have a last thought.

People around me hold their breath for one moment too long.

Someone screams.

Pandemonium. Everyone running, shoving, tripping and falling. All trying to get anywhere other than right here. I’m really good at stiff-arming a path with this fake limb. I fight my way to the side of the room, all the while managing to keep a grip on my fruit bag.

There’s a garbled hiss on the station’s general communications grid, and then we all see an Edochian on the public vids. The fact that the alien is wearing one of those funny berets lets everyone know three things. First, that this particular Edochian belongs to the First Consortium, their warrior caste. Second, because of the first reason, this fellow has no sense of humor whatsoever. And third, perhaps most important of all, is that it would love nothing better than erasing every human from the universe. It and the rest of its Consortium are the jolly lot who blew up Earth.

“In the spirit of our truce, we are here to provide security for the Chipper Clippers’ tryouts,” it says. Its mouth moves forming words in its own language as the station AI translates. “We will vaporize anyone trying to harm the practice field or those who occupy it. This is your only warning.”

The head and the voice disappear.

Say whatever you want about Chippers. The man has *connections*.

7: The Tryouts

Anybody who tells you that spaceball tryouts are little more than circus events, that people watch them because it’s the next best thing to televised murder sprees – well, they aren’t far off the mark. Chippers would’ve wanted us on the vid regardless of the venue. Doing this in Freehaven with the pirate clans as the prospective players, makes for quite the spectacle. I got an actual thank-you card from the Inter-Galactic Shipping Conglomerate for contributing to the two safest days in transit history. The vidtime we got during tryouts all but guaranteed that for thirty-six hours we were the center of the goddamn Universe. I didn’t get any sleep over the duration. My memory of the experience is hazy. It’s as if someone hung a veil over my face and only lifted it to show me the most fucked-up images.

This is how a tryout normally works: players spend half their time in simulators, and the other half playing scrimmages in an enclosed zero-g arena in full suits. The simulators make sure they can actually fly a suit and stay focused under pressure. Then the player gets to the scrimmages, where they’re tested on how well they play with others. Like I said, that’s how it normally is. The schedule gets shredded when potential players try to kill each other right from the beginning. Jager must have passed the word that my team was the one to play for, at least if you were a pirate. They came out of the fucking woodwork like I was shitting stardust and they all wanted a taste.

I hear the horror show before I even get there. I hear them through the damn walls. Screaming. Yelling. Sharp bangs and clanks against metal flooring that I hope is some sort of cultural musical expression. I know the mobile field comes with its own security contingent, androids of the same model as Mall Security. I’ve seen them around. But I don’t think anyone programmed them for a room full of criminals whom they cannot arrest.

I get to the lobby door and stop. The floor is several steps down from the door, which means that I have a great view of absolute chaos.

It’s a mosh pit timed to the percussion of fists.

I count seven - no, wait - eight brawls. My enhanced vision lets me zoom right in and see each blow land on each face, the skin buckle and split and ooze and splatter blood. Okay, too close. Back out a bit, swing left, hey that guy’s getting gangbanged by a bunch of women armed with strapons. Barbed. Who makes shit like that? That’s nasty and now I can’t un-see it. Awesome. Past them is a small-scale orgy, must be twenty people fucking each other in the corner. I’d like to see Bucky stay faithful under that kind of encouragement. Standing around the perimeter of this unlove-fest is a wall of men and women, looking solemn with arms crossed, like they’re the priests of some unholy ascension ritual. Every few seconds, one of them peels off and descends into the mess, only to be replaced by someone from the floor. Often bloodied and breathing hard, but they still assume the same stoic stance of their predecessor. Is this how the clans spend their get-togethers?

There was going to be a speech. I spent several minutes in my room preparing it. Now I don’t need it. Nobody will listen to me anyway. I need something dramatic to get their attention. Something loud.

I step back out of the room and turn to a slack-jawed member of the crew who’s staring into the lobby. “Hey, can you close this door?”

“Wha –” He can’t even finish a thought. I don’t blame him. The scene beyond us defies belief.

I stand in front of him to break his line of sight. “Do you work here?”

“Uh, yes.” Rapid blinking. “Yeah, I’m Brad.”

“Great. Brad, can you close the door and seal it?”

“Seal it?”

“Yeah. Can you do that?”

Brad steps over to the door controls and does as I ask. The door slides shut and seals with an audible hiss.

“Okay, Brad, now I want you to open the emergency airlock on the other end of the room. Just a crack.”

“I can’t do that. It will suck all the air out.”

“Not all of it. I just want to spook ‘em.”

“I could get fired.”

“I promise that you’ll be fired if you don’t. I’m Rick Stern. I’m the coach.”

“I thought you got banned.”

“Turns out it isn’t permanent. Open that door.”

Brad fiddles with the panel. Swears at it. Alarms go off in the lobby. Lights flash. The outer door opens a wee bit, debris goes flying and everyone stops fighting and fucking. I nod to Brad and the door closes. Bits of paper and smoke and what might be clumps of hair float around the room.

“Hi,” I say over the intercom. I wave at the two hundred-odd clansmen through the door’s window. “I’m Coach Stern. I’m the ringleader in this joint. Let’s do some actual spaceball tryouts, yeah? We’re going to do this by clan. Murder Gods, you’re up first. Hit the simulators.”

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For the record, blood feuds are usually declared against another team. Not by teammates on each other. The wide receivers I select happen to be mortal enemies. They happen to be from rival clans. They happen to have the same father. I happen to select them from a sea of applicants who are better, faster, and smarter, because I happen to like my balls where they are. Jager happens to give me thumbs up as I yell at the security bots to pull the two fuckheads apart without ripping their arms off.

“Enough,” I scream at them. “Stop right now or I’ll have you thrown into space without suits and we’ll see if you cling together for warmth.”

They stop struggling against robot arms that have already taken away their knives, guns, clubs, and an object that looks like a knitting needle but zapped a security bot with enough juice to fry it, and a second one standing three meters away.

I point at the one on the left. I think her name is Sarah. She has one of those scars across one eyebrow that extends down past her eye. The kind of brand that every adolescent thinks is cool, until they live through receiving it at the end of a rusty knife that’s carrying untold numbers of blood-borne diseases. Sarah also has a limp, and a nervous twitch that might have something to do with the metal plate in the back of her head. Three fingers on her left hand are spikes with articulating joints. She looks like somebody’s been trying to kill her in stages.

Her buddy on the other side doesn’t seem to have the same incremental death issues. I’ll call her Slick. She’s mostly intact. I point at Sarah. “You. Your name is Fuckhead #1. And you over there, your name is Fuckhead #2. Fuckhead #1, if Fuckhead #2 dies, I’m going to kill you in the same manner that Fuckhead #2 died. And vice versa, just in case you thought I was playing favorites. If Fuckhead #2 cuts her fucking finger, I’m going to cut yours, Fuckhead #1! Get the picture?”

Fuckhead #1 glares at me, but she nods. Fuckhead #2 is nodding before I even turn to her.

“I’m glad we understand each other,” I tell them. “Welcome to the team. Congratulations, assholes.”

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Around mid-morning I come out of the bathroom while tucking my shirt back into my pants. I’m reading the latest numbers from the simulators off a vidpad and I accidentally tuck it in with my shirt. I realize there’s a person standing nearby, quite possibly watching me do all of this stuff.

It’s a man in a uniform. He’s a short, wiry guy with red hair sticking out from under his little black hat. His name tag says ‘Captain Bartholomew’. He’s dancing from one foot to the other, like he has to use the head, too. Maybe that’s what he wants. Maybe he doesn’t want anything from me. Please, don’t let him want anything from me.

“You have to do something,” he shrieks at me.

Oh, for fuck’s sake. “What’s the problem?” Please be normal, please be normal.

“They’ve littered the field with mines. MINES!”

I’ll be honest, that doesn’t compute. “Mines?”

He points at a nearby observation deck. I walk over to the small platform jutting out into the middle of the field. Bucky’s standing there. The deck is enclosed with shielded transparent aluminum. The shields keep out flying suits and other debris, but not a SPIDER mine. The proximity mine gets its name from the eight pylons extending from its side, but that’s where the similarity with the insect ends. Contained within the mine is 200 kilograms of high explosive. It’s a rotating shaped charge, allowing it to deliver maximum damage to its target. I watch one float past the window, little red lights blinking at the end of each pylon. I’d never seen one this close before. Or the several hundred others wandering around in a constant search for something to blow up.

I turn to Bucky, who is concentrating on something far away or he’s constipated. Sometimes it’s hard to tell. “Where the fuck did these come from? And why did you let them in here? I go to take a piss, and they, they, do all this? How do you bring in an entire minefield in two minutes, anyway?”

“Do you see ‘em?” Bucky asks.

“Yes, I see them. I whole shitload of them. They aren’t duds, are they? These are real fucking mines in here. Who did this shit?”

“Them,” Bucky says, pointing at something out the window. “Said they wanted to show you how serious they were.”

“I can see that they’re serious!.Serious about sabotaging this team. Serious about ruining my day. Serious about fucking with my program.”

“Here they come.”

I see now what Bucky’s pointing at. Two suits flying in-between mines. Around them, up and over, coming so close to the pylons that I realize I’m holding my breath. I exhale, then gasp again as they buzz the observation deck at speeds I’d never seen before in the rusty Series X suits they're wearing.

“Those suits. Those aren’t even armored. If they hit a mine they’re toast. Fuck. If they hit a mine, *I’m* toast. Holy shit, they’re good.”

The pair whips back around and come to a stop just outside the deck. One of them raises a hand in salute.

I flipped them off. “Both of you.” I shout over the ASC. “Running backs. Welcome to the team. Now get these fucking things out of here.”

I don’t need to watch them clear the mines off the field, so I go down to visit Laura and our spaceball suits. I’ll be honest and admit that all I wanted was to be as far away as possible in the shielded underbelly of the ship. That meant the armory.

It’s the most valuable part of the ship. The *Hercules* isn’t worth what the thirty suits down here cost to build and maintain. Actually, I’m not sure if you can put a price tag to them, now that Laura’s been rooting around inside their guts. I take that back. People would pay a fortune for them, I’m sure, but all of those people are gunrunners. Not exactly legal, these suits.

When I get there, Laura’s ass is hanging out of a suit. I can tell from the position of her palm on the helmet’s window that she’s twisted around in a way that qualifies her for the more exotic pornos. I raise my hand to slap her butt. The little voice in the back of my head – the quiet one that whispers reason when the rest of my brain is intent on doing something idiotic –that quiet voice whips out a bullhorn and screams in my mind, *DON’T DO IT, FUCKHEAD #3!*

I put my hand down.

“I know you’re there,” her muffled voice echoes out of the suit.

“I could be anybody. How’d you know it was me?”

“A woman’s intuition.” She slithers out of the suit. A lock of hair drops in front of her eyes and she pushes it away with the back of her hand. It drops back like it always does. “Now get out of here, I’m busy.”

“No.”

“I’m serious, fuck off.”

“Maybe later.”

She sniffs. “What are you doing down here, anyway? Aren’t you needed to run the mayhem upstairs?”

“They’ll manage ten minutes without me,” I lie. I walk around a suit that looks suspiciously like it has missiles on its back. Might be booster rockets. We’ll call them booster rockets. “I want to check out my investment.”

“Which investment?”

I grin at her but don’t answer. She’s fishing. Let her wonder what she’s caught. Maybe she’ll be so busy that she won’t notice that her boat has a hole in the bottom of it. With all the bullshit going on upstairs, I really need these suits to save my ass.

“Are they fast?” I ask.

“Faster than anything you’ve ever worked with,” she says. “Stronger, too. We’ve made upgrades in armor weight in the past couple of years, so we don’t sacrifice speed.”

“What sort of upgrades?”

“If you’d been wearing one of these suits, you’d have two real arms instead of just one. I bet you’d like that.”

I shrug. “Eh, it’s not so bad. I can finger pussy like nobody’s business.” She snorted and rolled her eyes at me. “What else have you been up to down here?”

“Well, I haven’t had time to do a full retrofit,” she says. “But when I’m done, we’re going to have some very fast, very durable, very dangerous gladiators on the field.”

“Details, Laura. I love details.”

Laura disappears behind a suit and starts up a power tool, a loud one. The sound of tearing metal blasts around the room and the suit between us starts vibrating on its stand. “I’ve managed to get my hands on a new biomechanical alloy,” she says when she pauses drilling, or sanding, or whatever it is she’s doing.

“How’d you manage that?”

“Don’t ask.”

“I just did.”

Laura pokes her head around the suit and gives me a hard look. “Deniability, Rick. A shipment is going to arrive sometime later, I’ll let you know when. Today, maybe tomorrow. I want the docking bay cleared of personnel.”

“Now I’m really sorry I asked. What’s so important about this alloy?”

“It’s stronger and lighter than any available. Best of all, it heals itself.”

“Say what?”

“When you iron out the roster, give me a list of the ones without cybernetic implants. They’ll get suits with the alloy.”

“What’s the problem with implants? And how does it heal itself?”

She vanishes behind the suit again. More power tool mayhem. A bit later, she stops and says, “If the suit takes damage and the alloy starts its repairing process, it’s possible that the alloy will attempt to repair exposed implants. Even if you don’t need fixing. You could get fused to the armor.”

She starts up the metal grinding before I can respond. On purpose, I’m sure. I wait her out. “Fused to the suit?” I ask when she stops. I rotate my shoulder. “But I’m good, right?”

“I said exposed implants, Rick. You’ll be fine. Your running backs are going to get an upgrade that’ll make them near impossible to grapple. And one other thing that you’re better off not knowing about, which is coming in on the same shipment.”

“That deniability thing again?”

“You’re learning,” she says. “I never thought that was possible.”

“I forgot how extremely not-funny you are.”

“It may not even work,” she says, “so I don’t want to get your hopes up. I’m not even really sure where they’ll end up when I turn it on, either, so it’s sort of an ace in the hole at this point.”

“From the sounds of it, it’s an ace that might blow up in your face.”

“I’ll get the bugs worked out.”

“That’s what you said during the Sandstorms game. Everyone within the blast radius remembers how that turned out.”

Her face turns white then red. “You promised you’d never mention that again!” she screams. She chucks a wrench at me. It misses my face by millimeters. “You promised, Rick!”

“Whoa, it’s not like there’s anyone around to hear it.”

Laura grabs a drill with a half-meter bit sticking out the end of it. I turn tail and run.

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We all discover around mid-day that Kissy no longer considers herself a sex robot, and that “no fucking way” doesn’t mean “maybe”. We also discover that she got some recent and substantial upgrades to her, um..., chassis. I suppose it would’ve been easier to simply electrify the entire surface of her body to make simple touching a regrettable act, but she takes “no unwelcome groping” to a whole other level.

The douchebag in question puts his hands on Kissy after a scrimmage and whispers something in her ear. She smiles, retracts all of her clothing and gives everyone a free show of her too-perfect body in all its glory. She presses back against the front of the man’s body, grinding her ass into guy’s crotch.

Then she turns into a porcupine.

Long metal quills snap out and impale the man over fifty times. Three of them through his mouth and out the back of his head. Blood sprays the crowd behind him maneuvering in for a show. The man hangs there, impaled on Kissy’s back, his eyes bugging out of his head. A low keening sound warbles from his perforated throat. Then the quills snap apart as if on springs into three prongs each. The man explodes in a shower of red mist and fleshy gobbets. People trying to wipe blood from their clothes are suddenly confronted with a whole new mess.

Kissy retracts her quills and shivers as her skin ripples and shimmers across the surface of her frame. Blood and guts splatter the floor around her feet. Her clothing then flicks out into place, and she glances around at the men around her.

Everyone gets the point.

Pun intended.

An hour later I’m standing on the deck and half-listening to Bucky wax eloquent about Kissy’s “amazing display.” He’s lucky his fiancée isn’t around to hear his descriptive talents; she might have gotten the wrong idea. Janine seems nice enough, I suppose, but she’s a little pushy for my tastes. Lucky for her, Bucky isn’t the kind of guy who strays. He’ll put down roots on an escalator.

I’m listening to Bucky go on and on about Kissy’s tits. They're nice in a fake robot sort of way, which make me appreciate the real things even more, so I guess they do serve some sort of purpose. The scrimmage is doing what scrimmages do. It's showing who’s actually playing and who’s preening. You’d be surprised how many players don’t know their asses from a fucking hole in the fabric of the universe, but somehow still manage to make it look like they know what they’re doing. Until you hand them the ball, that is. It’s easy to mill around or let your suit do all the work and tell you where to go, who to tackle, and when to kiss your ass goodbye because somebody’s cutting through your suit when the refs aren’t looking. But give somebody the ball, tell them to score, and most of the fuckers just go to pieces.

Take the scrimmage quarterback I’m watching. I don’t need a quarterback, so I don’t give a shit about this idiot, which is good because he isn’t a real quarterback. Not a spaceball one, anyway. No self-respecting spaceball QB will step out of the pocket like that and expect to survive to the next snap. But what draws my attention is the fact that the meandering nimrod is, in fact, still alive long enough to wander out of the pocket. And survive out there. That’s impossible. There should be a slew of offensive linebackers trampling all over him like a herd of angry Epherian rhinos. They’re the same as Earth rhinos in that they’re big and bad-tempered. They’re different in that they have sharp teeth, claws, and can not only fly but actually teleport short distances. Epherian safaris give the phrase “running with the wild” a whole new meaning.

I realize the QB is still in one piece instead of several. I look for the opposing team’s offensive line and find them floating around in the middle of the field like somebody has cut their strings. I’ve never seen anything like it. I decide right then and there to hire the whole defensive line. I’m so blown away that I step up and plant my nose on the glass, as if that extra meter will give me a better view. I’m sure whatever they’ve done is illegal, but the mobile field’s referee AI hadn’t caught it. That’s good enough for me.

That step to the glass saves my life. A cloaked Veeni, who’s somehow managed to sneak onboard, avoid getting within range of any of the security bots designed to see through that invisibility shit, walks up and takes a swipe at me with a mifi knife. It misses my flesh by the thickness of my shirt. I know this because I later found a nice long slit in my jacket where the mono-filament blade passed through.

All I feel is a localized breeze across my lower back. Then there’s a loud whirring sound. A muffled gurgle. Something wet and heavy splatters the back of my shoulders and head. It feels like a warm milkshake. I turn around and find a Veeni standing behind me with his chest puffed out like he’s proud of something. But his expression doesn’t match that image. Veeni are humanoids with twice as many facial muscles as humans. Let’s just say they’re not any good at poker. Come to think of it, I’m not sure what this one’s expression means. It’s hard to tell with that power drill sticking out of his eye socket.

Laura gives the drill a good yank and the Veeni drops to the floor like a cast-off puppet. I realize that I haven’t been sprayed with milkshake.

“Jesus,” I reach up and pull blood and gore out of my hair. “Was there nothing else you could use to kill him? What are you doing up here, anyway?” I hear my voice rising octaves as I go, panic chasing it higher and higher. “That drill. What the fuck are you doing up here with that fucking drill?”

“You’re welcome, you asshole,” Laura shouts. “I’ll let the next guy disembowel you. I’ll even tell him to start at your anus and save your tiny balls for last.”

“Hey. You threw a wrench at my head not fifteen minutes ago. For all I know, you went through this fucker to get to me.”

“You are the most inconsiderate, ungrateful, selfish wretch I have ever known.” Laura revs the drill. “I’d really like to shove this up your nose.”

“Maybe that’s what you were trying to do all along. The Veeni just got in your way. All I do is bring up one little thing, I mean, it’s not THAT big of a deal, but all I gotta say is you–“

Laura’s face goes blank. “Don’t you fucking say it.”

I stand there with my mouth open and my finger in the air mid-shake. I want to. I want to say it SO BAD.

“I sure love to watch a fight as much as the next guy,” Bucky says, “but since keeping this party going means that my coach and our suit tech will kill each other, I’d appreciate it you two could declare a truce for a while, you know?” He chuckles. “At least until we win the Cup. Then you can go to town with that drill. Or another type of drill? I’d watch that, too. Love a good porno as much as a bloodbath.”

Laura squints her eyes shut. “Bucky, I don’t ever want you to think of me naked. Don’t do it.”

“Too late, missy,” he says with a wide grin. “Too late by at least, I dunno, how long have I known you? About that too late.” He laughs at her. “Don’t you know anything about men? We picture every woman naked almost as soon as we sees you.” He looks her up and down. “Sometimes more than once, if you catch my drift.”

I marvel at the man’s bravery. Or stupidity, take your pick.

“You’re lucky I like Janine,” Laura says, “or else I’d castrate you as a service to the universe.” She hefts the drill over her shoulder. “Rick, I was up here because the ship I mentioned earlier is docking in ten minutes. Keep everyone out of the hanger bay for the next hour. I’ll shoot anyone trying to catch a peek, too.”

She hip checks the door controls and glances down at the Veeni. “This asshole’s all yours. You’re welcome. Again.”

After she leaves, I say, “Bucky, how’d you like it if I told you that I’ve pictured Janine naked?”

He shrugs. “Depends. How’d she look?”

I hurry to the showers to get all this blood off me. I get some weird looks when I get there. I act as if nothing is amiss and even attempt on a couple of occasions to convey the idea that I’ve done this to another living organism with my bare hands. I’m hurrying not because I’ve got blood all over me, which is gross in its own right, but because I need to get down to the cargo deck without leaving a trail of evidence.

By the way, I’m one of those guys who peeks at Christmas presents. I flip through movies to watch the good parts. I read the last page to see if the hero gets the girl. What I’m getting at is sometimes life is better when I know what’s going to happen. When it does happen just like I knew it would, I’m all aboard the happy train and I’ve already got a good window seat. So, when Laura tells me not to let anyone peek, my brain’s natural response is *we gotta have a look at that*.

Besides, as if I’d pass up an opportunity to see what nifty little secret and probably highly illegal thing she’s sneaking into the tournament. You know that saying, ignorance is bliss? It’s bullshit. Ignorance is not bliss. It’s a word to describe a lack of imagination around every terrible thing that might happen to you. Ignorance is putting your head in the proverbial sand with full knowledge something is coming up behind you to fuck you in the ass.

I know, you’re thinking that it’s not possible to be cognizant of everything the universe is doing to fuck you over. Stars blow up, black holes devour whole systems, and planets eventually die. How can you be on top of that, too? Easy. Those big-time events, the ones that are spectacular no matter the distance of your spectator seat, those events always have some sort of warning. The signs are evident. You can’t ignore them. You’d have to override all sorts of safety protocols to fly into a black hole on purpose – so the idea that you don’t know it’s there is ridiculous. That’s the nice thing about the universe – it doesn’t suffer fools. In fact, the universe is so intent on not suffering fools that it will not only destroy the fool, but everyone next to the fool, just to be sure.

I not only want to find out what Laura’s bringing in, I need to find out. It’s my duty as coach to be aware of everything that’s going on. I wouldn’t be a responsible member of the spaceball sporting community if I let her do anything she wants without first ensuring people can’t get injured, or, heaven forbid, sued. By the way, if you believe that, I’ve got some timeshares in the Garden of Eden I’d like to sell you.

The supply bays are aft, huddled in a lower section as far away from regular people as you can get without sitting right on top of the engine room. That hasn’t changed since humans forayed out into space. Maintenance people still get the short end of the stick, the oldest looking equipment, and the dirtiest uniforms. It’s good that I dress like shit, because otherwise I’d really stand out down here.

I still stick out. As I pass an atmospheric processing room, someone shouts, “Oi, what are you doing down here?”

I stop and see a human technician holding a nest of semitransparent tubes. Liquid pulses through them at regular intervals. I get the sense that they should be inside the wall panel open at the guy’s feet.

“Just taking a walk,” I tell him. “It’s pretty crazy upstairs and we’re between scrimmages, anyway.”

“Wait, you’re Coach Stern,” the technician says. He drops the important-looking tubes on the floor and grabs a tool with a wrench on one end and some sort of grabber on the other. He hefts in his hand, as if testing its weight for a use it’s not designed for, and then he starts my way. His expression is not happy.

“Can I help you?” I ask.

“Yeah, you can help,” the guy says. “You can pay me back the money I lost on that playoff game you threw away. When you shot that bee. You can gimme back my retirement money. You gimme back the starship I was supposed to own by now!”

I can’t understand people like this. Okay, sure, I can’t understand anybody, but these numbskulls twist my brain. The gamblers who don’t understand gambling. The fucktards who think that when they put money into the pot, that it’s still theirs somehow. It’s not their money. It’s the pot’s. That’s the pot’s money. These idiots never get it. They keep putting money into the pot without understanding the idea that they may never see it again. Pain is experiencing a reality you never saw coming. Gamblers who don’t understand gambling get a lot of self-inflicted pain.

“I’m just a coach,” I tell him. “I’m sorry about your troubles, but I got problems of my own. So why don’t you put down that wrench? Before something happens that you might regret?”

“Oh, you’re going to regret this,” he says. He swings the wrench at me.

This is another instance where having a cybernetic implant helps out. The wrench whistles toward my face. I catch it. One handed. The guy is stronger than he looks. The wrench, too. Motors and synthetic sinew absorb most of it, but the impact thuds through the flesh of my neck and chest.

The guy doesn’t see that, though. All he sees is a man who weighs less than 80 kilograms catch a hurtling bludgeoning weapon as if it were a paper airplane. I watch confusion flash across his face, followed by alarm that he’d picked a fight with the wrong guy.

I smile at him and yank the wrench out of his grip.

The tech steps back.

“Jesus,” I say, hefting the wrench. “Can’t they make this thing out of something lighter?”

“What?” he asks.

“Maybe aluminum? We found it a long time ago. I think your wrench would easier to carry around if it were aluminum. Don’t you think so?”

“Um..., sure. Are you going to hit me with that?”

“What? Oh, no.” I hold out the wrench for him to take.

“Thanks,” he says, wrapping his hand around the handle.

“No problem,” I say. I don’t let go. I wait for him to meet my eyes, and add, “If I wanted to hit you, I’d just use my fist and crush all the bones in your face.”

I let go of the wrench.

He takes it back, ducks his head, and then turns away. I hurry off before he decides to trade up his wrench to something else. I’ve already been shot once this month.

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The nice thing about clearing all personnel from the loading bays is there isn’t anybody around to ask why I’m sneaking in. Nobody inquires why I'm hiding behind a bunch of shipping canisters and watching my wife take possession of some large crates. Whatever’s inside them must be cool, because the crates are the self-levitating kind. Everybody knows those carry the cool stuff.

I might have wondered what neat treats were waiting inside, and I might have even plotted how to get near them to find out what, but I’m distracted by the transport shuttle. It’s not a human vessel. It isn’t Nokkran, Veeni, or even Andosian. It’s got peculiar biomechanical nodes protruding from the ship’s skin, its smooth, reptile-like surface shimmering under the bay lights.

It’s Edochian. That’s just fucking great.

8: Preemptive Guilty Pleas

I don’t linger long. I can’t see what’s in the crates, and besides, the longer I stay the greater the chance Laura will discover my presence and do something precipitous. She likely suspects that I’m here already, she’s a smart girl, but there’s no point in letting her know for sure by doing something stupid and getting caught. It’s one thing to let her think I’m an idiot, but it’s quite another to give her video evidence.

The dead Veeni is gone by the time I get back to the observation deck. Bucky is there and he has Janine with him. “Well, look who decided to grace his own tryouts,” she says.

I ignore her and turn to Bucky. “So, what else do we have on the list?”

“Well, we could use a defensive line. I’ve seen some solid picks here and there, but we need unit cohesion.”

“Hire that one we saw earlier, the one that stuffed that offense.”

“Okay. Did you find out how they did that?”

“Nope. I don’t want to know, either.”

“You feelin’ okay?” Bucky asks. “You usually want to know the details on things like that. Getting enough sleep? Sometimes I turn into a big fat dumbass if I don’t get enough shuteye.”

I leave that one alone. “No, just a lot on my mind.” As in, what the fuck is in the crates? Can’t be Edochian tech, no matter what they’re calling this truce or cease-fire or whatever. So, what are they transporting? Is Chippers behind it? Does he even know about it?

I can’t say anything, because that’ll confirm that I was where I wasn’t supposed to be. I’ll probably have to be killed for knowing, or some spy shit like that. I realize then that I didn’t see any Edochians in the cargo transfer. No stick-like aliens. Just Laura and her floating crates. How come? The shuttle likely came from the cruiser parked nearby. That means First Consortium, which doesn’t make any sense. They hate humans more than any species in the universe.

I notice that Bucky is waiting for me to finish thinking. I shrug. “Sorry.”

“I ain’t seen you think this hard about something since the time you were trying to figure out how to tell Laura about the Veeni’s wife.”

“This isn’t like that,” I tell him, “and thank you very much for bringing that up.”

“Uh-huh.” He squints at me. “It’s got to do with Laura, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, but –”

“I can always tell. You never stick your tongue out when you’re thinking, except when it’s about Laura.”

“It’s not – what? I stick out my tongue?”

“Yep. A wee bit, off the side of your mouth, like this.” He demonstrates.

“Christ, I must look like an idiot when I do that.”

“I think it’s kind of cute,” Janine says.

“Really?”

“Yeah, almost makes you seem human.” She holds up her thumb and forefinger. They’re touching. “Almost.”

“So, not at all.”

“Gotta start somewhere,” she says. “I’ll let you know when you get to the level of a single-celled organism.”

I scowl to hide a grin. “I was beginning to like you, and now you’ve gone and ruined it. Bucky, hire that defensive line, but get enough second stringers to fill the holes we’re going to get. I’m guessing EMP bombs or something. Those will only work for one game, maybe two, and then everybody’s going to wise up. What else?”

“I found us a great kicker. But there’s a bit of a snag.”

“What kind of snag?”

“He’ll need his parents to sign a waiver for him.”

Fifteen minutes later Dexter Cribbens is a lanky boy with lots of zits. Bucky ushers him onto the observation deck, one hand on his shoulder, steering him over toward me. He introduces us. I nod at the boy instead of shaking his outstretched hand. Cribbens shoves his hands into his pockets, his body awkward and his face downcast, like I’d just fired him.

For fucks sake, I don’t need this shit. “How accurate are you?” I ask.

“I can plant the ball wherever you want,” he says, his voice cracking.

“Jesus Christ, how old are you?”

“Fifteen.”

“And your folks are okay with this?”

“My mom’s crazy about spaceball. My dad’s not around.”

“Uh-huh. Do you have a chaperone in mind?”

The kid’s face reddens. “I don’t need–”

“Bullshit,” I cut him off. “You’re a hormonal express train in the craziest part of the Universe. You are not stepping outside of your quarters without a goddamn shadow. You will agree to that or you go home.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll pay you the standard league rate for a kicker. I forget what it is. But you will not receive a single credit of it until after the Tournament. We’ll pay your living expenses, but I don’t need a teenager going fucking bananas out here on a player’s salary. Understand?”

He doesn’t look happy at first, but then it dawns on him that he’s getting a job. “So, I can play?”

I draw a deep breath, exhale, inhale, and then sigh. I’m going to hell. No question about it. I might as well have signed this kid’s death warrant. I should make sure he’s worth the trouble, though. “You can *try out*. Jury’s out on whether you can play, until I see you kick the ball like you say you can. Bucky, get him set up, and find a shadow for him.”

“Why me?”

“Because he was your idea.”

I don’t want a teenager on the team, but don’t want to say no to Bucky outright, so I make sure the kid will fail. Bucky and I stand on the observation deck and watch Cribbens come onto the field alone. A spaceball rests in the tee clamp fiftymeters in front of him. I watch him line up on the ball and I say over the ASC, “First thing I want you to do, is put that ball in the designated area on your HUD. It’ll be the little blue circle.”

“What?” Cribbens objects. “That’s a 950-meter kick! The target’s only five meters in diameter.”

“You said you could put the ball anywhere I wanted,” I remind him.

“Yeah, but within reason.”

“You’re lucky it isn’t smaller. Oh, and no suit assist on the kick, either.”

“WHAT?”

“You heard me, boy. Don’t ever count on your suit doing the work for you. Shit breaks all the time.”

Bucky snorts. “Better not let Laura hear you say that.”

I mute the ASC and tell him, “You shut your goddamn trap. I’m still not happy about this.” Back to Cribbens, I say, “Kid, you’re lucky I told you no assist up front, instead of rigging your suit without telling you.”

Silence on the comlink. Cribbens stands there for a minute, and then he bounds forward. One step, two, three, and then cranks on the ball.

I would be remiss if I didn’t explain that this is where spaceball gets all wobbly weird. See, a ball kicked or thrown in space is going to keep going and going until it encounters another object or that object’s gravity. If spaceballs did that, the game would be one penalty after another for intentional spacing. So spaceballs fake gravity. The ball considers its point of origin the zero plane. It calculates its initial velocity and direction and then adjusts accordingly to return to the zero plane at the end of its journey. Kick a rock in space, and it will sail onwards forever. Kick a spaceball in space, and it will arc, slow down as if air friction were being applied, and even bounce on the zero plane. Seems complicated, I know, but it keeps everybody from getting turned all upside down. Players carrying the ball can drop below the zero plane and still be considered inbounds, but the ball won’t go there by itself until the next throw.

So, I watch, dumbfounded, as the ball rises up in a glorious arc and then falls back toward the zero plane in a grand half circle. It lands in the target zone. Bounces straight up down a few times, and finally comes to rest. It’s less than a meter from the center point.

“What the –” I breathe.

“Told ya,” Bucky says.

“BULLSHIT,” I shout. The ASC channel is still on, but I don’t care. I’ve never seen anything like it without a suit assist.

“I’m looking at the readouts right now,” Bucky says, holding up a holographic vidpad with a three-dimensional image of Cribbens’ suit. A crapload of datapoints scrolls by that nobody ever reads. Well, maybe Laura reads that shit. All I care about is how many parts of the suit are blinking red. “No assist, Rick. Cribbens did it on his own.”

There’s a reason I’ve never seen anything like that without a suit assist. Players don’t do shit like that. Victory tilts on these types of plays, and it’s harder to prove if done without suit assist. If there’s no proof, coaches have to challenge the play. I don’t want to challenge a play. Ever. Coach’s challenges involve actual duels. The convoluted ruleset around them grinds games to a halt. The League usually bribes coaches into rescinding challenges due to lost advertising revenue.

“I take it I did okay,” Cribbens says over the ASC.

I press my palm against my forehead. Hell. There’s a special place carved out for me. I know it. “Yes. Welcome to the Clippers. Try not to die.”

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Laura drops by the observation deck. Some sort of bluish liquid stains her overalls. I’ve never seen bluish liquid around any suit. She isn’t carrying a power drill, and that makes me happy. Does she know I spied on her in the cargo hold? She must know. She always knows. She doesn’t look angry, though. I bet she’s saving it up for later, when I least expect it.

“You should hear the rumors floating around here,” Laura says. Her tone is accusing. “People are saying you just hired a ten-year-old kicker.”

I make some pretense out of inspecting my fingernails. “Fifteen, actually.”

“What’s that goo all over ya?” Bucky asks. “You slaughterin’ smurfs downstairs?”

“What are smurfs?”

“Blue trolls. They’re about ten centimeters tall and wear funny hats.”

“Sounds childish.”

“Well, they’re all male except for one lucky gal.”

“A gangbang, then. That explains why you like them.” She turns back to me. “Rick, tell me about this kid you’re trying to murder.”

“Hey. It’s not like I went looking for him. These are tryouts. Anybody can come and tryout.”

“Isn’t there a minimum age to play league ball?”

“Nope.” I pause. “Bucky, find out if there’s a minimum age to play league ball.”

“On it, boss,” he says. On his way out, he makes a point of examining Laura from head to toe. “That’s a good look for you, by the way.”

“What look?”

“The overalls. Too snug to be wearin’ pants underneath. One tug on the buckles and the whole thing gives way. Very sexy, makes a man wonder if you’re wearin’ any unmentionables or anyth–”

“Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

He leers at her. “Every day, little lady.”

After he’s gone, she says, “I’m starting to question the intelligence of that fiancée of his.”

“Mmmm...”

“Why are you staring at me like that?”

“I have an unbearable urge to tug on your buckles.”

“Bear it, or you’ll be jerking off with your feet for the rest of your life.”

“That doesn’t make any sense at all.”

“The kid, Rick?”

I throw up my hands. “Look, it wasn’t my idea. Bucky brought him in. I tried to make him fail, made him do a 950-meter kick without suit assist. He planted the ball within a meter of the target.”

Laura looks impressed. “Wow. But a teenager, Rick? Is that necessary?”

“I’m holding his salary for the season. He has to have a chaperone.”

“Really?”

“You look surprised.”

“Well, I didn’t think that you would, well –”

“I’m not a total asshole, you know.”

“Don’t break your arm patting yourself on the back just yet.” She smirks. “We’ll see if he survives the first game.”

She turns to leave, and I think I’m off the hook. She’s not going to bring up the cargo hold, she’s saving it. Then she turns back and raises a finger. I knew it.

“You know I can’t stand it when you keep secrets from me,” I blurt. Laura turns back, her expression surprised. “Of course, I was going to try to find out what completely illegal shit you were smuggling in on a goddamn Edochian ship. Are you trying to get us all killed? What if Fleet finds out that you’re working with them? They’ll blow us to smithereens.” Her expression shifts to angry, and then to the cold rage I’d seen in the Mall’s detention block. I realize she hadn’t known I was snooping on her. Now I’m going to die. I plow on, “What’s in the cases, Laura? What the fuck are you doing with Edochians? They blew up Earth, for fuck’s sake!”

She crosses her arms. “And they’re protecting this field, are they not?”

“That’s not my doing,” I shout. “That’s all Chippers, and it’s not like I have a choice in that. But you! You … You’re getting help from them.”

“It’s not what you think. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“I don’t think so. There’s nothing to gain.”

“How about my trust?”

She laughs. It sounds bitter. “When have you ever?” she asks, half to herself. “How about you let me run your suits, and I won’t have any more dealings with the Edochians.”

“Because you’ve already got what you want from them.”

“Well, there is that.”

I turn away from her and look out the observatory window, but I don’t register anything I see. She’s slipping away from me again. Not that I had a firm grip on her to begin with, but it’s nice to have her around. Pain in the ass that she is. Laura makes living fun. Exciting, frustrating, insanely maddening, sure, but fun. After this is all over, I’ll have to take another six months in a stasis tube to recover. If we survive. Chippers getting Edochians to guard the field is one thing. Publicity stunt if I ever saw one. But the humans on Freehaven won’t take kindly to us openly working with the aliens, and most of those humans are bloodthirsty pirates.

“You’re not making this easy for me, Laura,” I say. I can see her blurry reflection in the window. “I didn’t realize that when I asked you to run my suits, I had to include a clause prohibiting you from enlisting the aid of our sworn enemies.”

I hear her sigh, and then sense her at my side. I don’t dare turn. I’m afraid that I’ll break this spell, whatever it is. “We need what I got today, Rick,” she says. “We can’t win without it.”

“What is this ‘it’?”

“I can’t tell you.”

I round on her. “Can’t, or won’t?”

Laura looks up at me. Her green eyes stop my heart. They’re open and vulnerable and I see hurt and loss and hope and fear and despair and a deep well of determination. For a moment I forget that two days ago she shot me. Then that all goes away, replaced by the lopsided grin she gets when she’s trying to hide herself. “Won’t, of course,” she says. She reaches out and touches my face. “Don’t worry, baby, I won’t let anything hurt you.” No sarcasm or patronizing tone. She meant it. Then she snatches her hand back, startled. She squints at me and her tone sharpens. “I’ll let you know when the suits are ready. Don’t go snooping around again. It’s for your own safety.”

I watch her go. *Aha*.

9: The Zippers Are a Trap

It’s two in the morning and I’m trying to find my quarters. The corridors are deserted, the lights turned down to save energy. Light strips along the floor illuminate my footsteps. Reflective tape around bulkheads warn me against head-butting. I find myself closing my eyes every few steps. I need a bed. Christ, I’m so tired, a maintenance closet will do.

I know I’ve got quarters on the ship. I got a message about it this morning. 489-something. Which means deck 4, starboard side, aft. Port is odd numbers, starboard is even. I look at the number on the door nearest to me. 485. Oh, good. I’m close. Aha, there it is. I slap my hand on the entry plate. It’s keyed to my handprint. The door slides open.

I am immediately irritated to find the room occupied.

My brain registers two things right away. First, the woman sitting on the edge of the bed exudes the deadly grace of a predator. Second, sensual curves beneath a satin, leather, and chrome getup guarantees her a place in my *I Want to Unwrap That* outfits of all time. Her dark eyes lock on to me and she rises to her feet and starts my way. I have trouble not staring at the slow rock of her hips instead of checking her hands to see if they’re empty of weapons. I wouldn’t be the first coach to get killed this way. If this is it, if this is the moment, I hope I get the girl before the girl gets me.

The door snaps closed behind me. Like the trap door on one of those Have a Soul traps that lets you release your prey into the wild. So they die of exposure or by getting eaten by a larger predator, instead of you having a soul in the first place and flushing them straight down the toilet. The sound jars me to my senses.

“That’s close enough,” I tell her, and she stops her advance. “Who’re you?”

“My name is Jint,” she says.

“Jint what?”

She smiles at me without showing any teeth. “Jint is good enough. You’re easy to get to, Stern. Easy enough for me, easy enough for the Veeni.”

“They tried today already,” I say. “Beat you to it. The bastard got a power drill through the skull. How would you like to go?”

“Your wife isn’t here to save you.”

“I didn’t ask for her help. She did it pro bono. I’m sure she’d do you for free, too.”

Jint steps closer. “I’m sure she would.”

“You want to tell me what you’re doing here, or should we just get straight to the fighting part?”

“Fighting?” Jint asks, slithering up to me until she’s so close I catch a whiff of light perfume. It smells like the woods and light rain, of all things, almost enough to mask the scent of oiled steel. She twists her sinuous body around mine without touching, her head tilted back so she can stare up at me through thick eyelashes. “I don’t want to fight you, Stern.”

*Bullshit.* I grab her by the throat, lift her off the floor, and slam her against the door. I block her first kick with my free arm. I catch her leg on the rebound and turn and hurl her across the room with as much force as I can muster. Jint lands on her feet on the other side the bed. She should have hit the wall. She should have bounced off and hit the floor in a crumpled pile. She should have been down long enough for me to get out of there. Instead, she straightens and grins at me.

“That wasn’t very nice, Mr. Stern. I almost thought you were aiming for the bed.”

“I was. I got carried away. I saw the leather and buckles and figured you were into that sort of thing.”

Jint massages her neck. “You’re very fast. And strong.”

I shrug. “You’re nimble. Everybody’s got their talents. You want to tell me what you’re doing here? And you can stay on that side of the room with those knives of yours, thanks.”

“Knives? How do you know about them?”

Them. I figured at least one and asked to see if she’d confirm it. Sounds like she’s carrying more than one. It’ll cost me some blood to find out how many. “X-ray vision.” I lie. I make some pretense of checking her out. Even though I can’t see through her clothes, I imagine that I can. I hum my happiness.

“Liar,” Jint says. “We know that’s not one of your implants.”

“Hmm? Who’s ‘we’?” I stop humming. “Echelon.”

I stop humming. Part of me expected this visit. Well, not this exact visit, but one with the same questions I know Jint is about to ask me. Questions I don’t feel like answering. Echelon is the colloquial name for Fleet Intelligence. Lots of law-abiding humans trying to make the Universe safer for all species. At least, that’s what the brochure said. Now they’re trying to make up for the rather awkward event of not seeing an Edochian attack coming. They’ve lost the good fluffy parts from the brochure, and are now very much the bogeymen.

I look around for someplace to sit down. There’s a small dining nook and two slide-out chairs on my left. I commandeer a chair, open the tiny fridge and inspect the contents. Lots of booze, but some water packs and – you’ve got to be kidding me – a Fast Fruit bag. I pull out the water and the fruit bag. There are three apples inside.

I bite into an apple and turn back toward Jint. She sits down on the corner of the bed and tries to hide her envy of my snack. I toss her one of the extra apples.

Jint catches it with one hand without taking her eyes off me. She smiles at me, holds up the fruit in thanks, and takes a bite. “Mph, this is really good.” She wipes the juice off her chin with her thumb and sucks on it. “I hear this is pretty much the real thing.”

“Franchise options are available. Says so on the bag. So, Just Jint, I didn’t realize I was cool enough to show up on Echelon’s radar.”

“You’re not. It’s your wife we’re interested in.”

“Oh,” I say, a bit crestfallen. I remind myself that this is a good thing and my ego should go take a nap. “Why are you interested in Laura?”

“I think you know.”

“I’m sure I don’t.”

Jint watches me watch her, and the silence draws out between us. I go back to wondering how many snaps and buckles it would take to get that outfit off her. At least four. Five maybe. There’s some sort of buckle and zipper contraption in the back. I’d noticed it when I tossed her across the room. I’m not sure how many that adds to the count. Is it one buckle and one zipper, or a super buckle that counts as two?

“Four,” she says.

“What?”

“Four buckles. I can see you counting.”

“What about that thing at the back?”

“Knife holder.”

“Ah.”

Jint reaches up and undid a buckle. “Now just three.”

I can’t help but smile. Those three remaining roadblocks to heaven might as well be in another dimension. I know it, she knows I know it, but still here she is, fucking with me. I gesture at her. “As much as I’d like to sit here and watch you not undress, I’d like to get some sleep. So, could you please get to the point so we can move this along?”

“Spoilsport.”

“You have no intention of undoing anything else so – “

Jint leans over and pulls at a long zipper down her side that ends at her thigh and shows lots of skin and no underwear. “You sure about that?” she asks. She leans over the other way and does the same with the other zipper. It makes a very satisfying sound as it goes down.

The door pops open. I look over my shoulder at Laura standing on the threshold. She’s carrying that damn pistol she shot me with. She gives me only the most cursory of glances before glaring at the other woman in my room. “Jint,” she says.

Jint straightens and pulls up her zippers. “Laura,” she says. She shifts her legs and makes to stand up.

Laura raises the pistol.

“Don’t do anything hasty,” Jint warns.

“Like you were about to do with my husband?”

I’ll be honest, I feel a flutter in my stomach when she calls me that.

“You’re separated, honey,” Jint replies. “He’s fair game.”

“This is your only warning. If I see you within ten meters of him again, you’ll have an unfortunate accident. It will be messy.”

“You can try, sweetie,” Jint says. “You might have one first, you know. Maybe get sick on some bad food? Or be in a corridor when it suddenly depressurizes?”

“I could do you now.”

“There would be questions,” Jint says. “You can shoot your husband on Freehaven, and it gets chalked up to a marital dispute. You shoot a government official on a Spaceball League practice field, with the coach in the same room, and the League might suspend him pending the investigation.”

“You willing to bet your life on that?”

“From that peashooter? Please.”

I’ve never had anybody fight over me before. At least, not while I was in the same room. It’s hot. “Careful, ladies. Keep this up and I might get an elevated opinion of my own value.”

They both snort at the same time.

“As if,” Jint says.

“Don’t talk,” Laura adds. She steps into the room and off to the side, allowing Jint an unfettered lane to the corridor. The Echelon agent takes it. She tweaks a buckle at me on her way out.

The door closes again, leaving me with Laura and a gun. This can still go either way. I sit there and let her make the first move. Laura walks over to me, grabs the Fast Fruit bag out of my hand, and fishes around until she comes up with the last apple. She sits in the other chair, puts the gun down in the middle of the table, and bites into the apple, hard.

“Thanks for stopping by.” I say it when she has her mouth full. “I mean it. That’s twice you’ve saved my ass today.”

“You’re welcome,” she says around apple bits. “Was she really taking off her clothes when I walked in?”

“I’m not sure what she was doing. She was waiting for me when I got here. She made some threats, I threw her across the room, and then she went all sultry. I will say she was wearing a pretty awesome outfit. Have you ever worn … no? Should I stop talking now? I’m just really tired and I tend to ramble when I’m tired.”

Laura takes another bite. “You ramble whenever you get a chance to ramble, Rick.”

“She said she wasn’t here for me.”

“Then why the sexy stripper moves?” Laura asks.

“You think that’s sexy? That’s damn sexy hot that you think that’s sexy.”

“I’m already aware of what you think is damn sexy hot.”

I glance at her outfit with the exhausted hope that I might get lucky, however remote. “I do see that you’re still wearing your overalls.”

“You might as well give that up.”

“Not a chance.”

“Hmm...,” Laura muses. “Keep on like that and I might think you’re not serious about holding up your end of the bargain.”

“What bargain?”

“You said you’d give me a divorce.”

I must have been delirious. “Only if we win.”

A frown darkened her face. “You … You wouldn’t throw a cup tournament over that.”

“You sure? Maybe I’ve done some soul searching.”

“You’ve been in a hibernation tube. You can’t have been looking all that hard.”

“Maybe I’ll win you back then.”

Laura sets the apple core down next to the gun and gives me a long look. I return it and say nothing. See, I do know when to shut my mouth. I really missed watching her watch me. Those little crinkles around her eyes when she’s wondering what I’m thinking, and then filling in the blanks herself with thoughts I’m not smart enough to have. I smile at her, feeling a bit hopeful. Up until this point I was sure she was unwinnable. Now I’m not so sure.

“If Jint wasn’t here for you,” she says, “what did she want then?”

“She was asking about you. Why would she be asking about you?”

Her eyes go flat and her whole body stiffens. She stands up. “I should go.”

“Laura, why is Echelon interested in you?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Right. Nothing, as in getting presents from the Edochians, that kind of nothing?” Her whole body screams yes, but she still shakes her head. It’s funny how people think they can lie to the ones who know them best. “Okay, okay, I know it’s important to you, so I’ll play along. I’ll continue to run interference if Jint comes back around with all the leather and zippers. Dunno the lengths I’ll have to go to protect you, even though you won’t share this nothing with me. Must be something, this nothing.”

Laura opens her mouth to say something, and out comes a snort. “Leather and zippers? Are you trying to make me jealous?”

“Is it working?”

“Maybe a little.”

“Then yes, I’m trying to make you jealous.”

“You’re impossible.”

“Not nearly as much as you, baby.”

She picks up her gun and slips it back into the hideaway holster in her jacket. “Get some sleep, Rick. You look like shit. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

I grab for her sleeve. “Laura, wait.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” she says, dancing away. She pauses at the door and points at me. “Absolutely not, you stay right there. Don’t open your mouth, and stop looking at me like a lost puppy, you know that just kills me … No. I need sleep, too. Good night.”

10: Beware Bowler Hats

The spaceball field came with a present I didn’t ask for. It knocks on my door at 04:30, a little less than an hour after I collapsed into bed. So, I’m not exactly in a receiving frame of mind when I haul myself to my feet and stalk over to the door. I slap my hand on the open switch, and suck in a breath to scream obscenities at the person on the other side of it.

The bowler hat stops me.

It has a gold buckle on it. Shiny. The man under it is wearing a three-piece suit with polished black shoes, a red vest, and a pocket watch. In one hand, he grips a peculiar baggish pole made of nylon and what looks like the top half of a cane, and a black briefcase with another shiny gold buckle. The other thing I notice right away is this man has no laugh lines. He isn’t smiling, either.

*Oh, shit.* “Are you an accountant?” I ask. “Did Chippers send you?”

He bows at the waist in a quick, bird-like motion. “You may call me Maurice,” he says.

I groan. This is worse than I thought. Maurice has the sharp accent of a graduate cum laude from Terrance’s School of Proper Manners and Formal Etiquette. He sounds exactly like the guy in the commercial. Wait, he might *be* that guy.

“I was commissioned by Mr. Chippers to serve as your executive assistant, Mr. Stern.” He extends his free hand in another speedy movement, so fast that I tense as if under attack. A quick nod of his head indicates that I’m taking too long to grasp it.

I shake his hand. “What can you do that my AI assistant can’t?”

Maurice sniffs in a manner eerily similar to my wife’s. “An AI assistant is a sad substitute for a first-year Terrance boy,” he says. “I have already taken the liberty of retiring the poor thing from your software library. Now all it has to do is remember to turn on the air recyclers in the maintenance tubes. I will handle your appointments and reminders from now on. As well as schedule your day around your many responsibilities.”

I gawk at him.

“You’re staring at me, Mr. Stern.”

“Um... I don’t really follow any set schedule–”

“I am aware. You have missed many important meetings with the Shipping Guild, Freehaven’s Board of Commerce, the SeeYou Advertising Conglomerate, and several hundred other organizations requiring your attention. Running a spaceball team is quite different from coaching, Mr. Stern. The relationships must be maintained.”

“Now, wait just a minute–”

Maurice waves his hand at me, already dismissing me. “I know you are busy with the tryouts, so I have kept the appointments to a minimum. I will deal with most of the requests for your time, but there will be some every day which require your presence. As such, you have a lunch appointment with the Shipping Guild, and another meeting with the FBC at 15:00. You will have dinner with the local SeeYou representative. I will come by to collect you fiftteen minutes before each meeting to ensure you arrive on time.”

“How will you know where I am?”

He regards me like I’m an idiot. “I always know where you are, Mr. Stern. It’s my job.” He looks me up and down. “I will send a tailor to see you. The clothes you wear are unbefitting–”

I poke him in the chest. Hard. I leave my finger there. “You are not dressing me.”

The world spins. Something impacts my shoulder, butt, the side of my head, and the heels of my feet. Something soft, then hard. I realize that I’m on the floor on the other side of the room. I have no idea how I got here. The soft thing must have been me bouncing off the bed. How come Jint can sail across the room and land like a cat, and I turn into a sack of rocks?

I look up and Maurice is dusting imaginary flecks from his immaculate lapels. He’s still standing in the doorway, five meters away. “As I said, a tailor will be here in an hour. You represent Chipper Industries, Mr. Stern. I will instruct the tailor to follow your style, but with finer attention to detail than your current clothing applications. If you had let me finish, I would have also told you that your manner of dress is important not only to the public, but to your team. I am fully aware that your players will not respond well to a man in a pink track suit.”

Please, God, not a tailor. Nobody makes clothes anymore, not in the traditional sense. There are trillions of available patterns. Tailors are just human search engines with strong opinions. They are the epitome of fussy. I can’t do fussy right now. Not without sleep.

Since I’m right there, I clamber onto the bed. “An hour? Then go away. I need sleep.”

I try to close my eyes and they snap back open. The lethargic sensation I’ve been feeling for the past three days vanishes. I feel as rested as if I’d slept for twelve hours. “What the hell?”

“I have taken liberty and installed biologic monitoring applications into your software library,” Maurice says. “Among them is the GoGoGo add-on, the effects of which you are experiencing right now. It will allow you to forgo sleep, but still remain alert and responsive. I will warn you, however, that it is not a replacement for sleep. Do not use it more than forty-eight hours at a time.”

I bounce out of bed. “I feel amazing. What happens if I go longer than forty-eight hours?”

“The monitoring safety protocols engage. You will get a twenty-minute window with which to find a place to lie down. Then you will go to sleep until your body has recovered. I will give you more time to sleep tomorrow morning so that you may recover from the use of GoGoGo today.”

“How come I’ve never heard of GoGoGo?”

“It is a military application, not for civilian use. Your relationship with Mr. Chippers has allowed you access to otherwise restricted assets.”

Maurice puts his briefcase on the counter and opens it. I’ve never met anyone who carried an actual, real-life briefcase, so I go over and stick my nose in it. Sure, there might be private things in there, otherwise why carry it around, but I don’t care about any of his stuff. I just want to see what the inside of the case looks like.

“Whoa, what is the liner made out of? Is that velvet?”

“The case is nanocloth, Mr. Stern.”

“Wait, your briefcase can be anything you want it to be? I didn’t know nanocloth could do that.”

“Of course, it can. Do you not know how things work?”

“Not really. I know sports. That’s my thing. I leave the techno mumbo jumbo up to my wife. Is that actual paper?”

Maurice sighs. “I see no one ever taught you about personal space, Mr. Stern.”

“I know enough about how the ‘Net works to know that if you have anything important, stuff you don’t want other people to see, you keep it in your head.” Although I heard once that Echelon was able to hack people’s brains almost immediately after we started installing apps in our heads. Maybe they’ve done it to me. I could’ve saved them the trouble. There’s not much up there but spaceball, sports injuries, and swearwords in other languages. Okay. There’s a bit of porn up there, too. But just a bit.

I point at the paper. “Carrying that around says you want other people to see it. Me, probably. But there’s a shitload of words on it. Why don’t you just paraphrase it for me?”

“This is the formal contract between you and Mr. Chippers. It outlines–”

“I don’t care what it outlines,” I say. “I’ve got a verbal agreement with him already, and that’s good enough for me. I win the Cup, he pays me a shitload of money.”

“That hardly covers the legal ramifications, the protections, duties, and insurance forms that must be submitted to various parties, not to mention–”

“Great. You do it if you want. I’m not signing any of that shit. Nobody ever reads the fine print, and if nobody reads it, whatever bullshit that’s in it doesn’t matter to anybody other than the weedy monks who put it there. I’m not signing away my firstborn, or my other arm, or anything else other than what I promised Chippers when we talked.”

“If you do not sign, you will not coach.”

“I’m the last person on Chipper’s list. There isn’t anybody else.” I smile at him. “That’s the great thing about being at the bottom, Maurice. You can’t get fired.”

“A person can always be replaced, Mr. Stern.”

I pat him on the cheek. “Let me know how that works out for you.” Then I remember what happened the last time I touched him. I snatch my hand back.

The bit about getting fired or replaced doesn’t really bother me. I can’t count how many times team owners have threatened me for one reason or another. It never happens. All bluster. Maybe it works on other people, which is why they use it as an excuse to get more productivity, but not me. Never with me. Especially now. I’ve got money. I still get royalties from the interview I did after I shot that bee. Residuals are permanent in an intergalactic media economy. Impending destitution can’t persuade me, either. I carry everything I own on my person. Nobody can’t take anything away from you when you don’t have anything. Except my life, I suppose, but I haven’t gotten the impression that Chippers runs that way.

“If you do not sign, you will not be paid.”

“And the residuals I’ll get from doing interviews about how I coached Chippers’ team to a win pro-bono will more than make up for it,” I tell him. “And then he’ll have to explain why his team sucked so bad that I had to take him on as a charity case. Look, Maurice, I can see you come from world where signatures on paper keep things running. That’s not how it works in mine. Words, whether they’re on paper or falling out of someone’s mouth, are just words. And words are bullshit. Deeds are the important thing. Do what you say, not say what you’ll do. The Universe doesn’t care about what you say you’ll do. That’s just an idea. If you do it, though, then that’s imprinted on the fabric of time. It’s out there. Floating around, an event. Immutable. You want something set in stone? Do it. Add it to the annals of time. Otherwise, get out of my face.”

I opened the Fast Food bag to see if there was anything left. Ooo! A banana. “Oh, by the way, Maurice.”

“Yes?”

“Do yourself a favor and don’t ask any of the team to sign anything. They probably won’t be as nice as me about it.”

“I am not a moron, Mr. Stern.”

“I didn’t say that you were, Mr. – um, what did you say your last name was?”

“I didn’t, Mr. Stern. Terrance boys don’t have last names. We give up everything from our former lives when we join. I got a new name on my first day.”

Wow. That’s – wait a minute. I look at Maurice again, taking in the intent eyes, the quick motion, the fast blinking. The super smooth skin that makes him look like he’s twenty years old. He hucked me across the room without hurting me. Without displacing so much as a thread of clothing. “Maurice.”

“Yes?”

“Are you human?”

“No, Mr. Stern. I was, but now I am not. Now I am a Terrance boy.”

“Wait, did you just … Did you mean—” Holy fuckshit.

People have been trying to make human machines ever since humanity invented machines. It doesn’t work. A few years before the war, scientists used nanomachines to copy a human being at the molecular level. They stepped back to glorify in their creation and – nothing. It was brain dead. Everything worked, but it missed something. The spark of life, some called it. Their creature had no soul, nothing to drive it forward. It just sat there. Inanimate.

I stare at Maurice’s face, where an ever-so-slight smile is forming and wonder if he’s pulling my leg. “Are you fucking with me, Maurice?”

“A little, Mr. Stern. I am a bit more than human, yes, but not what you consider full-blown AI. Terrance boys are enhanced through genetic therapy, biomechanical improvements, implants, and advanced software libraries. These allow us to perform to the best level possible, whenever, wherever. The process consumes my memories, leaving me a blank slate. It is irreversible.”

“That’s sad.”

“You cannot mourn the loss of that which you do not remember, Mr. Stern.”

“It’s still sad.”

“The tailor is due in forty-eight minutes. Please be ready.”

“Did you have anything else for me between now and then?”

“I had allotted forty-three minutes for document signing, which you have made perfectly clear you will not do, three minutes for idle chit-chat such as this, and fourteen minutes for arguing, of which you have consumed eleven.”

“Arguing? Who said I was arguing? I’m not arguing.”

“All clients argue, Mr. Stern. They think they have been doing fine up until this point, and the idea of someone else telling them what to do and where to be can be offensive. You have been remarkably pliant on this subject and have not raised objections to the new schedule, and strangely obstinate on others that should be, as you would say, a no-brainer.”

“I haven’t seen the new schedule yet, so I’m withholding judgement.”

Another look as if I’m an idiot. “It is in your scheduler. It arrived before I did.”

“My what?”

“Your—” He goggled at me. “Are you telling me you have never used your scheduling software? It is one of the default applications in your library.”

I had no idea it was there. Well, that’s not true. I’ve always had the inkling that something like that was available, but to me, a scheduler is just a mechanism for increasing anxiety about bullshit meetings.

“What’s the name of it?” Applications are keyed to names. Think of the name and what it does, and your library fetches it and brings it to the forefront.

Maurice squints at me, as if trying to figure out if I’m kidding. He sighs. “TaskIt.”

*TaskIt*. A brick-like grid of names and times and colors pops into view. I focus on the first one and another pane slides out and shows me the event, times, and who’s attending. That one is for the tailor, somebody named Boris D’sen. There must be close to fifty tiles on here. “Is this for the month, or something?”

“No, Mr. Stern. That is today’s schedule.”

“What? Today? Are you shitting me?”

“No, Mr. Stern. I have estimated that you can be a thousand times more productive than your current abysmal rate.”

I check the next tile. A meeting with the team’s logistics officer. I don’t recognize the name. I didn’t know I had a logistics officer. I whip through the first handful of tiles. All meetings with people I don’t know who apparently work for me. It occurs to me that I’ve been a mighty big bottleneck for a lot of people. Hopefully, they aren’t all pissed at me. Otherwise, today is going to be balls awful. “Did you account for bathroom breaks in here?”

“Are you referring to the eighty-six minutes out of every day that you spend in restrooms?”

“Um..., how do you know how long I spend in the bathroom?”

“On my way here, I observed you on the *Hercules’* security footage. What do you do in there all the time?”

Whew. So, he only saw me going in and out, not sitting on the can. I feel a little better. Not a lot, but I think I’m going to take what I can get with Maurice. “It’s one of the only quiet places on the ship,” I say. “Definitely quieter than my own quarters at four in the morning.”

“You will be very busy over the next week, Mr. Stern. As soon as things calm down, I will schedule some time for yourself.”

“Maurice?”

“Yes?”

“Part of my arrangement with Chippers is that I would run my team my way.”

“And so you shall.”

“Don’t you think you’re trampling all over that?”

“Oh, no, Mr. Stern. You may run your team however you like. My job is to run *you*. Completely different.”

“Can’t you take these meetings, then?”

“Not until I see you in them first. After I observe you this first week, I will take over many of your responsibilities. I normally do this for clients. But, as you said, you and Chippers agreed that you would run your team your way. If you had not done that, you wouldn’t be having this conversation with me. In fact, you probably wouldn’t even know I was working for you.”

“I’m getting the impression that it’s the other way around.”

Another ever-so-slight smile from the Terrance boy.

I’m in trouble.

11: The Naming

“Okay. Okay,” I shout to the crowd in the main hall, trying to get them to look in the same direction while they jockey for position among the bleacher seats. That was a mistake, putting out any kind of seats because now they’re trying to sort themselves by rank. I’m not sure what constitutes pirate rank. How many ships you’ve plundered? Slaves taken? People murdered? Maybe something simple like height? Dammit, we should have just put me up high and them down in a pit, which is where they all belong anyway.

“Welcome to the team and all that,” I tell them. “This is the part where we introduce ourselves, and do some inner team building to make sure we get off to a nice start. Well, that’s not gonna happen. Why? Not because you might try to kill each other, but because we don’t have the time. We play our first game in a week. One goddamn week. Other teams in the tournament have had years to find the cohesion that will carry them to victory. I expect you to have it from the start. And to help in that regard, I’d like to introduce our offensive coordinator.”

Jager steps forward with his sizeable arms folded across his sizeable chest. His necklace of teeth rests above his scarred knuckles. He’s wearing a bright orange polo. “From this point forward,” he says, “until we win the tournament, all blood feuds are suspended.”

“What happens if we lose?” someone calls.

“I will strike your names from the clans,” Jager responds. “I will take your wealth and scatter your children to your enemies. Win, and you will know glory that none other can claim, and no one can take away from you. From this point forward, we are now all part of the same clan, the Chipper Cl–” Jager stops and rolls his eyes at me. “We need a different name. I’m not asking these players to die for such a pussy title.”

“I got it, fellas,” I hear Laura say from behind me.

I turn to see her shooing away a couple of clansmen from a large object shrouded in gray cowling. It's gliding in front of her on a floating platform. It’s tall. It looks like a suit, but I’m not sure why she has it covered. Laura directs it up next to me and stops, then turns to me and says, “I heard you talking about the team name. I got it. The suits match, too, and it takes too long to reconfigure them, so we’re stuck with it.”

I try to catch her eye. She looks tired. I want to see if our relationship has graduated from animosity to neutral or even to ‘maybe I’ll forgive the bum’, but Laura doesn’t look at me.

“Stuck with what?” Jager asks.

Laura smirks at him and yanks off the shroud.

Oh. My. Head. The suit is three meters tall. It’s all black, covered in a strange matte surface I’ve never seen before. It seems to suck in all the light around it. Silver and gold highlights break up its visual black hole. The face plate is smooth like the mall androids. The suit bears an aggressive crest, pauldrons, and breastplate. It isn’t a spaceball suit. It’s battle armor. Hell’s ninjas look like this. God. It’s so fucking sexy. Right smack in the middle of the breastplate, is a blazing gold star.

Laura opens her mouth to say something, and I raise my hand to stop her. I bet she’s going to call us something uplifting. Starburst or Sun Rays, some shit like that. I glance over my shoulder at the hardened men and woman behind me, and get a sudden idea.

“Jager, do you have a knife?”

He pulls a slim blade out of his sleeve and hands it to me.

I suck in a breath and drag the edge across my palm. *Ow! Owowowow!* I slap my hand over the gold star, leaving a bloody handprint. Fuck, this hurts.

I turn back to the team. “We’re called the Blood Suns.”

Jager smiles, a dark grin as black as the suit. He looks out over the assembled players. “Welcome to your new family. From this day forward, until we win and you take your glory, we are the Blood Suns. Swear your oath.”

Fifty men and women approach the suit. Each one, every single one of them, slash their hands and leave their silent blood oaths on the armor itself. I stand there and nod to each one as they pass. I'm making eye contact with one after another, so I don't see them mark the armor. I hear it. Sharp gasps of determined breaths. Droplets of blood spattering on the floor. Slaps of wet flesh on metal.

Kissy is at the end of the line. Her expression is unreadable. She mimics the others and cuts her hand. Silver gel oozes from her palm. When she moves past me, I turn to look at what they've done. Handprints cover the armor. Mine is the only one on the breastplate. More than one handprint is in the middle of the groin area. Of course, they did. Kissy slaps the armor on the breastplate. Her blood gel sparkles and then fuses to the metal. She inclines her head at me and joins the others.

Laura takes the dagger and, as I watch in a mixture of blood-fueled mania and horror, cuts her hand. She puts one foot on the knee guard, hauls herself up with a grunt and slaps the faceplate. It won’t obscure the suit’s vision, but it makes for a macabre scene.

Jager claps me on the shoulder so hard my knees buckle. “This is your leader. Behold his armor. When you clash on the field of battle, look to him and remember the oath you make today. Remember who you are. And make sure the enemies you let leave the field feel terror in their guts. May you find glory and plunder! What is your name?”

The team roars as one. “BLOOD SUNS.”

“What do you call your clan, your family?”

“BLOOD SUNS.”

“Who goes beside you as you ride into harm’s way?”

“BLOOD SUNS.”

“What will they carve in stone to remember your passing?”

“BLOOD SUNS. BLOOD SUNS. BLOOD SUNS.”

I send everyone down to the armory to get fitted for their suits while I go looking for a first aid kit. I can only handle so much zeal in one day. The clansmen are looking downright religious. I wasn’t expecting a set of armor from all that, by the way. Coaches do not wear armor on the sidelines. But this isn’t a typical team and it sure as hell won’t be a typical tournament. The more I think about it, though, the more I like it. The idea of wearing the metal on the field, the feeling of invincibility it gives me, the – well, gave me. The last time I wore a spaceball suit, I didn’t leave the field in one piece. That reminds me, I need to ask Laura if it’s safe for me to even wear the damn thing. She’d said something earlier about the suits fusing to players with implants. I like the armor, sure, but I don’t want to be stuck in it for the rest of my life.

The ship’s infirmary is two decks down. A short time later I’m sitting on a bench with bluish nanogel working its magic on the gash running across my palm. I love these little guys, so small yet so efficient, numbing the pain and regenerating my cells from the inside out. I’m not squeamish, so I get a few minutes of entertainment out of watching my own surgery. The nanogel evaporates as it heals, and the medibot hovering over my shoulder sucks it out of the air for reuse.

“Sharp things are bad,” the bot says when it’s finished.

“Thanks for the advice.” I leave the infirmary and go looking for Bucky. I need to talk to him about the one missing player from the first team meeting – Dexter Cribbens.

Turns out I don’t need Bucky to find Cribbens. I step off the lift on the armory deck and find Cribbens getting an earful from a woman. She must be his mother, the way her tone sounds. I can’t see her face, but her voice. Wait a minute. She’s wearing some familiar clothes. Buckles and zippers.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Jint? Is Just Jint really Jint goddamn Cribbens?”

The Echelon agent whirls around and for a split second I think her hand is going for one of the knives at her back.

Dexter looks mortified. Me, the coach, has just seen him get dressed down by his mom in public. Not my best moment, either, if my adolescent memory serves me correctly. Hard to tell, I was pumped full of so many drugs and booze as a kid it’s a wonder I made it into my twenties with my original liver.

“You,” Jint hisses. “You signed him to your team.”

“I did. He tried out. He did an amazing job, I might add.”

“See Mom?” Dexter says, “I told you. I’m going to play.”

“Against my express permission,” Jint shouts, rounding on her son. “I brought you to the tryouts to watch. I did not bring you so you could get yourself killed playing for this lunatic.” She turns back to me. “I want you to get him out of his contract.”

I hold up my hands. “You two didn’t see how we just changed the name of the team, did you? I’m pretty sure Jager isn’t going to let him back out.”

Jint’s face turns gray. “Jager? Erik Jager?”

I nod. I assume she knows Jager because Echelon knows about everybody. “He’s the team’s offensive coordinator, and I’ll tell you right now that he’ll view a contract release as very offensive.”

She swallows back whatever retort she’d queued up and rubs her face with one hand. “Okay, Dex, you can play. But, Stern, if anything happens to him, I will hold you personally responsible.”

“Oh, no. Not a chance. In case you haven’t noticed, this is spaceball. I hired fifty pirates to play on a team that’s heading into the tournament in a week. I can’t promise what will happen to him on the field, what with all the terrible danger kickers are in all by themselves in the middle of nowhere. If I were you, I’d be more concerned about all the trouble he’s going to get in off the field. Lord knows I would. Dexter’s contract says he has to have a chaperone. Well, if you want him to stay alive, I suggest you take up that burden.”

“Fine,” Jint says. “Dexter, go get fitted for your suit! I’ll wait for you here.”

“Really?” he asks, uncertain. “You don’t want to make sure –”

“Boy, do you really want her to change her mind?” I ask. “And do you want her hovering over you in a room full of clansmen? Not exactly the manliest thing I can think of.”

“Oh, yeah. Right.”

“Bring a nanogel pack with you,” I tell him.

“What for?”

“You’ll see when you get there.”

Dexter practically teleports into the armory, leaving me in the hallway with his pissed-off mother. Ah, shit. Laura is going to be furious when she finds out I invited this minx into the team’s entourage.

“If he gets hurt, I’ll kill you,” Jint promises when we were alone.

“Um..., about that. Can that start after the fitting?”

“Why?”

Dexter’s shout sounds muffled through the door, cracking voice and all.

“What was that?” Jint demands.

“That was Dexter getting initiated. No worries, just a scratch, and nothing the nanogel won’t take care of. But let’s talk about a new subject, one that won’t get me stabbed. How did your boy get to be such a good kicker? I’ve never seen anybody make a kick like that unassisted.”

“He’s always wanted to kick for a spaceball team. He’s been practicing ever since he was a little boy.”

“Really? A kicker? Most guys want to be the quarterback.”

“Well, Dexter’s not ‘most guys.’ And remember my promise, Stern. He gets hurt–”

“Yeah, yeah,” I say, waving my hand at her. “Don’t worry.”

The armory door opens, and Dexter emerges with a confused-looking Kissy in tow. My quarterback is wearing clothes, but her black fuck-me boots and leotard leaves nothing to the imagination. She's holding the hand of a teenager whose mother happens to be standing within easy range of kicking me in the nuts.

“Mom,” Dexter says, his eyes wide with excitement. “I want you to meet the quarterback. This is Kissy. She’s an android. She’s going to teach me how to talk to girls. Isn’t she amazing?”

Oh, no. This isn’t happening. I feel my day turn to absolute shit, hear the bells of doom and everything. This is worse than him getting hurt. Jint works for Echelon. She knows everything about everyone on this entire goddamn ship. Including Kissy. Parents usually see their pristine kids poisoned by a myriad array of forces over several years. In Jint’s eyes, it’s going to happen all at once, right here. Today. Jint will blame me for corrupting her son. I press myself up against the wall and try to turn invisible.

“Hello, you must be Dexter’s mother,” Kissy says, extending her hand to Jint. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Um..., yes,” Jint says, taking Kissy’s hand.

“I can see where Dexter gets his enthusiasm,” Kissy goes on, “you must be a great spaceball fan to come all this way to see our tryouts.”

“I didn’t–”

“Don’t you worry, Dexter will be quite fine on the team. Everyone here is a consummate professional. He’ll learn a great deal while surrounded by such fine individuals.”

Kissy sounds so serious and her expression is so genuine that I almost believe her. Almost. Calling a bunch of clansmen fine individuals is as much an insult to them as it is to the fine individual population, who likely would take issue getting lumped into the same category with thieves and murderers.

“I know all about you, Miss Kissy,” Jint says, not letting go of Kissy’s hand. “I know what you did before the coach found you. I’m sure you’ll be on your best behavior around my son.”

“Mum,” Dexter protests with a groan. “I’m standing right here.”

“Oh, of course,” Kissy says. “You may feel at ease, I’m off the market for the entire tournament.”

That makes feel at ease, too, but I don’t say that. I actually keep my mouth shut this time. This could still go either way, and I don’t want to be known later as the tipping point before it all went bad.

Jint takes back her hand. “Dexter, I expect a call when you’re done with your suit fitting. No wandering off.”

“Yeah, okay, whatever.”

Jint watches her son skip back into the armory, fixes me with a hard glare, and then spins on one foot and stalks away.

“I have something to tell you,” Kissy says to me after Jint’s gone.

“What?”

“Can we go somewhere private?”

“Uh, sure,” I say. We find a room down the hall, full of whirring machinery but no people. “What’s this about, Kissy?”

“Do you have ocular implants?”

“Yes, every coach does so we can see our players out on the field.”

She holds up her hand. “Do you mind?”

“I’m lost, Kissy.”

“Just relax.” She places one hand over my eyes and I feel the other grip the back of my head. Not hard, but not gently, either. I’m about to ask again what she’s doing when a hallway appears in my mind as if I’m walking down it. It looks familiar.

“What am I looking at?”

“I’m replaying a memory from yesterday,” Kissy says. “One of mine. It’s important.”

“Is this why you asked if I had implants?”

“Yes. I can only interface like this with people who have them.”

“I assume there’s a reason for that.”

“Yes. Sometimes, people want to experience what it’s like to have sex from another person’s perspective. Saves them from the hassle of surgery, not even the nano-trial packs. This is an alternative method. If you want, I’ll do it for you for free, because you’re a friend.”

“Uh, no thanks. Let’s get this over with.”

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Kissy is walking along the hallway. I’m not saying “we” and certainly not “I,” because that’s too fucking weird. I mean, c’mon, any moment Kissy is going to look down at her tits and I want this moment to be firmly in the third person. So, she’s walking along, her visual and audio sensor package taking in the people in the hallway. Kissy can see a lot. Heart rates, pupil dilation, body temperature, even a scanner that detects weapons and implants. She can deduce a person’s emotional state from their stance and their vitals, and even predict how they’ll react to different communication techniques. If Kissy ever goes into politics, we’re all screwed.

I realize that all the people around her are pirates. I know, practically all my players are pirates, and surely there will be pirates all over the ship. But these pirates are different. These are not the riffraff that currently call themselves Blood Suns. No, these are important pirates. They let Kissy pass, but I get the feeling that it isn’t a normal occurrence to let anyone walk near them without a confrontation. Something holds them back.

Kissy rounds a corner and I realize that something is someone. Erik Jager stands with three other men speaking in low tones. They break off when they see Kissy. A wordless exchange with Jager and the three men move a few paces away. They continue to converse among themselves but keep an eye on the newcomer.

Kissy ignores them and focuses on Jager. “I want to make sure there are no more incidents like the one today,” she says. “I apologize that I killed your clansman.”

Jager looks amused. “Everybody has the right to refuse an offer,” he says, “so long as they can defend themselves should that offer become a demand. If any innocents die because they refused and could not defend themselves, that blood is on their hands, not the demanding party.”

“That’s an odd way to look at it.”

Jager spreads his hands. “It is our way.”

“What if you lose?”

“There are no innocents among us. We make sure of that.”

“I’m sure you do. Still, I’d like it if you could encourage your people to let the matter rest,” Kissy says. “I’d hate to perforate any of my potential teammates, or their kin.”

“Ha. After that display this morning, I doubt anyone else will pester you. But if it makes you feel better, I will speak to them.” He holds out his hand. “Deal?”

Kissy takes it. “Deal.”

Flash forward to meeting Jint in the hallway and taking her hand to calm her down. Another flash, picture of Jint, picture of Jager, picture of Dexter, and then an image of twirling DNA strands.

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“Okay,” I say, breaking the connection. “I get it. No need to induce a seizure.”

So, Jint and Jager got together at some point and made Dexter. The boy must not know, which is why Jint’s so jumpy about Jager…hmm..., I wonder if Jager even knows? The guy is pretty insistent about getting involved in the team, and he didn’t have to. Unless he’s a huge a spaceball fan and wants front row seats to the show, or is bored, or both. Who knows? I certainly don’t, and I decide to tuck this information away until the time comes when I’ll know what the fuck to do with it.

“You keep this to yourself,” I tell Kissy. “No sense in stirring anything up.”

“I agree,” Kissy says. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go make sure Dexter isn’t getting into too much trouble.”

“Good luck with that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was fifteen, too, Kissy. He’s going to have more opportunities for mischief than every other teenager in the Universe.” I shake my head. “If I survive this adventure, please remind me not to do this again. Now go finish the fitting. Practice starts in a couple hours.”

“So soon?”

“Kissy, the Tournament starts in a week. We won’t be ready, not by a long shot.”

“What are you saying? Do you expect us to lose?”

“Yep.”

“What? You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Don’t look so worried. It will only be the first game.”

“How can you be sure?” Kissy asks.

“We’re not ready now, and we won’t be in a week. But don’t worry, Kissy, your teammates are the most competitive people in the universe. One game, Kissy, and one game only. I’d bet my career on it.”

12: The Shellacking

Tournament games are held on League fields in open space, far from planets, politics, influence, and menacing fleets. No locals to intimidate spaceball players and sway the gambling too far in any one direction. People tend to be more liberal with their money if they think the game isn’t fixed. Remote locations also promote safety. Interstellar travel is all routed through the gates. All gate traffic is monitored and it’s easy to tell what sort of ships are in each sector and what kind of mischief one might expect on any given day. Granted, you must still protect yourself from assassins, but you can rest assured that the assassins won’t be piloting capital cruisers when they run you down. It gives everybody a bit of breathing room and it’s supposed to encourage calm.

Unfortunately, my team is full of killers. Oh, you can argue that every spaceball player is a potential killer given the dangers of the game, but my people kill other people outside of spaceball games. They do it on purpose and may even do so for sport. It’s one thing to imagine that the team you’re facing *might* be deadly, but it’s quite another for it to be publicly known that they *are* deadly. And now they’re looking at you on the other side of a spaceball in the same manner that predators regard small critters – you’re too small for a satisfying meal, but they’re hungry enough to make an exception.

Pylons mark the edges of the field and serve as beacons in case any player goes out of bounds. Not so the game can halt, but so that the dozen or so medevac shuttles littered around the field have a starting point for their search and rescues.

Hundreds of camera bots hover over the field and record everything. The League AI splices the footage into meaningful stories for each play, lists the players and their stats for the fantasy spaceball leagues, and compiles all the quick replays from the great angles. All told, this creates more than twelve standard years of footage for every game. I’ve seen time travel. It’s the Spaceball League Game Day Broadcast.

But let’s be clear on one important point. All the cameras, all the angles, all the slow-motion shots – it’s not to help spectators. It’s to spot cheaters. Because if you’ve got your own secret AI that watches the referees and sees what things they’re looking at, you can infer what things they’re not looking at – and if one of those things is a player in a suit with adaptive camouflage mimicking the paint and lighting scheme of the opposing team, the referees won’t catch you switching sides long enough to fake the quarterback into throwing an interception. The cameras popped up back in 2741, after somebody with a guilty conscience tipped off the League that the Gikathka Stormblades used the technique to win the cup. When the new camera setup appeared at the start of the following season and caught them red-handed, the League banned the Stormblades and struck their wins from the records. The Gikathkas are still trying to live it down. Calling anyone a Stormblade is synonymous with “a dirty cheater who’d sell his own mother just to get half a graham cracker.”

We arrive at the field after the scouts report back that all’s clear. When you’ve got as much money tied up in suits as us, scouts are a prudent measure. Even though gates are two-way, you have to go around to the other side to travel back the way you came. It makes for a long trip when someone’s shooting at you. I don’t know what happens to ships that try to go back through the same event horizon they arrived through. The Edochians are tight-lipped about it. I just know they don’t come back.

It’s precisely this reason that we didn’t come in the *Hercules*. It’s too slow, doesn’t turn worth a damn, and doesn’t stand up very well to incoming attacks. We used the Blood Suns’ team bus instead. If a commercial freighter converted into a blockade runner counts as a bus, that is. Someone had found the time since last night to acquire the ship, paint it the same matte black as the suits, and put a huge starburst with a bloody handprint right on the nose of the crew compartment. Jager said he found the freighter somewhere and I don’t feel like asking. Well, I do feel like asking, just not him. I like team buses. Everybody rides together. No special compartments for star players. If we win, there’s a party. If we lose, there’s teambuilding. It occurs to me that if we lose because of a player’s mistake, the teambuilding here might involve murder.

The mood in the crew compartment is expectant. I’m feeling the same way. Though they probably don’t want to know what I’m expecting, because then I might be the one to get murdered. I’m expecting to lose.

“Hey, Coach?” a voice rings out. I didn’t recognize it.

I unbuckle from my chair next to Bucky and stand up. “Yeah?” I ask the upraised hand six rows back. “Who’re you?”

“Huck Fitzberg, wide receiver. Do you know who we’re playing today?”

“Joomit Clan, you dumbass,” someone snorts. “How do you not know who we’re playing?”

“I know that,” Huck said. “Do you know what they’re good at? How do they suck?”

This is why pirates make such good spaceball players. They want to know what strengths to avoid and which weaknesses they can exploit to get their job done as fast as possible. Before today, that was to commit atrocities on the intergalactic shipping community. Today, it will be on the intergalactic spaceball community.

“The Joomits are a sixth-generation family of spaceball players,” I say. “They’re really tight with each other.”

A rumble of chuckles and snorts.

“Yes, I’m sure the discussions on the ACS will be colorful. That also means that they know each other really, really well. They’re a more tight-knit team than you. They know their plays cold. They know what to do when the game goes sideways. They’re really good at passing the ball to more than one person to advance down the field. You might think you’re in the middle of run play, when they change it on you and throw it.”

“What do they suck at?” Fitzberg asks.

“Besides each other,” someone says.

I wait until the laughing subsides. “Their quarterback is weak. Old and a bit slow. Great arm and accurate. But takes a while to throw the ball. We’ll pressure their offensive line and create opportunity. He won’t throw a lot of interceptions, but we’ll force turnovers on downs because of incomplete passes.”

“What about their defense?”

“The Joomits think they’ve seen everything in League ball. In some sense they have. But they’ve never seen you. You’ll get a couple of games where people will be scared to death of you, but that will wear off. Not today, though. One of your best weapons today will be the ACS. Rattle them and we’ll see if we can grab any plays from that. Your suits are the best in the League. Your quarterback will not miss. The bees are going to be all over us, so we’ll have to catch the breaks as they come.”

“So, scare the shit outta them and blitz their quarterback. We can handle that.”

I nod and sit back down. I hear the team suggest insults and threats of unmentionable harm to the Joomits. Amping themselves up. Good. Makes for a bigger crash. The Joomits are a tired, broken-down team with aging hardware and a quarterback who’s rumored to take naps in his suit. They’re still a better team on their worst day than the Blood Suns. That will change after today’s game. Well, hopefully. Otherwise, I’ve grossly overestimated our chances.

“Nice speech,” Bucky says to me.

“Thanks.”

“Think they know what’s about to happen to them?”

“Not in a million years.”

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Everybody’s got a pre-game ritual. Some pray. Others call their moms. I’ve seen one player drink a gut-curdling concoction of raw eggs, whiskey, and cat milk. I used to be a fan of the pre-game blowjobs, but I lost my arm the last time. I’m down on that activity as a whole. Trauma runs deep.

Today, I started a new ritual of getting into a suit. I swore I’d never step foot in one again, but with my team watching me and my partially-estranged wife egging me on and telling me to stop being such a fucking pussy, well – there isn’t a whole lot a man can do but to say yes at that point.

“You sure it isn’t going to try to fix me?” I ask Laura for the fifth time. I’m still outside the suit. The rest of the team gave up watching and were busy donning their armor. I’m relieved I’m no longer the center of attention. I hate that. I know, you’re thinking I’m the coach. I must love being the center of things, telling everyone what to do. I like to make sure that things go right, sure, but I’ve never been a glory hound. People say glory lasts forever. They're wrong. It’s infamy that nobody forgets.

“Nothing can fix you,” Laura says. “You’re terminally broken.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Stop being such a baby and get in. I’ve got a shitload of work to do and you’re holding me up. You do remember how to put one of these on, don’t you?”

“Of course, I know,” I say. “It’s just the last time I was in one of these, I came back in pieces.”

“You’re going to go into it in pieces if you don’t get your ass in gear.”

“I’ll get in if you kiss me.”

“It’s going to be a kick in the nuts if you don’t get in.”

She says it with a smile, so I know she’s kidding. At least, I think she’s kidding. I don’t want to test the theory, though. I clamber into the suit. It’s cold against my softsuit but otherwise very comfortable. Military grade. Used to be, military grade meant functional and comfort be damned. Someone discovered that soldiers perform better when concentrating on the enemy, and not how their armor pinches them in their tender bits. The back of the suit closes with a low whirr and the hiss of pressurized air. I feel the vibration of the reactor spin up. The heads-up display jacks into my ocular implants and then the room appears as if the helmet were transparent. Diagnostic information that I never read scrolls by and targeting data – targeting data? – flickers whenever I look at someone.

“Are you okay in there?” Laura asks. The electronic sound amplifier distorts her voice.

“I’m fine, thanks for asking. Why is this suit showing me your heart rate and the three best places to cause hemorrhagic trauma?”

“Because some of these suits were diverted from the Fleet armories,” she says. “You got one that was pre-loaded for riot and crowd control.”

“Eviscerating civilians is considered crowd control?”

“It is when the civvies-to-suit ratio is 10,000:1. Everyone else is set. You ready to drop?”

“All boards green.”

“Good luck, Rick.”

“Hey, than—”

She ejects me out of the suit tube into open space. Shooting out of artificial gravity into weightlessness makes my stomach do a lurch-clench-almost throw up dance. I grit my teeth and think of boobs. Breasts are the universal mental reset buttons. Bounce, bounce.

The Joomits are already on the field. My HUD indicates that the rest of my team have dropped, so I lead them over to our side of the field. Bucky and Jager organize them for action while I study the other team’s armor. My implants allow me to zoom in close to see their markings and configurations. Still the old Solarum suits. Lots of patchwork on the armor. Old suits meant not much money flowing. The Joomits had hit hard times. Wars do that to everybody except the gun runners.

I notice they’ve written something on their suits. Names. Different names on different suits, Every Joomit has at least five painted on their breastplates, along with the word ‘*Babykillers’*. An invisible hand grips my stomach. I do a Net search on a name at random and grab the first headline. “Billy Joomit, age six, died today alongside his parents when the *Black Goos*e was hijacked in the Hades Cluster…”

Oh, fuck. Oh, FUCK. I flip on the ASC, team only. The kiddies are already talking. They’d seen the suits, too.

“Hey, I remember this one, the *Vanguard*,” someone says. “That ship was carrying some juicy medical supplies without any escorts. Just begging to get jacked.”

“Hey, Carter, do you remember Jiri Joomit? On the *Bellweather*? It’s ringin’ bells, haha.”

“I know that one, sure,” another voice says. “Some little tyke running around on the ship. Knew all the boltholes. Took us hours to root her out. Her parents were more interested in the guns they were running than keeping their daughter alive. The kid is a rising star in our clan, now.”

“Ha. I know that name. Finley. Finley. Search on this name, Gerald Joomit. You get it?”

“Oh, my mom’s teats,” a voice presumably belonging to Finley says. “Are you shittin’ me? That asshole tried to shoot at me with a fuckin’ harpoon. A real live harpoon. Who does that shit?”

“What’d you do to him?”

“Shot him in his fucking nuts with his own goddamn harpoon, is what I did.”

There are stories for all the names, all the ships. I turn the ASC to broadband and sure enough, the Joomits are listening – and pissed.

“Those were our family.”

“You killed them, you fucking bastards.”

“They were on their honeymoon.”

“My children. My poor children.”

“You’ll pay. You’ll pay.”

I turn off the ASC so I can concentrate. It’s not that I don’t sympathize with the Joomits, I do. I’m not a total degenerate. But space travel is dangerous, and from what I’ve just heard on my own team’s ASC, many Joomits are smugglers. If the Joomits think their graffiti stunt is going to get a reaction in their favor, then the inbreeding has taken hold and done significant brain damage.

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The head referee flies over to me. “Coach Stern, I expect a clean game today.”

I squint and my helmet’s visual filters automatically reduce the glare shining from the blinking black-yellow stripes. Referees are clearly visible at five kilometers. I’m only ten meters away. I feel like a tiny creature looking upon some twisted ancient god that gnaws upon souls. Okay, so maybe I still have some issues to work through.

“I’ll play fair if you play fair,” I say.

“I am aware of the circumstances of your suspension. I am aware of how many bribes were placed to have that suspension lifted. I am aware that your team is comprised of many wanted criminals, and of how many more bribes were placed to keep them from being arrested.”

I really wish we could dispense with organic referees, when the field AI does the job much better. They tried that and people hated it. Fighting with organic referees makes for better drama. I still hate it. “If you’d like to arrest them, go right ahead. I’d pay to watch that.” This could go on for a while, and I don’t feel like fencing with this dickhead. “Did you have anything else you wanted to get off your chest? We came here to play.”

“We are watching you today, Coach Stern.”

“Very good.”

He buzzes off. Asshole.

We still have coin tosses in the 29th century, but it’s not a real coin and it’s not even a toss. It’s a ten-centimeter silver box called the Quantum Coin Randomizer. I have no idea how it works. I don’t even like being near the thing. A techhead once famously remarked that since the coins are in many places at the same time, there’s no guarantee that at any given moment, somebody isn’t touching them and fooling with their randomness. I hate that. Who can think straight trying to wrap their brain around something like that? So, I try to believe that it’s still random and somebody somewhere doesn’t have their grubby mitts on my shit.

We lose the fake coin toss and have to kick.

Dexter Cribbens puts the ball just outside the Joomit’s endzone. God, that kid is good. A Joomit flies over and scoops up the ball and doesn’t make it 100 meters before getting clobbered. Great field position for us.

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Watching Bucky work is like watching somebody hump air. He tells his defensive line to fuck the quarterback and emphasizing each “fuck” with an angry hip thrust. I don’t know if Bucky has angry sex, but he’d be a master because he gets a lot of practice at spaceball games.

The Blood Suns continue to taunt the Joomits on the ASC. The Joomits get false start penalties right off the bat and push their quarterback into their own endzone. Four players jump the line of scrimmage and try to grapple our defenders.

After the play is dead a single Joomit floats away. At least he’s in one piece. A medevac swoops in and slurps him up. Standard practice is to slurp first and ask questions later. The extent of the damage is rarely known and it takes many precious seconds to find out, so medevacs zooms in and sucks the player into a small bay filled with nanogel.

If there’s a suit breach, then the trillions of microscopic robots in the gel get in and start to work immediately. But if the suit hasn’t been compromised it gets a little tricky. Some of the nanobots within the gel are tasked with removing the suit as fast as possible. If no communication can be established with the player, fast as possible used to mean absorbing the suit itself. Spaceball team finance managers complained a lot. Destroying a suit every time someone gets hurt is expensive. Nowadays, the nanobots tunnel through a special entry point to gain access to the player. This process takes ten seconds. Sure, the player might die in those extra seven seconds, but replacement humans are much less expensive than spaceball suits.

Back before there was nanogel, the suits actually allowed external radio commands. Activate the emergency release clamps and the suit fractures apart at the seams. It was a nightmare. Whole cottage industries sprung up around hacking into suits and causing an emergency clamp release in the middle of a game. Not the case anymore, though. Once you step into a suit, you are your own sovereign nation. Nobody is getting in unless you say so – except for the tiny buggers in nanogel who have a secret access hatch in the basement.

The medevac flies over to the sidelines so as to not impede the game. There used to be injury timeouts, but we’re too busy crushing each other to pause while the crippled and maimed are carried away.

I’m not sure what happened to the guy, though, and neither do the bees. They flit about but don’t sting anyone. The game resumes. Two more false start penalties in a row from the Joomits. Another immobilized player slurped up. They call a timeout.

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“Bucky,” I say on the Coach’s Comlink, or the CC, a special secure channel between myself and someone else on my team. This isn’t something I’m broadcasting on the ASC.

“What?”

“What are your guys doing to the Joomits?”

“How do you know we’re doing anything?”

“Don’t be cagey, you suck at it. I can see the field AI repositioning its cameras around the defensive line. Something’s going on and I’d like to know what it is.”

“It’s no big deal.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

“Here, I’ll let you talk to Carter, he can explain it better than I can. He and his twin sister Samantha are the ones who flew between the mines on the–”

“I know who they are, Bucky.”

“Oh. Well, he can tell to you.” Bucky keys in Carter’s suit to the conversation. “Carter, this is Bucky. Coach is on the line, and he wants to know what’s going on with the Joomits.”

“Hey, Coach, how you like us so far?”

“I like you a lot, but we’re two plays in and you’ve already got the field reconfiguring its eyes to better see what you’re doing. What happened to those two floaters?”

“Um..., is this channel secure?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Well, it’s sort of a family secret. But we’re family now, so I can tell you.”

I’m not sure if I should be flattered or frightened. A little of both, maybe. “Go on.”

“It’s those Solarum suits. The Blacksilver clan used to play in them, too, until my grandfather figured out how to crack the encryption on the reactor shielding protocols.”

I realize what he’s saying. “Holy shit.”

“Yeah, holy shit is right. Drop the reactor shielding for even half a second, and the reactor will scramble.”

“And those Solarum suits have that old problem where they’ll get stuck in recover mode after a reactor shielding failure,” Bucky says. “No reactor shields at all. The player is perfectly healthy in the suit, but they’re helpless until they restart their reactor.”

I chuckle. “Which nobody in their right mind does unless they want all sorts of cancer. The Solarum suits don’t have any backup shield generators that turn on before the reactor does. Nice.”

“It doesn’t work all the time, though,” Carter says. “You have to get in real close, and you have to catch the shield frequency rotation at just the right moment. My daddy was the master at it, and he taught me everything I know.”

“Thank your dad for me the next time you see him, Carter.”

“Hopefully it won’t be for awhile yet, Coach.”

“Why’s that?”

“Dead.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t worry,” Carter says, “I’m the one who made him that way. No need to feel awkward.”

“That makes it worse.”

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The Joomits calm down after their timeout. I’m sure the family patriarch had done one of his booming sermons and brought them all to heel. I've listened to those sermons before. His speeches are in the Spaceball League History Archive, where everything spaceball is recorded for history, cultural education, and team espionage. The Joomit patriarch, a fat man named Quentin, is a regular old gasbag with a beard that looks more at home on a hedge than a human being. It takes a lot of grooming to pull off a long beard without looking like a crazy person. The Joomits don’t do a lot of grooming. Quentin’s word is law within the Joomit clan, and whatever he said to them settles down the Joomit players. No more false starts.

They start off their series with a couple of running plays to get back the ground they lost due to the penalties. Then they throw their first pass of the game.

Crazy Eddie reaches up and intercepts the ball.

Maybe Eddie actually can teleport. He tucks the ball under his arm.

Three Blood Suns form a wedge in front of him and they take off up along the sideline.

The Joomits are out of position!

Eddie gets to the 150 meter line. 100 meters. Seventy-five meters.

Two Joomits hurtle in from the backfield. One of them mistimes the intercept and overshoots. The other crashes into the wedge, but Eddie sees it and sails up and over and into the endzone.

TOUCHDOWN!

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“Jager,” I ask after Cribbens kicks another extra point, “have these guys been practicing when I wasn’t looking?”

“Explain,” he says.

“Well, our players all come from different clans. I didn’t think they’d work all that well together in the first game.”

He laughs. “You expected them to lose, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah. It always happens with a green team, and it either makes ‘em or breaks ‘em. I figured it would be the glue that would bind our guys together.”

“Unnecessary,” Jager says. “We are brothers and sisters now. One failure is a failure for all.”

“That’s not what I meant. I mean, some of the different clans hate each other. I didn’t think our players would work together well at first.”

“The camps,” Jager says.

“What camps?”

“All children from all clans are sent to the camps. We teach them how to work as a team. Even if their clans are feuding. Especially if their clans are feuding. They play spaceball. They live with each other, eat with each other, and learn with each other. We know that some of them will die. Some new feuds start between clans because of the camps. Those incidents are few. A greater number return with a better appreciation of both the game and each other. Those camps are responsible for the teamwork you see today.”

If I could jump up and down inside a spaceball suit, I’d do it right now. Spaceball training camps. Holy shit. Holy fucking shit. It was the best news I’d gotten since Laura agreed to help with the suits. I suddenly see a bright light at the end of the tunnel.

“Just so you know, Jager, I’m having a hard time expressing how excited I am right now. How come nobody knows about this?”

“Everyone thinks we are born pirates, that our young ones earn their wings fighting other children to the death in dirty spike-ringed pits. We encourage this view. It helps strike fear into the hearts of our enemies. If everyone knew about our camps, it would be harder, and prey would fight back more. I would appreciate it if you would keep this information to yourself.”

“Are you kidding me? I’m not going to blabber this around and let other coaches know there’s an untapped pool of trained spaceball players on the Rim. I’ll keep you all to myself, thank you very much.”

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Cribbens kicks another perfect shot, and the Joomits return it 300 meters. They’re all business now, but their quarterback seems hesitant to throw. I would be, too, if I knew Crazy Eddie were out there somewhere. They don’t get very far on the ground and have to punt after a three and out.

One of the Mine Twins receives the kick at our 300 meter line and starts zipping back up the field. He bobs and weaves around two tackles before getting swarmed at midfield.

Our offensive line goes onto the field for the first time in the game. It’s also the first time everybody sees Kissy’s armor.

She’s naked and the same matte black as the regular suits. Wild white tattoos snake up her arms and legs and writhe across her abdomen. She’s bigger, a full head taller than the suit armor, and perfectly formed like an Amazon warrior. Where the other suits are angular with hard edges, Kissy is smooth and curvy. Her eyes glow red, her hair is a wild shock of coppery curls, and the suit vents on her back make her look like she has faint reddish wings. Her whole form oozes malevolence.

“Do you like it?” Laura asks on the CC.

“Like it? I want to hump your leg. Laura, she looks like a succubus queen. Who’s idea was this?”

“Kissy and I came up with it after the naming. I wanted it to be a surprise.”

“Well, count me surprised. Let’s see what everyone else thinks.” I keyed us in the ASC. The Joomits are duly impressed.

“What is that?”

“Is that legal?”

“She looks amazing.”

“Look at those perfect tits.”

“I’d like to show her a thing a two about my spaceballs.”

The Blood Suns don’t let them get far, though.

“Yeah, like your balls are big enough to see without a microscope.”

“Or your courage, that’s pretty insignificant, too.”

“Speaking of extremely small, can you even tell when you get a hardon?”

“Maybe they have tiny women to go along with their tiny wieners.”

I leave them to it and got on a new secure channel with my quarterback.

“Kissy,” I say.

“Yes?”

“You look incredible.”

“So, do you want to have sex with me now?”

“You look like a demon, Kissy.”

“So no, then. Hmph. Some people are into that.”

I laugh. “Good luck out there, Kissy.”

“Thanks, Coach.”

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Kissy takes the snap and drops back into the pocket. The Blood Suns have worked together before today and it shows. Kissy takes all the time in the world and then drills it straight down the field. The ball doesn’t even arc. She connects with a receiver – Fuckhead #2 – on the 100-meter line and the impact of the spaceball propels him straight into the endzone.

TOUCHDOWN!

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The Joomits never had a chance. We crush them, 46-3. They manage a desperate 400-meter field goal, and that’s it. The game win party back at the KornerStone in Freehaven is unlike anything I’ve ever seen. Pirates really know how to throw down. There’s booze and wrestling. Kissy changes out of her battle exosuit but she’s still naked. She’s with a bunch of her Pleasure Palace colleagues and there’s an old-fashioned orgy going on at the other end of the room.

I sit at the bar with Laura. Bucky and Janine are slow dancing nearby, at completely the wrong tempo for the music. They don’t seem to care.

Jager is nowhere to be seen. Maybe he has his own post-game ritual that involves adding more teeth to that necklace of his. The more I think about it, the more I don’t want to know.

I’ve got a buzz and I’m feeling good. I lean over to Laura’s ear and yell over the music, “You want to get out of here?”

She smiles and when I turn my head so I can hear what she says, she sticks her tongue in my ear. An electric chill zings right through me. My eyelids can’t decide if they wanted to stay open or closed. She nibbles on my earlobe and her breath is hot against me. Holy fuck, she’s good at this.

But when I reach for her, she pushes off of me, holds out one finger, and says, “Don’t get any ideas. That’s just for winning today’s game.”

I lean back against the bar. “What do I get if I win next week?”

Laura pushes her knee between my legs and leans into me. “Maybe I’ll kiss your other ear,” she says, and then turns and walks away.

I sit there with a stupid grin on my face as my heart rate attempts to climb back down.

Game on.

13: Assassins and Other Practical Jokers

The Joomits game dominated the Intergalactic Spaceball League’s news feeds for the following week. I don’t pay a whole lot of attention to the news and only skim the headlines, but I’ll admit I was curious about what people were saying about us. There was rampant speculation about where all the pirates trained. Everybody expected them to behave like an unorganized mob. Some of the more outlandish things I read alleged that the Blood Suns were actually the Gikathka Stormblades masquerading as pirates to get back into the game. Man, some people are really desperate.

Kissy got the lion’s share of the attention. It was the first time anyone had played League spaceball in a suit even remotely shaped like hers. When word got out that she was a sex robot and played the game naked in a souped-up exoskeleton, the coverage went viral. I don’t watch the news and I still saw her demon body from more angles than is really healthy while trying to maintain an estranged, long-term relationship with another woman. Mostly while sitting in those boring meetings Maurice talked about. I tried to avoid him, but he always knew where I was. Tracking me down was easy. I whined a lot. Definitely didn’t threaten him. Bowler hats.

Some people made a big stink about Kissy being a robot and her body on full display to the universe, but the ISL squashed all of it with the statement, “There are no rules against mechanical players, and there are no rules against playing without clothes. We are looking forward to seeing Miss Kissy play in upcoming games.” What they didn’t say was that the game saw viewing ratings 1200% higher than normal for a game played in the first week of the season. No media conglomerate is going to screw around with an instant viewership like that.

Unfortunately for us, Kissy had a lot of fans from her old job and they kept showing up on Freehaven hoping for another taste now that she was famous. She turned them all down, but they didn’t go away.

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I’m hiding in my quarters on the *Hercules*, when I hear an insistent knock. I get up, muttering to myself about what it’s going to take to find a spare six minutes around here to jerk off and nap, and open the door.

Bucky storms in. “I’ve been trying to reach you for the last hour. Why haven’t you been taking my calls?”

“I’m working on the strategy for next week’s game, Bucky. We’re playing the–”

“There ain’t gonna be a next game if you don’t come over the station, Rick. You gotta come now.”

“Whoa. Slow down, tell me what happened.”

“Okay,” Bucky says, breathing hard. “Okay. You know how Kissy’s been gettin’ all this attention over the last couple of days? All those crazy people showin’ up and tryin’ to have sex with her?”

“Yes.”

“Well, turns out after we showed the porcupine vid, most of ‘em went away. But one guy stayed behind and talked his way into Kissy’s quarters last night.”

“I’ve seen Kissy in action. One guy is no problem for her.”

Bucky shakes his head. “Not even a robotics engineer who specializes in her model and has a nasty habit of dismembering them? Been in prison twice for wanton destruction of Pleasure Palace property? The guy’s disassembled over forty sex robots in the last decade.”

Fear grapples my stomach and puts a crushing fist into my lungs. “Is she okay?”

“Who, Kissy? Yeah, she’s fine. You know those three ogres that we’ve got for offensive linemen? They decided to protect Kissy off the field, too, after all her former lovers showed up. Over twelve hundred of ‘em.” Bucky smirks. “She’s a busy girl.”

“Bucky. What happened?”

“Well, one of ‘em was guarding Kissy’s door, but this bastard got in, talkin’ some line about routine Pleasure Palace maintenance and promisin’ a secret vid of it. So now there’s two ogres on her door, the ones who can—”

“Bucky! I don’t give a shit about our linemen! What happened?”

“The guy waited until one of the guards went for a pee break. I guess the smarter one, because when he got back, he found out about Kissy’s visitor and got mad. Both ogres went into Kissy’s room and found the guy just getting’ started.” Bucky grimaces. “They tore him to pieces. Literally. ‘Poetic justice’ is what they said. Doesn’t seem all that poetic to me, unless you’re into that death poetry. Nasty stuff.”

“You have the attention span of a goddamn gnat.”

“Yeah, well, they’re lucky they didn’t get arrested.”

“Bucky? Jager is on our coaching staff and Clippers owns the team. You could hijack the entire station and probably get off with a slap on the wrist.”

“But now Kissy can’t play.”

“What? Why?”

Bucky shrugs. “She won’t say. Not doin’ a lot of talkin’. She’s just sitting in her quarters bawlin’ her eyes out.”

“She’s crying?”

“Yep. I wasn’t aware that they could do that, but apparently she absorbs moisture in the air to get the water. She’s a regular dehumidifier. Anyway, she won’t talk to no one, not even Laura, and we both know that they’ve got some sort of friendship goin’ on. She won’t talk to anyone, Rick. We’ve tried everybody. Even Jager.”

“I’m last? Wait, you tried Erik Jager before me? A guy with a necklace of teeth? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Nobody thought that you’d be the one to get through to her, seein’ as you have such a hard time getting through to every woman you meet.” He shrugs at my affronted stare. “It isn’t exactly a secret, Rick. You argue with your wife in public, she shot you, made you apologize on the vid, and—”

“Okay, okay,” I say, holding up my hands. “Stop right there, I really don’t want to think about all the ways I’ve embarrassed myself in public. I’ll go see how a machine can have a psychotic break.”

I can tell when we get to the section of Freehaven Station with Kissy’s quarters because it’s so empty. Freehaven’s a big place, sure, but there are twenty-five thousand people living here and it’s really extraordinary for there to be any hallway without at least some of them in it. The clansmen had shut down the entire section for Kissy’s protection, or at least that’s what the burly men blocking the access hatch said before they let me through. They let me through but not Bucky, who says he’s going back to his apartment, and to call him with updates.

The clansmen are all really uptight. I can see how nobody dares to try to get past them, what with the swords and all. Many clansmen are expert swordsmen. Shooting a gun guarantees a visit from Mall Security, but they don’t give a shit about edged weapons if you can’t cut a hole in the station’s outer wall with them. It’s like living in an old western town with no laws, but the town itself made sure you didn’t fuck with the buildings.

Two offensive linebackers are still standing guard outside Kissy’s door. They look happy to see me. “Thank God you’re here,” the biggest one says. “She won’t talk to anybody. It’s almost as if her brain is stuck in cry and sob mode.”

“How long has this been going on?” I ask.

“Three hours.”

“Straight?”

“Straight.”

“Your name’s Arthur, right? Arthur Porchetto?”

“You got it, Coach.”

“Did you really tear a man to pieces?”

His expression goes flat. “He had it coming.”

“I don’t doubt it. Were you the one who let him in to begin with?”

“Nah,” Arthur says. “That was Pauly. He ain’t here. He ain’t gonna be guarding anybody for a while.”

“Erm..., Pauly’s an offensive lineman and I need him to guard Kissy in the next game. So you didn’t do anything permanent to him, right?”

Arthur gets an evil grin on his face. “Oh, yeah, he’ll be there. He might be limping a little, but he’ll be there.”

“Oh, okay, that’s—”

“He’s lucky,” Arthur says. “We only took one of his testicles.”

“Good … Wait, what?” I hear a muffled wail through the door. I decide that I don’t want to hear about pirate justice. “I’ll try and talk to Kissy. You guys wait out here.”

Kissy’s apartment is a lot bigger than mine on the *Hercules*. She has actual rooms. They’re small, sure, but walls go a long way to keep people sane when sharing small spaces. I can hear Kissy’s whimpering in the room on the left. She starts quiet and then ramps up to full-blown howl, then back down to whimpering again. I’ve never heard a machine cry. They’re very methodical about it. Bucky was right about the humidity, too. Dry.

“Kissy, it’s me, Rick. Can I come in?”

No response. I can tell from the volume that she’s in the front half of her crying loop. I walk into the apartment and let the door close behind me. Kissy’s sitting on the floor beside her bed. She’s hugging her knees and rocking back and forth. She looks up when I appear in the doorway, but she doesn’t stop crying. She sees me. There’s no recognition in her features.

“Kissy.”

Nothing. More crying.

I’m not qualified to troubleshoot a machine as complicated as her. But maybe … She got shocked into this, so a shock might her out. “Kissy, will you have sex with me?”

Like flipping a light switch. All crying stops and she stands up. “Really?” she asks.

“No.”

Confusion. “Then why—”

“Kissy, are you aware that you’ve been crying for the past three hours?”

She stops. Her eyes do that little dance that all robots do when they’re checking their internal memories for things. “Wow, three whole hours. It’s that stupid Sadness Protocol, it’s never worked right.”

“You have a Sadness Protocol? What for?”

“So, I can empathize with people better. It was a late addition to my model and they never tested it properly. Under certain circumstances, I get caught in a loop until a doctor does a hard reset.”

“You mean a technician.”

“Semantics. Aren’t you just a machine, Rick? You have microscopic cells and I have microscopic nanobots. We’re really not that much different.”

I raise my hands in defeat. “Please. I’m sorry I mentioned it. If you need a hard reset, how come I was able to break you out of the loop with a single question?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “I guess you asked the right one.” She pouts. “Are you sure you don’t want to have sex with me?”

“I’m sure, Kissy. So, what set you off?”

“That asshole Victor,” she says, her features contorting to anger. “I’ve never met him, but he killed six of my friends on the Palace circuit. He was a systems engineer for my model before they caught him in a customs checkpoint with the heads of two missing girls.”

I assumed she means robot girls instead of regular girls, but I don’t push it. “How did he get in here?”

“He flashed some old credentials to the boys outside, said he was coming in for some overdue maintenance on the Palace women. He looked okay and said all the right things. Never mind the fact that Laura completely upgraded my exoskeleton and I no longer have any of the parts Victor’s familiar with.”

“Does that make Laura your doctor now?”

“Yes.”

“Huh. I wonder if she’ll play doctor with me.”

“You really have a one-track mind when she’s concerned, don’t you?”

“Pretty much. What happened after Victor got in?”

Kissy sits down on the bed and folds her arms. “He’d changed his face. Surgery. I didn’t recognize him. I was trying to tell him I didn’t need him, when he pulled out a handheld EMP. I cried out. The boys charged in and Victor didn’t stand a chance after that. I would not want to get in a fight with them.”

“You’re no slouch yourself, you know.”

“Yes, I could have handled him. But all he had to do was touch me with his EMP, and it would be lights out for me forever. That’s how he killed the other girls.” She touches her throat. “Well, it used to be like that. Laura upgraded my neural net’s shielding so that can’t happen anymore. I guess the old fears don’t die when you change your configuration.”

“Is that what triggered this Sadness Protocol? Your fear of dying?”

“I suppose so. I’m not sure, it’s never happened to me before. I’ll ask Laura to find a neural expert and see if we can’t remove the Protocol or bury it somehow. I really don’t want this happening in the middle of a game.”

“Good thinking.”

Kissy squints at me. “You know, he said something really weird, right when he pulled out the EMP.”

“What?” I ask.

“He called me ‘one of his dear ones’. He sounded jealous.”

Fear seizes me “Shit. Fuck! Grab your stuff, you’re coming with me.”

“Why?”

“Because Victor had help. I think they used Victor first because if he succeeded, nobody would have asked any questions. Nobody would’ve thought about who’s next.”

“Who is ‘they’?” Kissy asks.

“The Veeni. They hate my guts. Gave me a death note and everything last week.”

Kissy stands up with a bright smile. “I’m one of your dear ones? Give me a couple of minutes to get my things.”

I toggle my fast contact list and call Bucky.

No answer.

I pay the override. I really hope I’m going to see the horizontal tango again, however much damage it’ll be for my own psyche. I see his apartment, and it looks as if Arthur and his buddies started the party there before coming over to handle Victor. The place is trashed. I can’t see anything other than this narrow view. No panning on Freehaven cameras. Too old.

I disconnect and make another fast call to Laura.

She picks up. “Rick, I’m glad you called. Is Kissy all right?”

“She’s fine. Where are you?”

“I’m working with the suits. Why?”

“It’s a hit, Laura. It’s the Veeni. I’m having trouble getting a hold of Bucky. I’m going to go find him, but I want you to be ready.”

“I will, but why aren’t they going after you?”

“They said they’d destroy ‘all I held dear.’ You know how they are.”

“So you hold me dear, huh?”

“Baby, I’ll disassemble them with rusty nails if they hurt you.”

“That’s sweet. I’ll be careful, Rick. You go find Bucky.”

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Bucky’s apartment looks worse in person. Jager and I are standing in the open doorway. Neither of us have gone in, on account of all the broken glass. It’s really hard to trash a place these days, since there are no pots or pans to fling around, no bookshelves to turn over, and no wardrobes to sack. But whoever was in here was intent on breaking everything they could. Which is weird, because they have to work hard to do it. Why go to all that effort?

“I have my people looking for Bucky and his fiancée,” Jager says. He’s wearing his pink shirt again. He doesn’t look worried. I suppose it’s hard to look worried when you’ve got human teeth clicking together on a necklace.

“Remember that note you said you’d help me with?” I ask. “I think this is it.”

“Not possible,” Jager says.

“Well, they’re going after people I care about, so yeah, I think it is.”

“There are no Veeni onboard Freehaven,” Jager says, “and they like to carry out their assassinations in person.”

“How do you know there’s no Veeni here? Are you telling me that you kicked them all off the station?”

“Not as brusque as that, I would like them to come back at some point after the tournament. No, I simply convinced Freehaven’s commander to declare a cockroach infestation. A nuisance to humans, but their droppings are noxious to Veeni, even deadly in some cases. The Veeni are staying away all on their own.”

“That just means they don’t want to sleep here, but they’ll definitely drop by to kill some people.”

“Calm down. We have the station covered, and no Veeni have arrived in the week.”

“And there’s no way to sneak onboard, right?”

Jager frowns. “I already know about all the ways to sneak aboard. Don’t you think I’d cover those routes, too?” He gestures around at the room. “We’re wasting time. I think this is a trick. I think it’s made to look like a Veeni attempt, but it’s something else. Why go through all the effort to wreck a room like this? He hardly had any belongings, so they had to break the room itself to generate this much debris. You can’t do this in a scuffle, you have to bring a crowbar. This is—” He gets a faraway look that says he’s talking to someone else. He comes back. “We found Bucky. He’s fine. He’s in the Mall with Janine. She’s shopping. I have three men shadowing them now and they’ll let us know if anything happens.”

I call Laura again. “You all right?”

“Fine. I locked down the armory just to be safe, and I asked Bartholomew to place the *Hercules* on alert. Nobody on or off until you give the all clear.”

“You sure there wasn’t anybody in the armory with you when you locked it down?”

“Yes, Rick, and before you ask, no, there isn’t anyone hiding in the suits. You can’t get even open them without my say so, and I checked them to be sure.”

“That’s assuming that whatever might kill you is a person,” I say. “Will you do me a favor, and get into some armor? I’d feel better if I knew you were safe until we figured out what the hell is going on.”

“I think that’s cute, Rick, but no. I can take care of myself.”

“So can Kissy, and we all know how that almost turned out.”

“Yeah, well, if I have to sleep before we know what happened, I’ll sleep in a suit. You happy?”

“Very. I’ll call you back soon.”

I disconnect and give Jager the update. “I’m really confused,” I say. “Why try to kill Kissy and then make it look like Bucky is missing when he really isn’t?”

“I’m not sure,” Jager says. “I rarely have to deal with this sort of thing. Clansmen are more straightforward. We challenge each other to duels.”

“We need sneaky person kind of help.” I make another call. “Jint.”

“What do you want?” she asks.

“Look, I need your help.” I explain about Kissy and Bucky’s apartment. “We’re trying to figure out what this is all about, but coming up empty. I figured you’d have a better idea.”

“Are you still in the apartment?”

“Well, we’re standing in the doorway.”

“What does it smell like?”

I sniff. “Well, it’s sort of fruity, now that you mention it.” Strawberries? I sniff some more. “It’s stronger toward the back room.”

“Don’t go inside, you fucking moro—”

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I wake up in a completely different place and I can barely see. Mostly just grays and blacks and a couple of bright spots in front of me that slowly coalesce into lights on a ceiling. I turn my head. Or, at least, I try to turn my head. Doesn’t seem to want to work. I open my mouth to speak, but that doesn’t work, either. What the fuck is wrong with me?

“Don’t move, idiot,” Laura says, her voice somewhere off to my left. She sounds angry and scared at the same time. I hate to hear her like that. “The nanogel is still working on you. Shouldn’t he still be under?”

“Oops,” says a mechanical voice.

The ceiling swirls and fades out.

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When I come to again I’m in a different place again, but at least when I turn my head it works. The walls are milky white and so are the floors and ceiling. I’m in one of those elevated hospital recovery beds. It’s really just a ‘we were going to discharge you but wanted to wait a couple of minutes in case you tried to die again’ sort of rooms. Laura is sleeping in a chair in the corner. That’s not a good sign, it meant I’d been here for a long time. Healthcare in the 29th century is fast. Everything takes fifteen minutes, tops. They only keep people overnight who have been blown to pieces.

I look down. There are leg shapes beneath the blanket, and arms and a torso, too. Oh, thank God. But if I still have all my parts, then why am I still in the hospital?

“Laura,” I croak. Man, my mouth tastes like absolute shit, like death crawled in there and pitched a tent.

Her eyes pop open and she looks at me. There’s fear and hope and relief and then anger. Ah, I’ve seen that before. I’ve done something fairly horrible. Then why am I the one sitting in the hospital bed?

“What happened?” I manage to get out.

She comes over and gives me a sip from a water cup next to the bed. It’s room temperature but slightly minty. “You got blown up,” she says.

“Why am I still in the hospital?”

“The bomb was in Bucky’s bedroom, and everything in the room turned into shrapnel. You got shredded by his marble collection.”

I frown. “By his what?”

“There were hundreds of them. Ever since he was a little kid, he said, his mother would send them as gifts from different parts of the Universe. She had to travel a lot and was never home.”

Her voice is tired and I can tell she’s trying to be brave but is having trouble getting to the meaty part of the story. I wait.

“Jager saved your life,” she goes on. Her fingers laced in my own, and her grip is strong. Or maybe mine is weak. I can’t tell. “He has a mobile stasis pod in case of emergencies. If he wasn’t there, you would have bled to death.”

“Bled to death? Medibot response times are less than twenty seconds on Freehaven.”

“You—” Laura stops. Covers her face with her free hand and swallows down a sob. “You were blown apart.”

“Apart?” I look down again. “But it looks like they put me back together.”

“The Freehaven hospital wouldn’t touch you. I called Paul Chippers and he sent a specialist team. We’re on a medical frigate. They … They put you—” She stops again.

I terrible idea dawns on me. *Oh, shit.* Not again.

“What did they replace this time?” I ask.

Her voice is a whimper. “All of you.”

The door bursts open and Bucky runs in. He points at me. “OH MY GOD YOU SHOULD SEE YOUR FACE.”

Laura convulses and hisses a long string of giggles. The white walls vanish into clear glass and I see every member of the Blood Suns watching and laughing and high-fiving each other. I’m in one of the VR training rooms on the *Hercules*. I can hear the muffled roar of their glee even through walls that are supposedly soundproof.

Kissy struts in and says, “So, how did it feel to be a robot for a few seconds?”

“Unbelievable,” Jager says, coming in after Kissy. “You bought the whole thing.”

“V-victor?” I demand.

“Oh, that happened,” Bucky says. “We almost didn’t pull the prank, but we’d been plannin’ it for days and it was a great opportunity. Then you came up with that goin’ after me was connected to the attack on Kissy, and it was perfect!”

Jager turns to Laura and bows. “That was a masterful performance.”

She’s practically hyperventilating. “Thanks,” she manages between hysterical gasps.

“Whose idea?” I ask.

“Ours,” Carter says, walking into the room with his sister in tow. Samantha has reddish blonde hair and she luckily doesn’t look exactly like her brother, who has a face like a flat board. Fraternal twins, then.

“We’re big on elaborate pranks,” Samantha says. “We asked Laura if she thought it was a good idea—”

“And of course I said yes,” Laura finishes. “If we did it in-between games you’d never notice us, you get so engrossed in planning the next game.”

“But I called Jint,” I say.

Laura nods. “I asked her about it and she thought it was the funniest thing in the world. She’s the one who came up with the idea of using a flash grenade.”

“In Bucky’s apartment.”

“Yep. We drugged you while you were disoriented.”

“I woke up in a hospital.”

“My idea,” Samantha says. “It enhances the illusion of a hospital trip.”

I rub my face with my hands, and then look hard at each and every one of them. “I have one question, and one question only.” They wait with those half-smile, half-worried looks people get when they’ve done something they think is funny, but are waiting to see if the subject will laugh or get really, really pissed. “WHO TOOK OFF MY FUCKING PANTS?”

14: Blitzes and Heart Attacks

For the rest of the week I endure being the butt of an extremely large joke. It seems like everyone was in on it. I will say that if you want a team-building exercise, terrorizing the coach and playing off his fears of having even more body parts replaced than his arm, and watching him make a fool of himself in front of everybody – well, mission accomplished. Even people I know to be involved in active clan feuds worked together on the field in ways I never thought possible. Jager either, he comments on it often. It seems to be a big deal. I don’t think of myself as a peacemaker, but here I am, doing the good work. Ha! It was fortuitous, I suppose, since our second game is a lot harder than the first.

We play the Albraxan Bulldogs. They haven’t won a tournament in over a hundred years, ever since their kicker, a guy named Marty Brooke, whiffed a 220-meter attempt in overtime and turned his last name into a verb. The Bulldogs are desperate for a win, and desperate people do awful things.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” I ask Laura on game day. She’s helping me into my armor.

“It was me, what?” she asks with a smile.

“You know exactly what.”

“And what’s that?”

“It was you who took off my pants.”

“Oh, it wasn’t me,” she says. “We found a little old man named Bernie to do it. He’s ninety and wrinkly and he smells. But his eyes lit up like—”

“Stop. Why won’t anyone give me a straight answer? It’s been four days since your horrible prank. It’s not funny anymore.”

“Oh, it’s still funny. You not knowing who saw you without pants is very funny. In you go, funny man.”

When we get out onto the field, the Bulldogs are already there and ready for us. They win the coin toss and elect to receive. Cribbens not only kicks it to the 3 meter line, this time he arcs it so high that by the time a Bulldog does catch it, he has to wave fair kick or get annihilated.

I’m hoping for another touchback. Two games in a row will start a trend, but no love. The Bulldogs start running the ball. And continue to run it. And again. They find all sorts of holes in our defense. It’s nice when teams are eager to show you all of your weaknesses early in the season, but it’s still frustrating to watch.

After the Bulldogs push past midfield, and I key up a CC channel to Bucky. “I thought your job was to stop their advance.”

“Working on it, boss.”

“Really? Because it looks to me like you’re trying to ask them nicely. You know, like a pussy.”

“That helps a lot, thanks for your incredible insight.”

The Bulldogs methodically pick us apart and drive all the way down into the endzone and score. It’s like watching a giant boulder roll down a hill. You know where it’s going, but you can’t do a damn thing to stop it.

Touchdown. 0-7.

The Bulldogs always blitz the quarterback on their first defensive play. It’s kind of their thing. They use all eleven players and they want you to feel fear or some shit like that. I think it’s dumb because when the opposing team knows exactly what you’re going to do, they can plan all sorts of nasty things. And I have the nastiest nasties on my side of the line of scrimmage.

The Bulldog Blitz meet an immovable wall and bounce off. Instead of attacking them, the Blood Suns don’t move. The Bulldogs try to get through again and fail. I get the impression that the offensive line is sending a message to their defensive counterparts. When the Bulldogs try a third time, we let them through. Kissy is all by herself with the ball. The Bulldogs charged ahead, thinking they’re taking candy from a baby with a fleet of battle tanks.

Kissy waits for them in her sexy suit. I’m not sure what she’s going to do. All she said before the game was “let them through.” I’d refused at first.

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“You want to what?” I shouted when Kissy told me what she wanted while getting ready for the game in the armory. “Are you crazy?”

“I’ll be fine. You do what we planned, block the blitz, but after the first couple of tries, let them through.”

“How many of them?”

“All of them.”

“ALL?!”

“Stop yelling, I’m standing right here.”

“I can’t help it when people say crazy things to me.”

“Let them all through,” she repeated. “Do you really think I’d ask you for this if I thought I would be in danger?”

“I think you’re underestimating exactly that. What are you planning?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“I need a hint before I agree to something like this,” I say.

“No hints. And this is really just a courtesy, you know. I’m calling an audible. The offensive line will do anything for me after Victor. Just agree. It will be easier for everyone if you do.”

“Fine. Just don’t get yourself hurt.”

Kissy raises an eyebrow. “What would you do if I was?”

“Jesus, you’re killing me.”

So, the Bulldogs roar through our offensive line and I have no idea what’s about to happen. Sure, you could say that nobody knows what’s about to happen next at any given moment, and with all the random things that can happen in a spaceball game, surely I would be prepared for the unknown. But there’s a difference between wondering which of a set of probable outcomes I’ll see, and wondering which of all the possible outcomes in the universe is going to happen. I hold my breath and watch a train of destruction barrel straight at Kissy.

And then I see kung fu in space.

With one hand still holding the ball, Kissy executes an incredible acrobatic dance between, around, over and under each Bulldog. It seems like she barely touches any of them, but they all go spinning away from her. She’s using more force than a regular suit, too, because the Bulldogs sail quite a distance before each player can regain control of his position. They don’t have any time to get back into the action. Kissy slides around them all in a matter of seconds and then whizzes up the field unimpeded to score.

TOUCHDOWN. 7-7.

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When it comes to my offensive and defensive coordinators, I have a hands-off approach. I tell them things like “score” and “stop their fucking ground game,” respectively. Respect is the keyword here. I’m very respectful with Jager. I don’t know what he’ll do to me if I talk to him like I talk to Bucky. Seriously, I have no idea. My mind keeps coming up with colorful scenarios that end poorly for me. I don’t like to think about it.

When Bucky fields our porous defensive line again, all I say is, “Try not to be as useless as the last drive.”

“If you’d like to do this, be my guest.”

“A gerbil would do better than you at this point.” Before he can retort, I say, “Do you remember the tryouts?”

“Yeah, but – oh. Oh.” Bucky pauses, as he realizes I’m talking about the maneuver the defensive line used in tryouts to get their jobs. The field AI didn’t see it then, it probably won’t see it now. I’m glad Bucky caught my meaning, because it’s not something I’d want to actually spell out on the air. The CC is closed to prevent eavesdropping, sure, but only an idiot assumes that the field AI can’t brute force the encryption and listen in. “Are you sure you want to try that?”

“Did you have anything better planned?”

“Nothing as dumb as that, boss.”

“Give it a whirl.”

The Bulldogs run another ground play – why change what’s successful – and get stuffed. They run again and actually get negative meters. They call a timeout, during which the Bulldogs’ coach has a furious discussion with the bees. After the timeout is over and the Bulldogs are lined up on third down, the bees are in real close to the players. The Bulldogs probably figured out what was going on, but can’t prove it without hard evidence.

I could’ve called it off at that point, but I want to see if my guys will get caught. It’ll be serious if they do. I’ll have to crucify the whole squad to save the team. As in, “We had no idea when we hired this foul person that they would behave in such an unsportsmanlike way.” Nobody will believe us, but the Blood Suns won’t get banned from the Tournament.

After the snap, the Blood Suns charge through the Bulldogs’ offensive line like they’re asleep. We get to their quarterback before he even has time to hand off the ball. There’s a big crash, a tangle of arms and legs. The ball goes flying. Another huge pile of players fall on it.

I wait to see who comes up with it. “They were even faster on third down,” I comment to Bucky.

“Didn’t happen,” he says.

“How come?”

“No need. With the bees in so close, I figured they thought they saw something and were trying to spring a trap or something. They froze on the line.”

“Nice work.”

“Yeah, but we won’t be able to use that play again, boss.”

“It’s not something we want to be trotting out in every game, anyway.”

Let me be clear: I have nothing against cheating so long as I’m the one doing it and nobody’s getting killed. Spaceball isn’t a gentleman’s game. Popular teams generate more credits for their economies than the gross domestic product of entire planets, and the idea that everyone lets something that big ride on the fickle whim of chance is naïve fantasy. Losers fight fair, and then limp home on their loser feet to their loser houses and loser severance payments. I’m certainly not going to fight fair and be that loser guy. My rule for cheating is this: if the bees and field AI didn’t see it, then I didn’t do it.

The Bulldogs recover their own ball, but it’s fourth down and they punt. We return it to midfield and Kissy goes back to work.

They try to blitz again – not The Blitz, a regular one. Kissy still has enough time in the pocket to find a receiver down the field. She throws a pass and hits Huck Fitzberg while on the move in man-to-man coverage. Fitzberg doesn’t even slow down. He stiff-arms the defender, who can’t catch up fast enough to grapple him, and scores.

TOUCHDOWN. 14-7.

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The Bulldogs open up their next drive on their 320-meter line with a pass play. First one I’ve seen all game. They connect for 120-meters. The next play is another pass and they get 100 more meters. They throw again. 150-meters.

“Bucky,” I say on the CC.

“I know.”

“Do you need Kissy to take over for you?”

“That hurts, boss, that really hurts.”

“Seriously, man, you need to stop them.”

“I can see that, I’ve got eyes.”

It’s like that for the whole drive. The Bulldogs score again.

Touchdown. 14-14.

We score on the next drive. Then they score. We score. Back and forth like that for the entire game. At the two-minute warning, it’s tied 35-35 and we have the ball on their 300 meter line. It’s third down and 50. We have to convert and eat up more clock time, or kick a field goal and hope our sieve – I mean, defense – can stop them before they score again. They know the same thing. If they stop us here, we’re toast.

“Kissy,” I say on the CC.

“Yes?”

“How are you feeling about a quarterback sneak?”

“It’s fifty-meters,” she answers. “That’s not a sneak, that’s a run.”

“Fine, it’s a run. Are you up to it?”

“I’ve never done it before.”

“Just do what you did during the blitz,” I say.

“Oh. I can do that.”

“Except don’t score.”

“I know that, I’m not an idiot.”

“Well, if I thought you could take your time, I’d tell you to score, but that won’t happen.”

“Right.”

Kissy takes the snap directly on the next play. Her offensive linemen part the ways for her, and she uses her judo to deal with the two remaining defenders who are very surprised to see her. The Bulldogs’ safeties realize what’s happening and close in on her, but not before Kissy gets the requisite fifty-yards. She doesn’t stop, though.

She turns around and comes back.

“What are you doing!?” I scream at her.

“What did I tell you about the yelling?” she says.

“Now you’re behind the line of scrimmage! Go back!”

“I will.”

“When?”

“Soon.”

“How soon?!”

“I’m taking my time, just like you said.”

Kissy leads the Bulldogs on a merry chase back down the field toward our own endzone. Her teammates follow her and block as best as they can. Kissy zips along, pauses, watches the Bulldogs close in, and then zips to the next spot. After a minute and a half or so, when the game clock is down to 0:08 and I think I’m having an actual heart attack as Kissy hovers dangerously close to our own fucking goal line, she turns around and heaves the ball.

I’d been watching her so closely that I never noticed the lone Blood Sun standing in the Bulldog’s endzone.

Kissy’s throw is a like a laser. An entire kilometer, straight and true.

TOUCHDOWN. 42-35.

“Bucky,” I say after Cribbens puts the ball on their ten-meter line.

“Yes?”

“You really didn’t do anything else all game, so do you think you can hold them for eight seconds?”

“I think I can do that, yes.”

He does. The Bulldogs throw a Hail Mary. Crazy Eddie intercepts it.

Game over.

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The win celebration at the KornerStone club is wilder than the first one. Someone installed a series of hooks on the far wall, and amid feral bellows and howls, the Blood Suns installed a Joomit and Bulldog helmet. Like trophies. I don’t know where they got the helmets, and I don’t ask. I also don’t ask if the helmets are still occupied. I wouldn’t put it past them. What I don’t know won’t hurt me, right? Right.

Bucky and Janine are off doing their own celebration. Jager is standing behind the bar with a drink in hand. He offers one to me but I decline. I instead turn to Laura, who is watching the pagan helmet ritual, and say “So, I won.”

“We won.”

“Okay, we won.”

“Yes, we did.”

“You said that maybe you’d, well, kiss my other ear.”

“Yeah, maybe.” She stands up.

“Oh,” I say. Crestfallen.

She leans in. “I was the one who took off your pants. View was nice.”

I look up at her and see her mischief smile. I reach out for her but she slips away. I watch her go.

“Follow her, you idiot,” Jager says.

“That’s not how the game is played,” I tell him.

“Yes, it is.”

“Well, not this game.”

15: The Law Sniffs Around

That’s how it goes for five weeks. We win every game. No more blowouts, though. Seems like everybody wised up after the Joomits, and no one had ever done what Kissy did in the final few moments of the Bulldogs game, which makes it all the more surprising when she does it again three games later. It’s nice to be winning. But the entire time I’m nervous. I know that there’s a part of the universe that doesn’t like me. There’s a tiny spiteful bit of it, and there are consequences for me for winning. I just know it.

That consequence comes for me one evening as I’m standing on the observation deck of the *Hercules,* watching the stars and minding my own business. I hear the heavy footfalls of a person trying very hard not to sneak up on someone. I look over my shoulder and see a middle-aged man in a sharp suit. He comes up to the rail and joins me in star contemplation.

I look at him sideways. He’s clean-shaven and has that high and tight haircut that every military and law enforcement person gets upon entry to that club. “Who’re you?”

“Peter Henshaw,” he says. “Fleet Investigative Bureau.”

Bureaucracy is like a cockroach. It can survive anything, even losing its own planet. “What can I do for you?”

“You can tell me where you got your spaceball suits.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, “I can’t do that. I actually have no idea.”

“I think you’re lying.”

Well, it’s not a *whole* lie. “You are free to think whatever you want. Even if it’s wrong.”

He chuckles. “That’s a good one.”

“My mother said that to me all the time.”

“Your parents died on Earth?”

“Yes, but not during the Great Ambush. Before that.”

“From what?”

“Shuttle accident,” I say, remembering.

I was supposed to be on that shuttle. I’d overslept that morning and missed the flight. I was nineteen, during my *I’ll drink a lot all the time* phase. They left to go on vacation without me as sort of a passive aggressive intervention. It worked. I still have the occasional nip, but I prefer not to dull my experience. I raised a mental glass and toasted, *Live life like you stole it and they’re going to take it back at any moment. Thanks, Mom and Pops.*

“I’m sorry,” Henshaw says.

“Ha. You didn’t even try to sound like you meant it.”

“It’s the thing to say.”

“Not if you don’t mean it. If you don’t mean it, don’t say it. It’s okay to not say anything. Silence is better than bullshit.”

“Did your mother say that to you, too?”

“Nope, that’s all mine. So, tell me, Peter Henshaw, what’s your interest in my spaceball suits?”

“Fleet Supply sold forty of them six weeks ago to one of Paul Chipper’s subsidiaries.”

“Sold them, eh?”

“Yes. They were to go to civilian law enforcement agencies across the Rim Colonies. They never made it to the colonies, and your suits look remarkably like them. I’m here to determine if there was a breach of contract.”

“Wow, that’s some story. Hang on a second.” I call Laura, keeping our conversation in my head.

“Rick, I really don’t have time right now. I’m in the middle of a suit teardown and–”

“There’s a FIB here,” I interrupt her, “and he says the suits are stolen.” I relay what Henshaw told me.

“Where are you?” she asks.

“Observation deck.”

“I’ll be right up.”

I key off and turn back to Henshaw. “My suit expert is on her way. She’ll clear this up for you.”

“I doubt it,” he says. “Between you and me, this is just a formality. You’re in possession of military hardware that’s supposed to be out protecting settlements from the very raiders who are on your spaceball team. It’s disgusting and you should be ashamed of yourself.”

Ah. He’s one of those. “Well, if that were true, wouldn’t that mean that the suits were doing their jobs? Keeping the raiders at bay?”

“I don’t follow.”

“The raiders are here, Pete. Not ravaging Rim Colonies. Mission accomplished, and nobody had to do anything.” I realize I might have accidentally admitted to something, so I add, “That’s assuming that the suits came from where you said, which I can’t say for certain.”

“I’m here to take those suits,” he says.

“Just you?”

“Just me.”

“Wow.”

“Wow, what?”

“I mean, it’s just been years since I’ve seen someone sent a merry goose chase as big as yours. Who did you piss off?”

“What?”

“Well, Pete, usually when someone is sent alone into a pit of vipers to get the shiny bauble, it’s because they fucked up and this is a last-ditch assignment. If you win, great, but you’re not expected to win. In fact, you’re expected to be never heard from again. So, what happened, Pete? You sleep with the boss’s wife? Sister? Wait, was it his daughter? Pete. You dog.”

He turns red on the last one. Maybe he did sleep with his boss’ daughter, or maybe the red face meant he’s really offended and I’m about to get punched. I also know that it’s entirely possible – no, probable – that he’s right and our spaceball suits were diverted from some other legitimate project to my playground. I’m okay with that. My own suit was set up to eviscerate people. I’m saving people I’ve never met from being torn in half. I should get a medal.

“Goose chase or not, I represent the Fleet and if I determine if you stole—”

I lean in. “Pete.”

“Yeah?”

“When you flew in, did you happen to notice the Edochian cruiser sitting off the port bow?”

He smiles at me. “That’s a fake.”

“Really?” I ask. “Looks convincing to me.”

“Have you been onboard that cruiser?”

“No.”

“Have you seen an Edochian from it?”

“Not in person, but one spoke to us when it arrived.”

“Right. On the vid, where everything is real. Have you seen Edochian patrols, or other ships come and go from it? Have you seen it move, dump garbage, or otherwise act like a ship with thousands of people on it?”

“Now that you mention it, no—”

A dart appears on Henshaw’s neck. His hand slaps on it and we both turn to see where it came from. Well, I turn. Henshaw never makes the full pivot. He topples over. I don’t catch him. He seems like a dick.

Laura puts her stun gun down and I won’t lie, I relax more than a tiny bit. She rolls her eyes. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, Rick, I’m not going to stun you, too. Does that sound like something I would do?”

“Uh, actually it sounds exactly like something you would do.”

She smiles as she comes over and hip-checks me. “You’re right, sweetie, I would. But—”

“Sweetie?”

“I need your help. Grab his feet.”

“Sweetie?” I repeat.

“His feet, Rick.”

I grab Henshaw’s feet and we carry him from the room. “Where are we going with him?”

“Just up the corridor.”

I drop his feet, forcing Laura to stop. “There’s an airlock up there.”

She fixes me with one of her patented death-glares. “Richard Charles. Do you honestly think I would flush this man out of the airlock simply for asking questions?”

“It depends if he was asking about the Sandstorms game.”

Laura’s affront flashes to anger. “I swear to God, you talk about that one more—”

“I’m kidding. I’m kidding.”

“Yeah, well, his shuttle is still docked up here, numbnuts. Pick up his feet.”

We bring Henshaw to his shuttle, a Fleet-issue gate jumper. The things are deathtraps. They have a nasty habit of disintegrating on the fifteenth trip through a gate. I don’t know why the number fifteen. Nobody does. But it happens so often that the shuttles have a big clock just inside the door that displays how many trips through the gates the ship has taken. This one has thirteen jumps on it.

Gate jumpers have three seats. We sit him in one of the passenger seats. “Strap him in,” Laura said. “I’ll take care of the flight plan.”

“Auto-pilot?” I ask.

“Well, I’m not flying it, dummy.”

“Where are you sending him?” I ask.

“Back to the gate. He’ll be out for a couple more hours, long enough for him to sleep through the jump.”

“Which will end up where?”

Laura looks up from the controls. “I dunno, where should we send him?”

I point my thumb at the jump clock. “This will be the shuttle’s last Jump. How about somewhere relaxing? He’s too uptight. Maybe he needs a vacation.”

“Pronos it is,” Laura says.

“He can’t afford Pronos on a FIB salary.”

“I know,” Laura says. She gives the autopilot its instructions. “It’s all set, let’s go.”

We leave the shuttle and close the airlock. The shuttle automatically disengages from the docking collar and we go back to the observation deck to watch it leave the *Hercules*. I really hope this works. I don’t need Henshaw coming back and asking his questions in a firmer tone of voice.

The observation deck is still deserted. Even though we spend our time in different parts of the ship and rarely see each other, Laura and I pretty much have the *Hercules* to ourselves after practice finishes for the day. Everybody else heads over to Freehaven. The Gate is a tiny shiny dot in the distance. Henshaw’s shuttle zooms toward it.

“You know,” I say, “he was saying all sorts of interesting things before you tranq’ed him.”

“And some of them were the reason I shot him,” she says.

“Was he right?” I ask.

“Maybe.”

“Maybe means yes. So, the cruiser’s not real?”

Laura snorts. “What? No. I mean, yes. I was talking about the suits, Rick.”

“Are you sure? Because now that I think about it, the cruiser isn’t doing all the big ship things that big ships do.”

“It’s Edochian, you idiot. They’re not the same as humans. You’re not going to see garbage dumps, or shuttles back and forth to the mall. You’re definitely not going to see patrols. Edochians don’t need them. Their sensor packages can detect incoming ships in the next galaxy.”

“How do you know that kind of thing? Seems a bit like insider technical data.”

“Because I’ve worked for Fleet, remember, and they know these things.”

“You were a civilian. They wouldn’t have told you.”

Laura smiled. “Fleet engineers are geeks. Geeks babble if there’s a pretty lady in the room.”

I smile at her. “That’s not a fair description of you.”

She frowns. “Why not?”

“Flowers are pretty. Fireworks are pretty. When pretty things see you, they despair because they will never achieve your kind of beautiful.”

Her eyes lit. “That was a good line.”

“Not a line, sweetheart.”

“Sweetheart?”

“Well, you did call me ‘sweetie’ just a bit ago.”

“And then numbnuts and dummy, so don’t get carried away.”

I step closer. “I know your tricks. Those are terms of endearment.”

“Those are–”

She stops when I rest my knuckles against her belly and lean in to kiss her. Time slows. She doesn’t pull away or turn her head. Her eyes lock with mine. Her lips part ever so slightly, and I touch mine to hers. Her lips are so soft. I close my eyes when she lifts her chin. Her frame swells and she kisses me back.

A flash of light flickers through my closed eyelids.

I open them. There’s a fireball where Henshaw’s shuttle is supposed to be.

Laura must have felt me tense, because she breaks off the kiss and looks up to my face. She turns and looks at the window as the shuttle’s bits and pieces float away from each other at high speed.

She whirls back and grabs both my arms. “That was NOT me.”

“I know,” I say.

“You do?”

“Yeah, self-destructs make a lot of noise when you turn them on,” I say. “So, you have ample warning to turn them back off again. I didn’t hear any of that.”

“I could have removed the engine shielding,” Laura says. “You wouldn’t have seen me do it while you were strapping in Henshaw.”

“But you would have made it so he’d already passed through the gate, so I wouldn’t ask questions.”

“Engine shielding is tricky, and jumpers aren’t all that stable.”

“Um..., I’m convincing myself that you didn’t do it, so please stop ruining it.”

Laura smiles at me and taps me on the chin. “Maybe it was you?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You could have planted a bomb or something on Henshaw. I was programming the navigation computer. I wouldn’t have seen you.”

“Right. I carry bombs like that in my pocket just in case.”

Laura puts her hand on my chest. “I think you’re being nice to me because you want to go back to the kissing.”

“Guilty.” I lean in and she lifts her head to better meet mine and then I stop.

“What is it?” she asks.

“How did you know who he was?” I ask. “He only said his name was Henshaw once, and that was before I called you.”

Laura blinks. “You told me what it was.”

“No, I didn’t.” I stare at her. No way. NO. WAY. I can’t believe it. “You. You did. You *did* blow him up.”

Her expression is mutinous. “Yeah, and I’d do it again. Let me tell you about Peter Henshaw. His nice guy routine is an act. Do you know why he’s out here on his own? Because six years ago he murdered three civilians and two children, who didn’t know they were carrying military hardware on their cargo ship. A ‘friend’ was using them to smuggle. The details of what happened were murky enough for him to get shit assignments and not court-martialed. Murky, my ass, he had connections protecting him. No, before you ask, I didn’t know any of the civvies. I was doing the universe a favor. It’s better without him in it.”

I do a quick ‘Net search and confirm it, *Three merchant sailors killed, including two children, FIB agent Peter Henshaw under investigation.* “Okay, but—”

“Look, if I didn’t do it, someone else would, and it would’ve been a lot messier. No, I can’t tell you who. Besides, Rick, he already figured out where our suits came from, and he already knew we were going to tell him to fuck off. He’d come back with reinforcements, or he’d complain to the League that we were using military hardware, and then who knows who would start poking around.”

“Laura, I’m fine with what you did to Henshaw, I really am. But what happens when Fleet sends someone else?”

“It’ll be weeks. And if they do, hopefully they’ll be in another gate jumper with crappy reactor shielding.”

“You can’t kill everybody, Laura. And they’re just suits. Chippers has gobs of money. He’d have gotten us more suits.”

“Not these suits. They’re diff—” she cuts off and turns away.

She almost said something right there. I saw it, and she knew I saw it. I want to know it, but coaxing it out of her is going to be trouble. But something even worse happens. Part of me, the deep dark part that suspects everyone of everything, whispers that her kiss was just another deception to keep me occupied.

*No. Fuck off. That was real.*

*You just wish it was real. She’s playing you.*

*Well, you weren’t the one kissing her, it felt real to me.*

*You* want *it to be real. You need it to be real. So, what are you willing to overlook to keep that illusion?*

*Everything.*

*Shit. We’re fucked.*

*That’s right, so keep your dark ideas in that dark hole where there’s no kissing and no touching and no good sensations and go fuck yourself.*

“Laura,” I say. She still has her back to me.

I don’t want to say the wrong thing and fuck everything up, but the suspicions rocketing around in my head will no longer stay silent. I can play the doofus for a long time, but I have some scratch in this now. Time to see if I’m as hip deep in the shit as I think. I try to make my voice sound calm. “I’m guessing that the suits might have been Fleet issue at one point, probably when we got them, but they’re not anymore? You’ve done something to them?” Laura nods. “Does it have to do with the delivery you got? The one I wasn’t supposed to know about?” Another nod. “Something is going to happen, isn’t it? Something that Henshaw wasn’t allowed to know about?” A long pause. A nod. “And this something will probably happen during the championship game? When the whole Universe is watching?” She turns around, stunned fear etched on her face. Not hip deep. Neck deep. I hold up one hand. “I won’t ask what that is, because I know you can’t tell me.”

Laura closes her mouth. Her expression relaxes. “Don’t think that by saying you won’t ask, that I won’t tell you what I said I wouldn’t tell you because I think you’re being nice to me.”

I squint at her. “Your logic is unassailable when you speak with quadruple negatives.”

She smiles a small, quiet smile, and then kisses me. I did not expect it, though I do expect her to now dance away when I reach up to hold her.

I’m completely blown away when she doesn’t do that, either.

When we stop for a breather, I can’t help but ask, “Why now?”

Tears form in her eyes. “Because now I know you trust me.”

“I love you,” I say, “and you love me back. Trust comes with territory.”

“This is different.”

I squint at her. “It wouldn’t have anything to do with being complicit in a man’s death, would it?”

She nips my neck. “Would it creep you out if it did?”

“Not if you keep doing that, it wouldn’t.”

We go back to my place and consummate a very long dry spell in our marriage. No, I’m not sharing all the details. I’ll talk about other people fucking, but I’m not good enough to make it into the annals of Righteous Boinking. I’m clumsy and routinely fall out of beds. Besides, I’d like to be considered a gentleman about at least one thing in my life. I know I’m not fooling anyone, but it’s the thought that counts, right? Right.

After she shows me that she still has far more stamina than I, Laura traces designs on my chest with her finger while I stare at the ceiling and try to get my brain to fire on more than one synapse.

“Wow,” she purrs, “you’d think that this was your first time in two years.”

“It was,” I admit.

“Liar.”

“No lie. Never wanted anybody else.”

Her finger pauses in place. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“You know me, sex is like truth serum.” I meet her gaze. “I know that I’ll never get to stop apologizing for not being able to withstand a Veeni siren who can overpower any human male in the universe. I’m sorry I wasn’t strong enough. But it never changed how I feel about you.”

“Then why did you stop chasing me?”

“Baby, the day you kicked me out, you stuck a gun in my face.”

She breaks eye contact and goes back to tracing designs. “I was drunk.”

“You threatened to shoot me if you saw me again. And you burned down our house.”

“I was *really* pissed at you.”

“You were far beyond pissed,” I told her. “I decided to give you a couple of days to cool off, but when I went to find you, it was too late. You were gone.”

“But you knew where I was. You knew where to find me at that Fleet base.”

“Yes, I always knew where you were. Does that make me a stalker?”

“Maybe a little.”

I kiss the top of her head. “Do you still want that divorce?”

She nuzzles me. “Nope.”

“Good.”

16: Lore Dump

Laura is still in the bed when I wake up. I take that as a sign that I can stop worrying that this fragile thing might fall apart at the next ill-placed sneeze. She could have rolled out of bed and left last night while I was sleeping, but she didn’t. I know she thought about it. Any woman would. But not any woman would still have her head nestled in the crook of my arm, and that makes all the difference in the universe. I kiss the top of her head. She shifts and snuggles closer. I hear content purring.

She raises her head and looks at me with sleepy eyes. “Hi.”

I smile. “Hiya back.”

“Do you have anything to eat around here? I’m starving.”

“Hey, this is the coach’s quarters. I don’t know what you’re used to down in the bowels of the ship, but this is a full-service suite.” I run my fingers down her spine and stop in the small of her back. “You desire it and it happens.”

“Pancakes with butter and syrup, orange juice, and sausage. Then coffee. Lots of coffee.”

“Big day?”

“Oh, you know, just another spaceball game.”

“No pressure, eh?” I get out of bed and amble over to the food dispenser to get her breakfast. I really don’t have to do anything; the machine is voice-operated and already heard her request. Something is missing, though. “Wheat or buttermilk pancakes?” I ask.

“Buttermilk, of course. Wheat is for people who like tasteless shit.”

The little door lifts and a tall stack of steaming pancakes rolls out. Three pads of butter melt away from the top as if racing to see which one can topple over the side first. I ask for another glass of juice for myself, and then carry everything over on the food tray.

Laura settles the tray on her lap. “I could get used to this,” she says.

“Feel free,” I tell her.

“I think I will. The food is good around here.”

“Just the food?”

She smears some syrup on my fingers, leans forward and sucks them clean.

I have a hard time forming a complete thought for the duration. “Wow. Um... Wow.” She lets go of my hand and returns to her food. I take a long pull from my juice. It’s not real juice, just the powdered, reconstituted kind. “So, I know you can’t tell me what’s going to happen,” I says, “but can you tell me what *has* happened? Can you tell me anything about what led up to this?”

Laura is quiet for a moment and eats some of her pancakes. “You want the story?” she asks.

“Yes. I think it would help.”

She puts her fork down. “Okay, I’ll tell you what I can.

It goes a little like this. Three months ago, things were really bad for the human race. Edochian cruisers like the one out there hung around at every gate and blew up human ships trying to escape the Nokkran dreadnoughts hunting them down one by one. Everybody was cut off from everyone else, and it looked like the end.” She pokes me in the arm. “Well, at least to those of us not sleeping in giant tampon tubes on Pronos.”

“Hey, we all have our coping mechanisms,” I say.

“I think you’re descended from a badger or some other marsupial. You go to ground when there’s trouble.”

“Not all trouble. Just the Universe ending sort that I can’t fight against.”

“Everyone can fight, Rick, in their own way. You’re doing it right now with the Blood Suns.”

“This counts?”

“Sure. Anyway, there’s these two guys, Tom Beane and Skip Tyler.”

I recognize the first one. Beane’s the King of the Underworld. Literally, the King of the Underworld. I used to think it a name and not a real person, sort of like Rex Duster in the 25th century, Elias in the 23rd, and that Keyser Soze fellow back in the 20th. Before the war, nobody remembered meeting Beane and everyone dealt with him through proxies. Jager might be the head of all the pirates in this part of the universe, but Jager is very public about it and people know what he looks like. Beane is a phantom and criminals terrorize each other with tales of supposed sightings. “I saw on the Net that Beane was the reason the Edochians went apeshit,” I said.

“The First Consortium,” Laura corrects me. “It’s just them. There’s a sort of schism going on right now within the consortiums. It isn’t on the surface, but the cracks are there. We’re trying to widen them.”

“I take it I’m part of the wedge?”

“Sort of.”

“Are you sure you can’t give me a hint about what I’m supposed to do?”

“Nope. Just be yourself.”

“Famous last words.” I take another sip of my orange juice. I wonder if the woman at that Fast Fruit kiosk would entertain any franchise spin-offs into the juice market. I bet juice from her oranges will taste better than this micro-manufactured stuff. But I’m sure they’ve probably already started on it. Every good idea I come up with, someone else has gotten to it first. “Back to the story.”

“Are you at least semi-aware enough to know what Beane was doing to draw the First’s attention?” Laura asks.

“Hello. I was in a sleeping tube, not under a rock. He was doing faster-than-light research.”

The Edochians Forbade hyperspace research. With a capital F. That’s how we humans met them in the first place, after a failed experiment back in the 23rd Century tore a hole in the fabric of the Universe and sucked through an entire planet before the Edochians appeared and closed it. They whacked us on the nose and said, “No.” Then they made us sign the Hyperspace Treaty in 2640 at gunpoint and in exchange let us use their Gate network. But no more FTL attempts. Their First Consortium goons ran around enforcing the Treaty, regardless of pesky things like sovereign borders. They’d wipe out whole colonies if they thought there were FTL experiments going on.

“You’re right, tube dweller,” Laura says with a smirk. “Beane was running secret research labs to create an FTL drive. The Edochians caught wind of it, and when they realized he had actually achieved the technology safely, decided to wipe out the human race.”

“Because clearly,” I say, “that’s the proven method of uninventing something.”

“Something about it scares the shit out of them,” Laura says. “We didn’t know what it was until three months ago.”

“What happened three months ago?”

“I’m getting to that. Do you know how many Edochian consortiums there are?”

“Yep, three. They’re like castes. The first is the warrior caste, the second is their worker caste, and the third is their science and engineering caste.”

“Right. There used to be fourth, though.”

“Four? What did the fourth do?”

“The thinking caste. Sort of like their philosophy and religion. They were all telepaths, and the only ones capable of FTL travel. They mentally folded space, allowing an entire ship to instantly travel from one end of the universe to the other.”

“Whoa.”

“They’re the only ones who could do it. Several thousand years ago, the Fourth Consortium had a major disagreement with the First, mostly having to do with the other races in the universe. The First wanted to rule, the Fourth wanted to leave everybody alone, etc.”

“How did that go for them?”

“The same thing that always happens when pacifists pick fights with warriors. The First subjugated the Fourth. The remnants of the Fourth serve as navigators on Edochian ships, like living FTL drives.”

“Ouch,” I say. “Who’s the other guy, Skip Tyler?”

“He was a Hunter before the war.”

Aha. That’s also with a capital H. Officially, the hunters are attached to the Fleet Domestic Police, a nice-sounding bureaucratic organization that deals with the sort of crime that humans do to other humans. When human criminals flee beyond humanity’s borders, hunters are tasked with bringing them back dead or alive. Mostly dead. They spend their time in nasty parts of space and are separated from the scum they chase by a very thin and shaky line. Hunters make Echelon’s special operators look like fluffy bunnies. That thought triggers the image of Jint in her leather getup with a white bunny tail. Awesome.

“What are you grinning at?” Laura asks.

“Some random thought,” I say. “Unimportant. What’s Tyler’s connection to all this?”

“The FTL research has been going on in Beane’s family for generations. Beane’s father knew about the Fourth Consortium and actually engineered Tyler from remnant Fourth Consortium genetic material. Tyler is a hybrid human-Edochian, and the only one to survive the experiments.”

“What superpowers did he gain from that? And why did he get to run around free? Usually people like him occupy small rooms in a lab.”

“Beane’s father thought he’d failed. The only visual indication Tyler has that he’s a hybrid is his eyes. They’re all black. But that’s it. Other than being half a Halloween costume, Tyler has no outward indication that he’s not entirely human. No telepathic ability.”

“Again, why is he running around? I’ve seen enough movies to know that a failed experiment usually involves dissecting the failures to see what went wrong.”

“They didn’t have any more material from the Fourth to splice in, and the Edochians were investigating. They shut down the operation and put Tyler into the foster system. He grew up into the charming man he is today.”

“Does he know that he was grown in a tube by Beane’s dad?”

“He didn’t find that out until a couple of months ago. He always thought his mother was raped by an Edochian during a First raid.”

“Is that even possible? I wasn’t aware Edochians even had dicks.”

“They don’t,” Laura says. “Edochians reproduce asexually. I don’t know much about how it works, nobody does. But we do know that they pass on their memories to their children.”

“Slick,” I say. “I guess it’s easy to be an advanced race when you never forget anything.”

“Right. And it also explains why none of them have done anything about the Fourth, because for them it still happened yesterday. I guess it’s easy to hold a grudge when the memory is still fresh.”

“They should try alcohol. So, I take it Tyler does have some ability?”

Laura says, “Yes, Tyler’s a latent telepath. He can’t communicate telepathically with any humans or regular Edochians, but he can connect to the Fourths. Two months ago, he was on a Fleet ship staring down the nose of an Edochian destroyer’s main turbocannon. Tyler somehow freed that destroyer’s Fourth navigator via telepathic link. The navigator was very angry with its captors and killed everyone onboard.”

“So, we have an Edochian ship of our very own?”

“No, the Edochians destroyed it. Probably to keep it out of our hands. But for a brief moment, the navigator was free. The result is that the Edochians have untethered their navigators, for fear that Tyler could pop in on Beane’s FTL ships and free them. The Edochians will travel in emergencies, sure, but for all intents in purposes we’ve grounded their capital ships. They have to rely on vessels small enough to fit through the gates.”

“They don’t have regular FTL capabilities?”

“No need. They had the navigators. They never developed the FTL bubble technology Beane perfected.”

“How does that work?”

“In extremely simplified terms, Beane’s drive creates a bubble around the ship, lowering its mass to zero, and then sort of hucks that bubble through space.”

“Neat. And the gates?”

“Anchored wormholes. No special drive required.”

“Also neat.”

“Don’t you know how anything works?”

“Baby, I don’t even know how the door to this room works. So, the cruiser outside Freehaven right now?”

“Second Consortium.”

“But there was a First goon on the vid when they got here.”

“Faked. The Edochians don’t give a shit about us. They’re here because Beane used to use Freehaven as a base of operations, and they’re sitting on the station in case he comes back.”

“But they Jumped in,” I say.

“I’m sure they untethered their navigator as soon as they got here. We knew through our contacts when they’d arrive, so we had Chippers bring in the *Hercules* at the same time.”

“Contacts?”

“Not all of the Edochians follow the First’s lead. There are some sane ones.”

I put down my empty glass and poke at the breakfast sausage. I guess it’s beef. We’ll call it beef. I’m going to eat it regardless of what it is, but my brain expects a decision before I put some random chunk of burnt flesh in my mouth.

“Does Chippers know what’s going on?”

“Some. He’s a patriot and wasn’t hard to convince.”

“Why me?”

“We’ve got a special present planned for the First Consortium, but we need the entire Universe watching to make it work. The Spaceball Tournament is a great start, but it’s got to be special. We needed a circus. As far as ringmasters go, we couldn’t think of anybody better than you.”

“Wait a minute. I was *your* idea?”

She nods. “I pitched you to Beane.”

“How do you know him?”

“I know his wife, Kiera. We lived near each other when we were kids.”

“Weird.”

“Yeah, small Universe.” I sigh. “What?”

“I dunno. It all feels so, so engineered. Fake.”

“This is not fake,” Laura says. She puts her hand on mine. The real one. Her eyes are big and hopeful and determined all at the same time. “You and I are not fake,” she says. “I had no idea this was going to happen, Rick. I definitely didn’t plan on it. I was still very angry with you when you came to find me at Fleet.”

“But this was all planned.”

“Not all of it. I knew you’d come to me for the suits, which are key. But we had no idea you’d recruit your players right out of the clans. That was pure genius on your part.”

“Thanks. It’s a gift.”

“You do have many that I enjoy,” she says. She caresses my fingers.

I wiggle them a bit. “Fancy another go?”

Laura’s eyes flutter. “Most definitely, but later,” she says. “I have a lot of work to do today, and you still have to share your plans for beating the Milkmaids tonight. They’re undefeated.”

“So are we.”

“Rick, they’re undefeated because every team they’ve played against has let them win. Nobody wants to play them.”

“I do. It’s going to be fun!”

That’s a lie. It’s not going to be fun.

17: Scary People

TODO: Mention that this is the last game before the playoffs.

The Milkmaids are a penal colony team. I know we’ve all heard of prison sports teams full of misunderstood inmates who get the chance to be part of something bigger than themselves – and while they may not win the big game, they’re better human beings for the experience. The Milkmaids are not one of those teams. They are the scariest motherfuckers you will ever meet. They’re all hardened criminals selected for combat based on how long they’ve survived the supermax Hysis penal colony, where prisoners are pushed out of a shuttle and left to fend for themselves with a jumpsuit, floppy shoes, and an eating utensil. You’d be amazed at how many people a determined individual can kill with a spork.

From the vids I’ve seen of Hysis, the prison is split into two kingdoms. One of them has walls and the other doesn’t. I think that walls in general represent some sort of challenge to those living outside of them, and the idea that there’s a place a person can’t go makes them unhinged. It might not be better in there, it could even be worse, but people won’t stop until they get in. If they can’t get in, then they try to tear it down. I guess what I’m saying is that the Hysis population fights a lot. I think Chippers owns a network that broadcasts all sorts of shows from inside Hysis – battle shows, character shows, redemption shows, you name it, there’s a show about it.

Anyway, the Milkmaids were the idea of some idiotic social scientist, who thought that a spaceball team would create a bond between them and that they wouldn’t be at war all the time. It doesn’t really work, but they kept the team because of the ratings and equipment sponsorships. The selected Milkmaid doesn’t get new digs or live a life of luxury, either. They’re still in general population, which is why the Milkmaid roster in in constant flux. Sporks are a constant threat on Hysis.

The networks are all talking about the similarities between our teams. Thing is, all of the Milkmaids get caught. So, I’m thinking that my guys are a bit smarter, but then I think about the average visitor to the KornerStone and figure that my team just lives in places cops are scared to visit. I try not to pay too much attention to the ‘Net, though. I can learn about any subject, see it, hear it, and even smell it and touch it if I have the right sensory implants. I can have news feeds scrolling across my eyes if I want, little doorways into the universe happening around me. My problem with all of that is that there’s so much information available that I feel it deadens the experience of actually living. This is not to say that I don’t look up things from time to time, but it usually only occurs when I’m about to buy something and I want to get the reviews. Will it work as advertised, or will it blow up in my face and leave me disfigured for however long it takes for me to get to a hospital, that sort of thing.

I can learn almost whatever I want about other people using the ‘Net, too. Yes, even smell and touch with the right implants. Gross. I never do. Not even people I’m about to do business with, something Laura gives me shit about. I want my first impression to actually be a first impression, not a summary judgment of information I’ve already received and formed an opinion about. Call me old-fashioned. Go ahead, I won’t get offended.

I do use the ‘Net for team research, though. The information gathering app that’s built into my sensory suite is amazing. I ask it questions like “List all strategies the Milkmaids have played over the past 100 years, and group them by similarity.”

Bam! I get this list:

*Head-hunting.*

*Murder.*

*Intimidation.*

*Brute force blitzes.*

*Penalty attrition.*

*Ice hockey passing.*

Okay. So not a lot of spaceball techniques. I check out the last one, because that seemed like sports, passing a lot – only to find out that they practice this trick with live hand grenades. I wonder how many of the Milkmaids have hand replacement implants.

I’ve played against teams like the Milkmaids before. Momma’s Bunch is the obvious one here, but it’s not like I’m doomed to repeat the trauma and eternal psych-out of the day I lost my arm. There are plenty of teams in the league who’ve discovered that their planet’s population really digs it when they play demolition derby instead of spaceball, and pays them handsomely for it. The trouble here is that most wrecking teams have the intelligence to tone it down a bit when playing against a bunch of pirates. Not the Milkmaids. They’re all rabid.

Maybe we can just lose this one? No, that isn’t an option.

It’s important that I get Laura to her championship game. I know she would cheat if it looked like we couldn’t win, but she has enough on her plate and doesn’t need to do my job, too. The regular season is half over, only six more games to go to get to the playoffs. I’m not worried about making the playoffs. We were currently undefeated at 6-0, and the rules are so convoluted around the playoff berths, wildcard berths, and wild wildcard berths, that you have to lose almost all of your games to be eliminated. The regular season is like a pre-playoff season. The only difference is the fans’ attention level.

It’s funny how your motivation changes along with your perspective. Before Laura filled me in on what’s really going on, I wanted to win because A: it’s nice to win, and B: it would’ve been an Eternal Fuck You to the Spaceball League. I can come out of retirement, slap a team together in two weeks, and win your fucking circus. Now I have a whole war riding on my shoulders, and my wife has placed a ridiculously large bet on me pulling through for her and the rest of the universe.

Urgh. This is why I don’t like getting involved in the big Tapestry of Life. Too many threads. It seems too big for one person, and my ego isn’t large enough to delude myself into thinking I’m sufficiently important to make a lick of difference. But somebody does, and I’ll be damned if I let her down. What’s my next move, then? Well, I have to beat the Milkmaids and I have to do it without losing half my players.

I’m still dwelling on it when someone knocks on my door.

“Open,” I say, immediately regretting not getting up to check. People are trying to kill me, and here I am letting just anybody in. It’s Jint. One look at her face and my fight or flight instinct very nearly engages.

“Have you come up with a plan against the Milkmaids?” she demands.

“I’m working on it right now,” I tell her.

“And?”

“I never give out my game day strategies, Jint, not to anybody.”

“I know. It’s one of your more irritating habits.”

“You know my habits?”

“Echelon, remember? I know everything about you.”

That makes me uncomfortable. There are a lot of things I know about me that make me uncomfortable. For instance, the idea of somebody else with the details of that awful summer day with Jenny Winters when I was thirteen makes me want to throw up. I shake off the memory. “So why are you asking for something you already know I’m not giving?”

“I know all about the Milkmaids,” she says. “I want to know how you’re going to protect my son from them.”

“Dexter is a kicker. They’ll never be near him.”

“I don’t want him on the same field as the Milkmaids,” she says.

“He will be tonight,” I say. “And he’ll still be a kicker, which means the other team isn’t allowed to touch him. I fail to see what the problem is.”

“If the Milkmaids read the team roster and make the connection that Dexter is my son, then they’ll go out of their way to touch him.”

“Am I to understand that you put some of the Milkmaids on Hysis?”

Please say no, please say no.

“Yes,” Jint says. “Four of them. Every single one of them is a degree of degenerate you have never encountered.”

“I dunno, I’ve met a lot of degenerates.”

“The worst go to Hysis. I had assistance putting them there, too, and I’m the last member of my team left alive.”

I study her. “You’re the last alive because you have a dangerous line of work, or you’re the last alive because you’re being hunted down one by one?”

“Hunted,” she admits.

“How does it feel?”

“I’m sorry?”

“That pit in your stomach is what happens to everybody when you say, ‘I’m Echelon.’ How does it feel?”

Her jaw drops. “I can’t believe how insensitive you are. I’m standing here telling you that my son is in danger from a group of disgraced Echelon wet workers, and you’re playing armchair psychologist? How do you get off saying something like that to me?”

“Wow.”

Her brows furrow. “Wow, what?”

Wow, I’m surprised I haven’t been slapped. I’m not telling her that, though. “Just, wow.”

“Wow, WHAT?”

“How did you ever get to be in Echelon, anyway?” I ask her. “You’ve given away a lot of secrets in the past five minutes.” I tick them off my fingers. “You’ve told me details about your Echelon operations. I know about how some of the Milkmaids don’t like you. You’re on the run. And some of the Milkmaids are former Echelon. Is there anything else you’d like to share while you’re at it? I’m big on the sharing these days. Let’s get it all out in the open so I know where the steaming piles of shit are. I really hate stepping in other people’s crap.”

She steps forward and shakes her finger under my nose. “You protect my son on the field.”

“He’ll be fine,” I say.

She gives me another glare and then walks away.

“I have a plan,” I murmur to myself.

I do have a plan. It’s somewhere in my head, I just know it. Coaxing it out might take some effort, though.

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I go out to the observation deck to have my lunch. Make a little picnic of it. Maybe the big open space will help me think of a strategy, maybe I can visualize the players and how they’ll move around on the field. Mostly, I just visualize my guys getting torn up and killed. Lunch sucks.

The Milkmaids’ strength, besides their intimidating roster, is the fact that they play every game like it’s their last. They really, really do. It’s one thing to think like it’s your last game, and to treat every opponent like they’re the ones to send you home, but that’s just a psychological tool regular players use to focus their energy on game day. You can’t actually think that the entire time, because the whole point of the regular season is to get to the end. The Milkmaids don’t think the same way. I look up their game day rosters for last season, and discover that their entire team rotated players out six times. They churned through six entire strings of players to get to the end of the season. Either in their games or between them, the Milkmaids lost nearly five players a week. Jesus.

I hear heavy footsteps. Crazy Eddie hunches his way through the door. It’s the first time I’d seen him within three meters since the day I recruited him. I know he’s been spending all of his free time on Freehaven in-between games and practices. This isn’t a “Hey, how’s it going” kind of meeting, this is an “Um, can I talk to you?” one.

“Can I talk to you, Coach?” he asks.

“Sure, Eddie,” I say. “What’s on your mind?”

“The Milkmaids.”

“What about them?”

“We got a good game plan for beatin’ them tonight?”

“We do, Eddie,” I lie. “I’m counting on you being there for us, just like you have all season.”

“Thanks, Coach. I won’t let the team down. The reason I wanted to talk, though, is that when I was on Pronos, I heard about the Milkmaids from the other inmates. The things people said about ‘em, they, they–”

“Do the Milkmaids scare you, Eddie?”

He thinks for a moment. “Yeah, Coach. They do.”

Oh, we’re fucked. “They’re just men, Eddie. They’re nastier than you, they’ve done far worse things than you, and they probably think bad thoughts all day long, but they’re just men. They’re scared, too.”

“Of what?”

“Of going back to Hysis.” I have a crazy thought that perhaps we could turn the Milkmaids, get to them somehow and promise them asylum, but then I remember that four of them will kill Jint and her son, so no, that option is out. Back to fearing for our lives. “Would you want to go to Hysis?”

“No way, Coach.”

“So imagine how they feel, and they’ve been there already. And if they make it through the game, they have to go back. Your average Milkmaid is a suicidal player. That makes them vulnerable.”

“How do you figure?” Eddie asks.

“They’ll take risks we won’t and create opportunities for us where we usually wouldn’t get any. You’ll have more interceptions than usual, because they’ll throw it when they shouldn’t. We’ll get more completions because they’ll blitz Kissy when they shouldn’t. We–”

“I’m not worried about that stuff, Coach,” Eddie interrupts me.

“What, then?”

“I hear what the Milkmaids do with their sporks.”

“Eddie.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you really think Laura would let you fly around in something that could be damaged by a goddamn utensil?”

“Well, no, but–”

“And do you think she would give you a suit that wouldn’t protect you from assholes like the Milkmaids?”

“No, but–”

“Eddie, she told me that if I’d been wearing your suit back when I played, I’d still have my own arm. Do you think she’d make that promise lightly?”

“No, Coach.”

“Are you still scared of the Milkmaids, Eddie?”

He thinks for another minute. “Maybe a little. But not as much as before. Thanks, Coach.”

“You’re welcome.”

He leaves, probably feeling a bit better about himself, a bit less frightened, and a bit more confident that his coach has a plan to win.

I hope I can deliver.

I let Eddie leave and then retreat to the bathroom to get away from everyone. I am sitting on the can and doing a word search puzzle to keep the bad thoughts out of my brain. I’ve done my business. I’m just procrastinating instead of putting my pants back on.

I hear the door open. Then heels. This is not a unisex bathroom. Am I in the wrong bathroom? Did I pick the women’s room by accident? This is not an encounter I want to live through today. I look up, though I can’t see anything except the stall walls. I hold my breath. Maybe if I don’t make any noise, they’ll do whatever it was they came in to do, and never know I was here.

“Stern?”

What the fuck? “Janine?”

“I thought you’d be in here, hiding like a little girl.” Her voice and her heel strikes move closer to the stalls.

I put my pants on in case she gets any funny ideas. When the toilet is done auto-flushing I say, “It was the quietest place around until you walked in.” I open the stall door. She’s standing just outside and has to back up. “What can I do for you today?”

“You can tell me what you’re planning for the Milkmaids.”

For fuck’s sake, not her, too. “Why would I tell you that?”

“So, I can tell Bucky and then he can tell all of the players who are begging him for details. They can’t get anything out of you. You’re making him miserable, and when he’s miserable, I’m miserable.” She steps closer and shakes her finger at me. “You do not want to make me miserable, Coach Stern.”

That’s very brave of her, considering what happened to her the last time she got in my face. I decide to be nice. I got laid last night. I’m feeling at one with the Universe. “I don’t tell anybody my game day strategies,” I say. “I think you’d be hard pressed to find a coach who does.”

“This is different.”

“What’s different about this is that you’re standing in the men’s lavatory badgering me about it. What’s different about this is that you seem to feel like you’re entitled to information that I wouldn’t tell my mother. But do you know what’s really, truly different about this?”

“You have no idea what to do about the Milkmaids, do you?” she asks.

The fight leaks right out of me. “No, not really,” I admit. I go over to clean my hands. I wave them through the blue forcefield in the wall, and it removes all the germs from my skin that aren’t supposed to be there. “You caught me, I have no idea. At least not yet. Something will pop, I just have to think about it some more.”

Janine laughs at me. “You’re not going to figure it out,” she says. “There’s nothing to figure out with the Milkmaids. They kill their opponents. It’s simple. They don’t play to win. They play to kill. Usually in the most spectacular way they can manage. You can’t figure out how to beat them on a spaceball field if they’re not there to play spaceball. Look, I know you don’t know what to do, and that probably pisses you off. Maybe more now that I’m standing here telling it to you. But you have to know that regular tactics aren’t going to work with the Milkmaids.”

“And you have an idea to fix that?”

“It’s the only one that will work.”

“I’m all ears.”

“Stop thinking that the only attack your offensive coordinator can manage is on the field.”

I wait for the rest of her idea, but that’s it. “Are you suggesting that I ask Jager to wipe out on an entire team?”

“Nope,” Janine says, then starts for the door. “All I’m suggesting is that you ask him for some advice.”

She leaves. I stare at the door for a few minutes, trying to figure out if there’s another way. Just because I don’t have a plan to beat them isn’t a good enough reason to request the wholesale slaughter of a spaceball team. I can stomach quite a few things, but this is too much. Then I think about Laura and the burden riding on her shoulders. Am I willing to risk her plans on the off-chance I can pull a win over the Milkmaids out of my ass? The simple answer is no. Good thing I’m a simple guy.

I still feel like throwing up all the way to see Jager.

The pirate godfather is in the same corridor on Freehaven that Kissy showed me when she found out about Dexter’s heritage. He has the same guys standing around him, too. They have looks on their faces that say they knew why I’m here, and what I’m about to ask. I hate being predictable.

“Hi, Jager,” I say, “I thought I’d find you here.”

“Why?” he asks. “You have never been here before.”

“Ah, never mind about that. I want to talk to you about the Milkmaids.”

Jager smiles at me. “No luck finding answer in bathroom?”

“How did you know I was – no, don’t say anything. Look, I’m not sure I can beat them on the field, not without losing half our players. I don’t want to lose everybody at once like that, the team will never recover.”

“But lose one player is okay?”

“A team can bounce back from one player,” I say. “Rage and payback and all that. Six or seven people at once, though, that’s tough.”

“How can I help?”

“Any ideas on how to keep the Milkmaids from playing tonight?” I ask. “Something non-lethal?”

Jager grins at the last part. “Yes, I do. Did.”

“Did what?”

“Did already.”

“I’m sorry?”

Jager claps his hand on my shoulder. I see it coming and try not to flinch. “I heard you have trouble,” he says, leading me away from the other men. “I have trouble myself. You see, I want to destroy Milkmaids before they destroy us. Self-defense, yes? And perhaps boon to Universe, they are not men. Animals in armor are animals all the same. But put hit on team would be, as you say, bad precedent. Never in history of League has this happened. Our fear should not rule us to break tradition. So I keep Milkmaids away without killing them. Easy. It is good you came to see me.”

He lets go of my shoulder. We’re at the end of the corridor, at the exit. Jager turns to go back, and I realize I have no idea what he’s talking about. Do I want to know? Is it good enough that we won’t be playing the Milkmaids tonight, or do I really have to be aware of the circumstances that make that possible?

I open my mouth to ask.

Jager raises his hand without turning around.

I close my mouth.

He puts his hand down and keeps going.

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We don’t play that night. A mysterious virus gets into Hysis’ network and shuts down everything. Shuttles, satellites, anything with a whisper of technology in the penal colony goes silent. It’s the first time an entire planet has gone dark since the war. The Milkmaids forfeit the match.

Jager is wearing a small, secret smile the next time I see him. I don’t ask about Hysis. He won’t tell me if I did. What I do know is that the man clearly has connections outside the pirate clans. He made a whole planet shut down for a day.

Say what you want about the Milkmaids.

The scariest motherfucker I know wears pink shirts.

18: Karma Breaks Kneecaps

I discover during the next game that the Blood Suns built up a lot of fear and anger over the idea of playing the Milkmaids, all of it feral and brutal. I know this because they unleash it all against a freshman team called the Whimsions, who never stood a chance. What makes it even worse is that for the entire first half we’re playing a bunch of moon-faced kids who’d all won some retarded planetary contest and who’d stood in for the regular players. The match receives an abnormal amount of media coverage, and most of it beams back to their homeworld so the parents can watch their kids play real spaceball!

We annihilate them. We beat them so badly that I feel sorry for them.

I know Laura feels sorry for them, too, because I hear about it for three days. We don’t actually have a discussion concerning the team’s behavior, or an honest debate over whether it’s acceptable for pirates to rant at teenagers on the ASC, or even a fight about my decision to keep scoring after we were crushing them 88-3. I already know that I did something wrong and felt dirty for it, but she digs the knife in by sending a steady stream of withering comments in my direction. I’m not interested in having my sex privileges revoked, so I know better than to talk back. That’s a lose-lose all around. I’ll admit that I have a truly difficult time keeping my mouth shut, though. We’re talking a Herculean effort. I should get a medal. Things like:

“Their mothers were watching them play.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t take it easy after it was clear you were going to win.”

“Little old grandmothers had to listen to the ASC feed. There are things no person should have to listen to, and they heard it all. Grandmothers, Rick.”

“Is it possible to charge coaches with unsportsmanlike conduct?”

“Don’t you have any humanity left?”

“How does it feel to completely grind away the love for spaceball in so many people, all at once?”

“Karma’s a bitch, Rick.”

That last one hits home hard, because even without Mrs. Remind Me of My Shortcomings, karma is on my mind. My feeling on karma is this: what goes around comes around, but if you step out of the way and think you’re smart for dodging disaster, your smugness acts as a super-dense core that slingshots the karma around even faster, so that the next time you see its fury it’s been transformed into a hurtling fireball of doom. I dread what it’ll look like. What the hell can be worse than the Milkmaids? And will it spread out over the whole team to lessen the blow, or aim directly at me? Can I avoid it, leaving myself open for karma’s third revolution? Do I dare? A collision like that might be seen from orbit.

I don’t have to wait long. Karma’s reply arrives on Wednesday and sucker punches me in the face.

\*\*\*

I’m eating my lunch on the observation deck while the team runs drills. Bucky’s poring over some new defense plays with Janine. They’re concentrating real hard and completely ignoring me. That’s fine because I don’t like talking to Janine. I want to be nice to her but when she starts talking I want to cover my ears and sing songs to make the bad person go away. I’ve decided I’m just too fucking busy to make new friends. Adding new people to my life is hard. It’s work. I have to want it. Really, really want it. What I want is for her to go away, but she seems to ground Bucky and I suppose that’s a good thing. He’s watching her talk like every word falling out of her face is molten gold with fairies sticking out of it. The two of them don’t even look up when the newcomer steps out onto the deck.

I’m a little surprised. Security isn’t supposed to let just anybody onto the ship, and after the attempt on my life, they are forbidden from allowing anyone I haven’t personally vetted onto the observation deck with me. But one look at her and I know why she made it here. I know why Security let her pass.

She’s short. An old pair of flight goggles rests on bright blue hair she’s pulled away from her face and tied with a fluorescent pink scrunchy. A brown leather jacket covers a black tactical vest, a red open-necked shirt with wide lapels, and black pants tucked into calf boots. She isn’t wearing any makeup and she’s got a lot of freckles. I can’t see any weapons, but I know from experience that people in her line of work don’t go anywhere without at least one monofilament blade. The silver badgers on the lapels of her jacket mark her. She works for the League. A Bookie.

She shouldn’t be here. At least, not for Bucky. He said that he’d gotten the genetic modification. His addiction cleared. She couldn’t be here for him. Most of my brain believes that, but a small glimmer flickers in the back corners where I don’t like looking and whispers, *I told you so, you fucking dickhead.*

The Bookie takes in the entire room in a glance and locks onto Bucky.

“Martin Clementine Buchannan,” she shouts.

Bucky freezes stock still, like a woodland animal that has crossed paths with a dangerous predator.

Janine jumps to her feet. “Bucky, who is that? How do you know her? You better not be—”

The Bookie sneers. “Honey, dream on. You can keep the wrinkled old bag. I got better things to do than shag the leftovers.” She turns her attention back to Bucky, who’s creeping away and freezes again. “Mr. Buchannan, you owe Mr. Diggles and diverse others three million and change. On behalf of the League and the Gambling Debt Resolution Department, I’m here to collect.”

“THREE MILLION!?” I shout. “Bucky, you said you only owed a hundred grand to that Milo guy.”

“Milo is not Mr. Diggles,” The Bookie says, “and while Milo’s debt is included in this collection attempt that amount is insignificant compared to what Mr. Buchannan owes Mr. Diggles.”

Flash boil achieved. “Bucky. What the fuck? You said you were clean. You said you had an operation to fix your gambling problem.”

He shrugs. “Yeah, about that. I sort of made it up.”

“I know. There’s a Bookie here. Bucky, the only reason I hired you was because you said you had that operation, and now I find out that you lied to me? That you’re still gambling with money you don’t have? That you’re still fucking up your life and everyone else’s around you?”

“Me?!” Bucky yells, standing up. He crosses the room and grabs the front of my shirt. “You ruined everything when you shot that bee. We were gonna lose that game and I was gonna make a shitload of money. I was gonna make back what I owed and then some. But then you lost your fuckin’ cool and shot a fuckin’ referee.”

Something shatters in my head and I push him away. “What? Wait a minute. Wait a fucking minute. Did you bet against us? You bet against me?”

He snorts. “Of course. I had it all planned out. It was a sure thing. You sleep with the ref’s wife, you practically guarantee that we lose. That asshole would call every little foul on you. It was such a fuckin’ sure thing, and you fucked it up so fuckin’ bad.”

I raise a hand. Drop it. I actually hear the squelch in my head when the rotten pieces fall into place. “Did you…did you set me up with that Veeni?” Bucky grimaces. I can’t believe it. It’s like I’m looking at a different person. A person I don’t know is standing before me in the skin of an old friend. I feel like I’ve been run over. “You … You … *Why*?”

“I owed Mr. Diggles, Rick, and you don’t want to owe Mr. Diggles. He was gonna kill me. Kill me slow. He was gonna put me into a vat of rats. They’d have gnawed off my feet first. Then my shins. My knees. He’d use drugs to keep me from sinking into shock. Said I’d feel it all. Said I’d scream myself hoarse. Said I’d break my own wrists trying to get out of the cuffs, trying to escape. You get the picture. So, I told him I could throw the cup game. I got the Veeni woman to sleep with you – she hated her husband and wanted to embarrass him. The rest would’ve taken care of itself, if you hadn’t shot the guy.”

“I don’t get it. We lost. You should’ve been in the clear.”

Bucky shakes his head. “The League struck the game from the records. Said it was tainted, that the ref wasn’t in his right frame of mind. Took ‘em awhile, but after they made the ruling, I guess Mr. Diggles had to pay back some debts.”

The Bookie claps her hands. “Thanks for the history lesson, Mr. Buchannan. So, now that we’re all up to date, I’d like to collect the three million now. Mr. Diggles and diverse others have been fined for accepting gambling tickets from team employees, which is against League rules. The fines have been suspended pending your repayment, but should you fail to come up with the money the fines will be imposed and I assure you, they are quite heavy. Diverse others shall be diversely displeased. You should also be aware that if I can’t collect the money now, you will be banned from the League effective immediately, and that I will also break both your ankles.” She grins and cracks her knuckles. “To tell you the truth, I really like breaking ankles, so if you don’t have the creds, I’d appreciate the heads-up so we can get started.”

“But Milo was going to take both his arms,” I say. “You only want to bust his ankles. Seems like you’re starting awfully small.”

“Rick,” Bucky says. “Who’s side are you on?”

“My side, you fucking asshole. Life was great for me until somebody fucked it up. I just found out it was you. Fuck you, Bucky. Fuck you.”

“Didn’t you hear what he just said?” Janine says. “They were gonna torture him to death.”

I forgot she was standing there. I was focused on Bucky like a laser beam. This was the man who ruined me. A friend, for fuck’s sake. Well, I thought he was a friend. Goes to show you how good I can pick ‘em. “They still can, for all I care.”

“You don’t mean that,” Janine says. “I know you like to play the tough guy, but you’re not that cold–”

“You don’t know me at all,” I cut her off, “so save your breath. Why, Bucky? You could have asked for help. But no, you went ahead and fucked me. For money, Bucky. You should have told the League, there are assistance programs for that crap.”

“What, and be in debt to them for the rest of my life? Thanks, but no thanks.”

“So it was better to ruin me.”

The Bookie nods at Bucky. “That was pretty low, even for us,” she says. “To be quite honest, the League is surprised that you went to such lengths. You could have easily thrown the game by inserting some less than stellar plays into the defense.”

“It wouldn’t have worked,” Bucky says. “The field AI can detect shit like that.”

“You know that isn’t true, Mr. Buchannan,” the Bookie says, “because you’ve been doing it this time again, all season. One or two games wouldn’t have mattered, like I just suggested. But you’ve been doing it in all of them, for some reason. The field AI detected that. The pattern gave you away.”

“All season!?” I yell. “You’ve been trying to fuck me all season? Again?”

“And you’ve been winning despite it,” The Bookie says. “I usually don’t gamble, Mr. Stern, but I will place a bet or two on the Blood Suns.”

“That’s wonderful,” I say.

“You should be aware that I have been monitoring your pulse and blood pressure throughout this encounter. Your surprise and anger are genuine. Since you have been unaware of your employee’s actions, you and the Blood Suns will not be held responsible.”

I nod and walk over to the door. The Bookie stands aside for me.

“Where are you going?” Bucky demands. “You know that Chippers can pay the debt, no problem. Call him and help me out, man.”

I look back at him. Maybe for the last time. I’m okay with that. “Bucky, you told me you were clean. You lied to me. You sicced a Veeni siren on me. You ruined my career. And you know what? I could forgive all that because I understand why you did the things you did.”

A flicker of hope shines in his eyes. “Thanks, Rick–”

I raise a finger. “But you hurt Laura. Your selfishness caused her pain. I’m still picking up the pieces from what you did to her. I could forgive you for what you did to me, but I’ll never forgive you for what you did to her. Never.”

“Aw, come on, she’s a bitch and you know it, you hardly even like her–”

“Bucky, shut your mouth. You shut your goddamn mouth! I’ll even make it easy for you. If you ever speak to me or Laura again, *I’ll* break your legs. Oh, and you’re fired, by the way.” I turn to the Bookie. “He’s all yours.”

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“Are you serious?” Laura asks.

We’re down in the armory. I can’t remember getting here. I do remember the screams from the observation deck when I walked away. I feel sorry for Bucky, I really do. But he did it to himself. Besides, it’s not like the injury is permanent. Breaking ankles and kneecaps is just for old time’s sake, a throwback to the old days. A bit of excruciating pain, sure, but modern medicine can fix all of that in an hour.

“Yep,” I say, leaning up against my armor. It feels good. Something stable. “He cursed me out while the Bookie was working on him. He kept at until there weren’t any more words, just screaming. And you know what? Bucky can scream really loud.”

Laura sits down next to me and takes my hand. “Oh, baby, I’m sorry.”

“You know the most annoying part? I should have known better. I should have picked somebody else.”

“There was no way you could have known.”

“Sure there was. I could’ve checked up on his story. Gotten his medical records. Then I would’ve known from the start.”

“Woulda, coulda, shoulda. Don’t beat yourself up over what you didn’t do. You can’t change it. You can only move forward.”

I smile. “Sometimes that’s the hardest part.”

“Not really. Easy as putting one foot in front of the other. A child can do it.”

“There’re a lot of things a kid can do that I can’t.”

“Like what?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure I can’t stick my foot in my mouth.”

“Really?”

“You know what I mean,” I say. “I can’t actually put it my mouth. I don’t bend that way.”

“I think you manage it at least twice a day, Rick.”

“Yeah, well, at least nobody’s writing them down.”

“That you know of. Who are you going to get to replace Bucky?”

I close my eyes. Squeeze them shut, more like. Maybe this is all a dream, and everything will be all right when I open them again. Nope, still shitty. “I have no idea,” I say. “Bucky’s been trying to fuck us all season, and we’ve been winning anyway. Maybe we don’t need one.”

“You know as well as I do that that's not true.”

“So where am I supposed to find coordinator this late in the season?”

“You could always ask Jager. I’m sure he knows somebody.”

“I really don't need to be asking him for anything else. I'm not sure I want to know what I owe him in exchange for shutting down Hysis.”

“Rick, it’s not just about finding the right guy. It's about finding the right guy for these players. They're going to be pissed when they find out that Bucky was trying to throw games. They’ll want somebody they can trust to not fuck them over.”

“And you think Jager is the only guy that can provide somebody like that?”

“You know I'm right, Rick.”

“Yeah, I just hate to ask him.”

“Why ask?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why don’t you hold a late season tryout? That way–”

I sit straight up. “Brilliant.” I lean over and kiss her on the cheek. “Sweetheart, you’re fucking brilliant.”

“What? What did I say?”

I swear, sometimes I think that Laura was placed in the universe to get me out of jams. It’s not like she’s the one extracting me from some retarded situation I invariably put myself in, but she appears at the right moment, or says the right thing, or looks at me in the right way, and I change course. I know exactly what to do to replace Bucky.

Replace Bucky. The words are hard to think. But he betrayed me. Not once, not twice, but every time we played a game. I’m sure he had his reasons, and the non-asshole part of me wants to hear him out, but the angry voices in my head drown out the compassionate ones. I don’t want to be compassionate right now. I don’t want to try to understand him, to put myself in his shoes and see the world from his perspective. Bucky’s perspective is bullshit. You don’t sell out friends to settle debts.

I toggle my comlink. “Maurice,” I shout. I’m so excited that I forget to have the mental conversation and go the old-fashioned way.

Maurice responds right away, as always, but he sounds peevish. Like I’d woken him up or something. “Mr. Stern, why do you sound like you’re underwater?” he asks. “You’re not actually talking out loud, are you?”

“We’re having tryouts,” I say. Still shouting.

“For what? We already have a –“

“For a new defensive coordinator. I fired Bucky.”

“You what? But I just finished –“

“Doesn’t matter. We need a new one. We’re going to have tryouts. I need you to put it together.”

“Very well, Mr. Stern. When do you want to have these tryouts?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“To-tom- what? What do you mean, tomorrow morning?”

“Well, we’ve got a game in four days, and I need a couple days breaking the new guy in. So, yeah, tomorrow morning. Unless I’m asking too much of you.”

“Did I say that? Did you hear me say that, Mr. Stern?”

“Put the word out to the pirate clans that we’re looking, and that tryouts are tomorrow. Got all that?”

“Mr. Stern, I have dictated the Galactic President’s inauguration speech from memory. At gunpoint. I believe I can remember your sixteen-word sentence.”

I stop to count.

Maurice sniffs. “I can hear you counting in your head, Mr. Stern. Sixteen words, I assure you. Was there anything else?”

“No. So I’ll let you get to it then! Bye!”

I disconnect and turn back to Laura. “Well, that’s all set. You have any plans this afternoon?”

She stands up and stretches. “I’ve got three suits I need to tear down, why?”

I pinch her ass. She yelps and swats at me. “Ow! Rick, you do that again and I’m going to-ow! What the fuck did I just-ow! Don’t you dare try to tickle meeeeeee!”

The old trick still works. Three pinches, a tickle torture and a small chase around the room. I still have the keys to Laura’s safe.

19

I was expecting another round of craziness in the main lobby on the *Hercules*, but I don’t get it. The last time I was here, it was full of pirates. It was mayhem, like watching a pitched battle in, on and around a small-scale orgy, gambling den, and over five full-contact football games – all at once. I’m taken aback at how quiet it is now. Sure, I’d only given a day’s warning, but pirates are notorious for getting all riled up on short notice. It’s kind of their thing.

The room is practically empty. I’m sure that I’d get an echo if I raised my voice. At the far end of the lobby is a man, sitting on the floor. He’s leaning up against the wall with his eyes closed. There’s a backpack next to his feet, a brown leather thing as worn and wrinkled as its owner. It moves, though, like there’s something sleeping inside of it.

“I’m officially creeped out,” I mutter to myself.

The man’s eyes snap open. I can tell with my enhanced vision that he’s looking right at me. Into my eyes. It’s as creepy a stare as the slowly twitching thing in his backpack. The man plants his feet and walks himself up the wall. He never blinks. The backpack’s top flips open. Something orange skitters out of it and up the man’s pant leg. It wriggles up and behind him and I see something bulge around his stomach and then it all smooths out. The man never moves.

I’m happy I’m standing over here and he’s all the way over there. If that had happened any closer, I would have backed up, closed the door, and then blasted everything out the airlock.

“That would be extremely uncomfortable,” the man says.

Whoa. The guy is telepathic.

“I am not,” the man says, “but my friend is. I see glimpses of your thoughts through her.”

“Her?”

*My name is Sysianti*, a voice says in my head. Decidedly female. Clipped diction. Disapproving. *I know all about you, Mr. Stern, so yes, I disapprove. So much talent wasted on an infantile sport. Mindless entertainment.*

“Are you here for the defensive coordinator position?”

*I am to serve in that capacity, yes. To pay a debt. A poor exchange, but I will not argue the terms.*

“Debt? To whom?”

The man turns his head slightly, as if listening to a small whisper. “She says that’s none of your business.”

“How come she talks to me, and then sometimes she talks through you? No, back up a second. Is she the orange thing plastered all over your chest? I can see the hairs peeking out of your shirt.”

The faint whiskers disappears as the creature shifts position.

“Yep,” the man says. “My name’s Darden, by the way. I’m Sysianti’s *kasha’re*. I carry her from place to place, and in return, she allows me to live without pain, without disease, and I get to see the Universe from the vantage point of three hundred extra years. Nice exchange, if you ask me.”

“How’s the sex?”

Darden snorts. “It’s not like that. Sysianti’s kind don’t reproduce that way, anyway.”

“What kind is she, exactly?”

*I am of the Neeci,* she says.

“You know, that’s really obnoxious,” I say. “I’m having a conversation with your golf cart here, and you keep barging in.”

*What is a golf cart?*

I picture it in my head. “That’s a golf cart.”

*Are you being offensive on purpose?*

“Nope. It’s a gift. So, what’s your range?”

*Suitable for a spaceball game, I assure you.*

“Do you go both ways?” I ask.

*I have sustained two-way communication with over eight hundred separate sentient beings at once,* Sysianti said*, and yes, I caught your feeble attempt at innuendo. And no, I was not amused.*

“This isn’t going to be very fun if you don’t relax,” I tell her.

*I am not here for fun. I am here to pay a debt.*

“Nothing says you have to be so uptight when doing it, though.”

Darden looks at me for a moment, and then he says, “I’m not so sure you’d be thrilled to know what she thinks is fun.”

I decide to agree with him and plow onward. “What kind of experience do you have coaching?”

*Ever wonder why the Andosians win so much?*

“You’re deflecting.”

*Answer the question. Do you know why?*

“Because they’re telepathic.”

*No. They win because* I’m *telepathic.*

“Andosians aren’t telepathic?”

*They’re more empathic than telepathic. They feel what others feel, but they cannot achieve a true mind bond.*

“So, you used to work with the Andosian team?”

*I still do.*

“What?”

Darden stretches. “She’s in more than one place at the same time,” he says. “Lots of places. Every so often, a Neeci splits in half, creating a copy. They’re all the same mind, different bodies. Sysianti and her *kasha’re* are all over the Universe.”

“How many?”

“Numerous.”

“So, all Neeci are Sysianti?”

“No, sometimes Sysianti disconnects from a body, and if that body splits while they’re disconnected, then that new Neeci becomes its own being. I think it has something to do with the exponential increase in collective experiences. At some point it’s too difficult to re-forge the mind bond.”

“Ok. That makes sense, sort of. But what I don’t get is how you can work for the Andosian team and ours at the same time. Seems like a major conflict of interest.”

“If you agree to let her work for you, she’ll split from that node.”

“How do I know she will?”

*You have my word.*

“And I’m supposed to just believe that?”

“Neeci can’t break their word,” Darden says. “Once a Neeci commits, there’s no turning back. It’s a physical and mental thing for them. If a Neeci breaks their word, the mind bond between their nodes shatter. All at once. It would be like if all of your limbs lost their connection to each other at the same time.”

“So she dies.”

“Not exactly, but the comparison fits. It’s a trauma every Neeci will fight to avoid.”

“And I have your word?” I ask.

*I give it freely.*

“Good. You’re hired. If you need anything, talk to Maurice.”

“We’ve already spoken with your supervisor,” Darden says, “and arrangements have been made for our needs.”

“Supervisor? No, you’ve got it backwards. Maurice works for me.”

“He arranges all of your appointments?”

“Yes.”

“Tells you where to go, who to speak to, what to say?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“He instructs you on what to wear, what to eat, who you can shake hands with, and who you must avoid touching at all costs to avoid assassination?”

“Yeah, but hold on for a minute—”

“I believe you work for Maurice, Mr. Stern,” Darden says.

He’s smiling now. I’m not sure I like it.

“That is true,” Maurice says, coming up beside me, “but I would prefer it if you did not tell that to my clients. It makes it easier on everybody if they think that they are the ones in charge.”

I open my mouth to retort, but no words come out. No thoughts bubble up to suppress this terrible idea. Me, work for Maurice? Absurd. But the more I think about it, the less sure I am.

“Perhaps it would be better if you found something to occupy yourself,” Maurice advises me. “No sense in worrying about things you cannot change, sir.”

“Right. That’s a good idea. What’s next for me on my schedule?”

“You have twelve minutes to spare before your next meeting, which is with the Shipping Guild.”

“Again? What do they want now?”

“Everything and more, sir, as always.”

“That’s not what they’re going to talk to me about, though, is it?”

“Of course not, sir. That was a joke.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to tell with you.”

20

It’s the day before the first playoff game and nobody on the team can find Dexter Cribbens.

Maybe it’s the day before the first playoff game? Move up the timeline.

“Where is he?”

“How should I know? I told you I wasn’t going to be his minder.” I look around at the team. “Anybody seen Cribbens?”

I get a lot of shrugs.

“You suck at this,” Jint says. She points at Fuckhead #1. “You. When did you last see my son?”

“At yesterday’s practice,” he says. “And I didn’t talk to him, neither.”

“Good for you.” Jint looks around. “Who’s seen him sooner than that?”

A hand goes up. “Saw him comin’ outta the head yesterday afternoon. C-deck, I think.”

“We were with him last night,” says another, “at the – ouch. What’s with the fuckin’ elbow, Hawgs?“

“Shut the fuck up.”

I see the two of them right away, in the back. It’s Bobby Grimes and Paul Hawgs, both offensive linemen. Kissy’s boys. I can tell by their looks that they’re trying to be subtle, but they might as well have been dressed in pink tutus and twirling rainbow batons.

“The two of you got something?” I ask. “Spill it.”

They spot something real interesting on the floor.

“Really, guys?” I say. “You know something. We’re going to find out what. Stalling just makes it worse for you.”

Kissy stands up, turns around, and grabs both men by an ear. She frog marches them through the front two rows and presents them to Jint. “Talk,” she said.

Grimes is talking before Kissy finishes her order. I know right then that I should never tell him a secret, not unless I want it broadcasted to everyone he meets. He’s an information-must-be-free kind of guy. I bet he’s the last guy to know about anything, and he’s trying to make up for it.

“We just wanted to take him out,” Grimes says, “show him a good time.”

Jint’s eyebrows bang into her forehead, and then crash back down into a dark frown. “Where?”

“Just the Kornerstone, nothin’ major.”

Jint’s expression says that it certainly IS major. “You arrive with him?”

“Yeah.”

“You leave with him?”

Grimes scratches his head. “Dunno. Things are fuzzy for me after the fourth round of Blindsiders. How ‘bout you, Hawgs?”

Hawgs doesn’t say anything. Kissy twists his ear and he hits the floor. “OW! JESUS MARY FUCKING CUNTHOLE!”

“Talk,” Kissy says, “or you’ll lose it. Then I’ll twist something else that you don’t have two of.”

“FUCK. FUCKING, FUCK. FUCK. FUCK!”

“Just talk, Hawgs,” Grimes says. “You’re gonna look really funny without that ear.”

Hawgs opens his mouth as if to say something and screams instead. Kissy’s hand comes off his head with a bloody hunk of flesh. “Too slow,” she says. “Quit yelling, Hawgs. You can get an ear regrown for 100 credits. I’m going to rip off your cock next, and those are a bit harder to do. You might end up with something the size of my pinky finger.”

“Fuck. Stop. I’ll talk.” Hawgs presses his hand to the left side of his head to stem the bleeding. “Can I get a nanogel pack first?”

“After,” Kissy says. “Where’s Dexter?”

“I don’t know where he is. But I saw him leave the club last night with a Scorpion Girl.”

I see a hand reach in and grab Hawgs’ neck. It’s Jager. He pulls Hawgs to him and growls into his face, “You let a Scorpion Girl take my son?”

A lot of people start talking at once, but my attention is riveted on Hawgs’ face. This guy gets his ear ripped off and treats it as if he scraped his knee. But Jager is in his face and I’m pretty sure he shit his pants. I take a whiff. Yep, Hawgs shit his pants.

“He’s not on the ship,” Kissy reports. Everyone looks at her. She’s not looking at anybody, she’s listening to somebody else. “He’s not on Freehaven.”

“Bah, I know where he is,” Jager says. He lets go of Hawgs’ neck. “We will speak of this later. You might be able to make it up to me.”

Hawgs stumbles away, presumably in search of a nanogel pack and a new pair of pants.

“He isn’t anywhere on the IIDS network,” Kissy says.

“Because the Scorpion Lady has him,” Jager says.

I’ve heard of her. The clanmaster of the Scorpion clan. She’s extra special crazy, with nanotattoos in the shape of scorpions. Nanotattoos can change shape in three dimensions, so if you want that snake armband to come alive and strangle someone while you’re wrestling them to the ground, nanotattoos will do it. I’ve never been into the tattoo bit. They’re not as permanent as they used to be – removal takes only as long as dipping the inked body part into a nanogel vat – so it seems like a lot of pain to endure on purpose.

The Scorpion Lady has a lot of these scorpion nanotattoos. One on each hand, each foot, on her arms, her shoulders, just about anywhere she might come in contact with another person. Even her tongue. Ouch. The rumor also says she’s got two positioned on her inner thighs, and another just above the magic happy place. All of them ready to strike whomever – or whatever – happens to be nearby, and all of them armed with an implanted vial of poison. Anybody who tries to have sex with the Scorpion Lady has to be really, really confidant. Or a robot.

When the Scorpion Lady was an up and comer, she used to seduce rival clanmasters and then strike and poison them during sex. After she’d absorbed or destroyed a few enemy clans this way, the other clanmasters wised up and stopped trying to get into her pants, even when said pants and contents therein were freely offered. I’m seen vids. The Scorpion Lady is hot, but some things just aren’t worth it.

Jint has heard of her, too, because she draws one of her many knives and does this fancy underhand throw at Hawgs. It whips across the room and everyone holds a collective breath for a split second because we all know she’s a good shot and if she kills him there will be trouble. Yeah, Hawgs made a bad mistake and he’s in the doghouse with Jager, but he’s still a clansman and Jint’s not. If Hawgs dies at her hand and it’s not accidental, every player on my team will be honor bound to slay her on the spot. Even if she is a teammate’s mom. All of that flashes through my head, and on its heels is Jager knows Cribbens is his!

The knife hums with this weird wom-wom-wom noise, which tells everyone within earshot that it’s a monofilament blade. It passes through Hawgs’ right shoulder and buries itself in the wall. Pinning him to it.

So here’s this guy. He got his ear ripped off. Scared by another man into shitting his pants. And now he’s stuck on a wall like a wiggly, shit-smelling poster. All for watching a teenager walk out of a bar with a woman. I mean, c’mon. This is a little much. I’m just sayin’. To myself.

Jint stalks up to Hawgs and grabs the knife handle. The big burly man makes this low keening sound as Jint whispers in his ear.

My hearing is implant amplified so I hear everything she says.

“Keep up that sound you’re making right now,” Jint tells him. “That’s good. Maybe a little louder now, like I’m telling you something really scary.”

Hawgs whines himself into a higher pitch.

“I didn’t plan on this part, it’s just flowing. But it’ll leave a great impression. By the way, I’m going to triple your pay for this last bit.”

The whine takes on a questioning note. Jint grabs the knife handle and rips it out of the wall. Hawgs screams.

I glance around to see if I’m the only one who heard that. Everyone is rapt, including Laura and Kissy. So I’m the only one. Fan-fucking-tastic.

Jint turns around and walks up to Jager and sticks the bloody knife under his chin. The blade is cooking Hawgs’ blood and it hisses and spits. “This is because of you,” she shouts. “Because of you and her. And now she has my son.”

Jager puts his hand over her wrist and pushes the knife down. The blade is still active and it cuts through his tooth necklace. The gruesome pearls clatter to the floor. “She has MY son,” he says. “And she will not keep him the day.” He looks around. “Who will follow me to the Scorpions’ lair and take back what is mine?”

Everyone roars. Jager raises his fist and leads the way out of the room.

I grab Laura’s hand as the crowd forms around us and we start to move. This must be what fish in those big schools feel like. Swim. Swim now. We’re all swimming and you have to swim, too. This doesn’t work if you don’t swim. C’mon, swim. I squeeze Laura’s hand and she squeezes back. I wish I could tell her that this isn’t real, that Jint’s got some pretty big puppet strings going on right now, but there’s no way I’m going to blurt something out and spoil the show. I know how many knives she’s got, and I don’t want to be part of the spectacle aside from a quiet spectator. Quiet means I don’t get impaled.

The pirate school swims its way directly to the team bus’ airlock. Maurice makes the mistake of being out in the hallway and gets scooped up. I hear some prim objections followed by coarse yelling and he shuts up and goes along for the ride. I wonder if this is how pirate raids go. Somebody gets mad, makes a rousing cry, and it happens. Immediately. No planning. No strategy. Just up and go. I then wonder how pirate raids are deemed a success. Most ships shot down? Most people maimed or killed? Or just showing up and surprising the other guy and stealing some of his stuff? Maybe that’s it.

We all pile into the team bus. Well, almost all of us. Still holding onto me, Laura grabs Jager’s hand and pulls us back from the mob. It flows around us and into the ship, no longer needing its leader, already knowing what it needs to do. Swim. Attack. Kill.

“What is this?” Jager demands.

“I have an idea,” Laura says. “I can get us a ship.”

“We have ship.”

“A better ship. A military-class vessel. I have contacts.”

Jager’s suspicious. “What sort of contacts?”

“What if I told you that I know someone in Omm Industries?”

At the other end of the airlock, Fuckhead #2 leans out of the bus and yells, “Uncle. Are we goin’ or what?”

Jager head swivels ever so slightly.

Fuckhead #2’s face blanches and he ducks back inside.

“Omm Industries?” Jager asks. “This is nothing. I know someone in Omm Industries. Everyone can say this.”

“Oh, yeah? Does your sector rep’s last name actually end in Omm?”

Jager’s eyebrows shoot up. “You speak the truth? Yes. Yes, go. Wait, how long?”

“I’ll meet you in six hours.” She blinks a couple of times. “I just uploaded the coordinates into the bus’ computer. I need you to do something, though, while we’re gone.”

“Wait, who is we?”

She grips my hand even tighter. I get the feeling that she’ll kill people to keep me off the bus. Which I won’t lie, makes me feel happy and sick to my stomach at the same time. Happy because I’ll be safer with my wife. Sick because my entire team is in one place at the same time, sailing into a battle where the other side almost certainly knows they’re coming.

“I need him,” Laura says. “He’s going to help me make the deal with Holden.”

I’ve never met Holden Omm and have no idea what he even looks like. “He’s a big spaceball fan,” I say with a shrug. “I’m pretty sure that front-row tickets to the cup game are going to be part of this arrangement.” I think I’m telling the truth, given what Laura has told me about the importance of making the Cup game. I’m guessing Holden, and if not Holden, then his boss, are going to a big part of the game. So, yeah, front-row seats.

Jager squints at me. I nearly pull a Hawgs and clench my butt cheeks together. Then he squints at Laura. “Fine. But you are not standing with your clan.”

“Bullshit,” Laura says. “We’re standing with them; we’re just going to get some bigger guns. Wait, you were just going to run right into the Scorpion Lady’s territory on the team bus?”

“It is done this way. If a clan cannot protect its children, then that clan will not survive.”

“Jesus. That answers my question about how you got your place in pirate hierarchy. Jint! Kissy!” When they come into view, Laura asks, “Jint, do you have an IIDS node?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Great. Kissy, once the bus reaches the coordinates in the nav link, take the node and go on ahead to scout for Dexter. Hang tight once you find him and provide onsite intel so we’re not flying in blind.”

“I can do that,” Kissy nods.

“Are you serious?” Jint asks. “The sex robot? No offense, Kissy.”

“None taken,” Kissy replies. “You wouldn’t know. My armor has some neat tricks beyond looking sexy on the field.”

“But you’re not wearing your armor.”

Kissy’s clothes ripple and disappear as her body changes jet black, her eyes turn red and she gets a meter taller. The vents in her back turn the airlock sooty orange and those white flame tattoos flicker up over her limbs. I’ve only ever seen her on the field like this, and she’s even sexier up close. The entire process takes less than two seconds.

“I’m always wearing my armor,” she says, her voice amplified and distorted as if speaking with the voices a thousand dark angels. “Don’t worry, I’ll get in close enough to scan for your boy without being seen.” Then she powers down battle mode and returns to normal. She catches me ogling before her clothes flick back into place and smirks at me.

I tear my eyes away just in time to catch Jint trying to look hopeful. A bit of consternation right before, some oh crap now what do I do action. Before, I wasn’t sure what game she’s playing. I’m sure now. She’s trying to get my whole team killed.

I open my mouth to call her on it and Laura digs her fingernails into my palm. Then she says, “Remember, Erik. Six hours, and we’ll be at the rendezvous. Don’t go wandering off until we get there.”

“Fine. But one moment later…”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ll be saving the day.”

Jager glares at her, and ushers Kissy and Jint through the airlock and closes it behind them. Some red lights turn on and there’s a flash of white light through the little porthole at the far end, and I know the team bus has disembarked.

“You mind telling me why we just let Jint get on that ship?” I ask. “You know she orchestrated the whole thing, right?”

“I’m got that feeling, yeah,” Laura says.

“And she’s trying to get the team killed, right?”

“Then why did she get on the team bus with them?”

“Laura, I heard her talking to Hawgs at the wall. It was an act. Well, not the knife part, but she put him up to it.”

“I thought his eyes didn’t look right. Not scared enough. What did she say to him, exactly?”

I told her.

“Cribbens didn’t get kidnapped; I’d bet my left boob on it.”

“Why the left one? I think it’s of equal value, if not greater, than the right one.”

“You have the attention span of a nano-gnat. Wait, what do you mean, greater value than my right?”

“Simple. Your left boob is where my right hand goes. I get more tactile sensations out of my right hand than my left because it’s still real, and I can deliver finer motor touches with it than my cybernetic one. Unless I’m doing a reach around, that is, but yeah, statistically speaking, your left boob gets more traffic and therefore is of greater value.”

“How long have you been working on that?”

“Just now. I never thought about it until you offered up one of your boobs to the Bet God in the Sky. Which I’d prefer you didn’t do, by the way. I like your boobs right where they are. Maybe a bit closer, though.” I make a groping gesture with both my hands and she slaps them away. “So, if Cribbens didn’t get kidnapped, are we still going on a rescue mission?”

“We still are,” Laura says. “But we’re going to get a better ship before Erik and his rag-tag band of merry mischief makers ever leave the rendezvous point. The team bus isn’t exactly battle-worthy.”

“True. So what’s the plan?”

“Our ride is already on its way, so wait here. I have to get some things from the armory.”

“The armory is five decks down. How long are you going to be?”

“About an hour.”

“I’m not standing here for an entire hour.”

“Do whatever you want. Be standing here when I get back.”

21

I’m still standing here when Laura comes back. I had a bunch of ideas of what I could do to burn through an hour. I can’t remember when I last had an hour completely to myself with nothing else to do. Maurice isn’t here telling me which meeting or interview I’m late for, and ever since Maurice banned the media bots from the ship, nobody’s trying to pester me about my game day preparations, which to be honest, are sort of up in the air at the moment. I don’t know how many people are coming back from Erik’s quest.

I spent twenty minutes trying to decide, ten minutes walking down to the end of the hallway only to turn back, sure that whatever I was about to do would take too long, and ended up checking my messages for half an hour. I don’t have very many. I know, you’re thinking spaceball coach, I must get a lot of random pieces of junk from all corners of the known universe. Spam is that peculiar meat product that’s still sold in oddly-shaped containers. Nobody gets the mailbox variety anymore, not after the Disinformation War. After that little gem in our history, anybody sending unsolicited messages gets three warnings before they get a fine. After the fine, if you do it again you get disconnected from the ‘Net for a year. Most people go insane after getting kicked off the ‘Net. Or they join a monastery. Maybe both.

I’ve got twelve messages in my inbox. Three are saved. One saying that I’d been banned from the League <when>. Another I got right after my conversation with Chippers, saying my ban had been lifted <when>. The other is from my Mom <I thought they died before this>, talking about me coming home for my Dad’s 65th birthday as a surprise <when>. It was the last communication I got from her before the Edochians got their panties in a bunch and blew up the planet beneath her feet. I don’t listen to it much anymore, I’ve got it memorized. I just can’t delete it.

Three new messages from Bucky.

First: ‘Ricky, I understand you’re all pissy about the gambling, but tell me, man, what would’ve you of done in my place? Gone crawling? Gone begging? I don’t crawl, Rick, and I sure as hell don’t beg. Better things to be doing than beg, Ricky. But…now that I said that…you gotta let me come back. I don’t have nothing else and that fuckin’ Bookie is gonna come back and break my ankles every week I don’t pay. She’s a right cunt and likes it. Fuckin’ Bookies! Where am I supposed to get three million? Outta my ass? Ah…shit. Please, Ricky, I’m begging you, I down on my hands and knees begging like the fuckin’ loser I am, please let me come back. I won’t try to fuck ye over anymore, I promise.’

Right. I’ll get right on that. What kind of idiot does he think I am? Asshole.

Second: ‘Oi! So you’re ignoring my messages, I get it. Don’t wanna man up and listen to what I’ve got to say, don’t wanna talk to me like a real man. I get it, I get it. Fuck you, Rick. Fuck. You. I bet you couldn’t last ten minutes in the real world, you know that? Always gotta go crawling to that bitch Laura and get her to bail you out. We could’ve done it without her, you know, could’ve won the whole shebang, but you’re scared shitless of doing anything without that fuckin’ cunt. Fuck her, too! Go fuck yourselves, Rick, go fuck yourselves with a fuckin’ splintered wooden bat!’

Nice, Bucky. Nice.

Third: ‘You won’t hear from me again, Ricky, but lemme just say this: you’re going to get yours. You’re going to get yours, Ricky. You’re going to get fuckin’ yours. I got something in the works that’ll fuck you right good. I can’t wait to see your fuckin’ face when it happens, Ricky, I can’t fuckin’ wait. We could’ve had it all together, but you dropped me like a goddamn lead ball. You know what? I think we’d all have been better off if you’d been on Earth on The Day. Would’ve saved us all a whole lotta trouble. But you’re here, and I’m here, and you might think that by firing me I can’t fuck you over anymore. You’re wrong, Ricky. You’re wrong. I’m still going to fuck you over. And you’re not even going to see it coming.’

Uh-huh. Probably the only thing Bucky can do right now is try to go work for another team. Not in any official capacity, but as some advisor. Tell them all about how the Blood Suns play, the holes in the defense, where to attack and all that. Fat lot of good it’ll do him. Neeci <or Sysanti?> won’t pick up where he left off. She’ll rewrite the entire playbook.

I delete all three of his messages and fire off another one to Maurice to block Bucky from the entire team, and from everyone the team members know. When Maurice is done, Bucky won’t be even able to contact an ex-girlfriend of the last maintenance worker to service the *Hercules*.

Maurice immediately responds with *I have. The three I allowed through to you gave you the gist of his thought progression. We will not receive any more from him.*

*How many were there?*

*Twelve. You also received twenty-three messages from Janine, but I assume that you do not want to listen to those.*

*You assume correctly.*

A pause. Then, *Are you coming?*

*Yes, we’re going for help.* I picture how the team bus usually is, and then Maurice sitting all proper-like surrounded by that lot. I don’t worry about him, though. Terrance Boys are definitely not pussies.

*Please hurry. Your schedule is falling into further disarray with each moment.*

*Oh, the horror.*

Speaking of Maurice, the other six messages are from him, indeed reminding me of all the meetings I have today that I’m sure I won’t make now that we’re going to go get ourselves killed rescuing our kicker. I’ve just come to the conclusion that I’m probably going to die today when the door at the end of the hallway opens and Laura comes through.

She’s got thirty technicians behind her with what looks like all of the teams’ spaceball suits on those levitating tables. She stops next to me and waves them by. They all troop past down the airlock. The door opens at the other end and they bring them aboard a ship I had no idea was even there. I’m about to make a comment to that effect when I see that one of the suits has a bunch of bloody handprints on the faceplate.

“Hey, is that my suit?”

“Yes.”

“Why are we bringing it?”

“For you to wear, dummy. Did you think your team was going into battle without you?”

“Battle? What battle?”

“Did you see what happened this morning? There will be a battle. Nobody on the team will come back without battling somebody, something! A battle will happen. I’m just hoping I can get the suits to them before they actually find one.”

“Aw, fuck, I’m going to get killed, I know it.”

She sniffed. “Honey, you’ve done more dangerous things than this without wearing pants.”

I follow her down the corridor to the airlock. I’ve done a lot of dumb things in my life, it’s true. I’m trying to remember which of them were pant-less excursions when we walk onto the cleanest ship I’ve ever seen. The *Hercules* is a pile of greasy wires and old used condoms compared to the spotless silver and white walls of the place. I feel dirty just standing inside the threshold, like I’ve done something wrong and should go back and take a shower.

“Whoa, can you even have a ship this clean?” I ask. “I don’t want to touch anything. Isn’t this against some sort of spacefaring rule, or something?”

“Who is that?” a woman’s voice calls from the other side of the airlock.

“It’s him, Kiera,” Laura calls back. She’s got a weird lilt to her voice, like she’s going to be in trouble, or she’s already in trouble and she’s trying to lessen the impact of the trouble. I’ve used the same lilt whenever someone asked me if I was at a strip club before coming home for dinner, asking by the club name, like they thought they knew already and were trying to catch me in a lie? I never was at said club. Never.

The woman named Kiera walks into view. I’ve never seen her before because I’d remember. She’s got deep red brown hair all tied up and knotted in one of those crazy braids that takes four people working all at once to manufacture. She’s wearing an empty battle harness over a gray t-shirt with black pants and dark red boots. I can’t tell from here but I’m certain she’s got at least one knife on her. She’s hot. She’s *smokin’*. The sort of beautiful where she knows it and uses it as a weapon. I don’t mind. She can fire away all day. I take all of this in and process it in the smallest slice of a second where thoughts still happen. Laura does bad things to me if she catches me staring at pretty women.

Kiera sees me. “Fuck. Laura, did you really have to bring him?”

“Who’re you?” I ask.

She doesn’t even look at me. “Laura. Why is he here?”

Laura doesn’t respond. I look at her. She’s stopped dead in the middle of the airlock. She’s staring at Kiera. Kiera sees her looking and nods. My wife squeals like a little girl and launches herself into Kiera’s arms.

“Are you serious?” Laura says. “Moo-Moo, when? And why didn’t you tell me?”

“I found out a few days ago and we’ve been really busy,” Kiera says, her voice completely different now. Warm. Happy. “Thomas is still in shock about it because he thought I couldn’t.”

“Is he happy?”

“He is. I just surprised him, that’s all.”

Laura waves me over. “Rick, come over here.”

I approach and get a chilly stare from Kiera.

“Rick, this is my oldest friend, Kiera Moon. She’s with Thomas Beane.” Laura’s face lights up. “Is Tom-Tom here?”

“No, he couldn’t come.”

My brain processes the nicknames. It’s difficult. I’ve just been told that this woman is shacked up with the bogeyman, and I realize now that I’m standing on one of their ships, the ones that go toe-to-toe with fucking Edochian destroyers, and it’s quite possible I might be killed later for things I’m not supposed to know about, but…but…Tom-Tom…and Moo-Moo…

Words come out of my mouth unbidden, “Tom-Tom and—”

“Don’t you fucking say it,” Moon says, pulling a curved knife from nowhere and waving it under my nose. “Only one person gets to call me that, and she’s got tits.”

“Moo-Moo,” Laura says. “Put that away. Think of the baby.”

It’s twenty minutes later and I’m sitting on the floor just outside the cockpit. There are only two chairs and the women are in them. I was told to “not wander off” and then they closed the door on me. I’m not exactly sulking, but I feel like this is a wasted opportunity because I very much want to explore. I want to experience the shiny. This ship is all about the shiny. The walls are smooth and silver and light blue with glossy instrument panels here and there. The lights are soft. Everything’s round, very few hard edges and I get the sense that whoever designed it wanted a space they could feel perpetually comfortable in. I’m also fairly certain that the three of us are the only people onboard. I want to see the ship that doesn’t need anything but a pilot, and could probably do without one of those in a pinch.

I heard in passing that this ship can travel through hyperspace. I’ve never seen a hyperspace drive, thought I never would, and even though I have no idea how it works I still want to see it. It’s got to be super shiny. I’m certain that I am not allowed to see it, not allowed to roll around in the shiny like catnip. I know this in my soul. Down deep. When Kiera deigns to look at me, she expresses in silence that whatever warmth and love she feels for Laura, it in no way radiates in my direction or in any direction that I might accidentally step, stumble, or otherwise fall through. And though I’m certain that my marital relationship with Kiera’s childhood friend has a reasonable chance of keeping me alive in the face of perceived wrongdoing, I’d rather just avoid as much unpleasantness as I can today. I’m going to get more than my fair share from the Blood Suns and I’m being uncharacteristically proactive about mitigating self-inflicted emergencies.

Fuckin’ pirates. They seemed like such a good idea. Don’t get me wrong, they’re amazing spaceball players. We’re undefeated, but for fuck sakes, look at what we’re doing right now. The entire team is on the bus, parked who knows where, waiting for this ship and our spaceball suits so we can have a proper invasion with a proper battle and a proper ass-kicking. This is the type of situation where I wish I were still in a sleeping tube on Pronos. Sure, I wouldn’t be back in the game, and I wouldn’t be back with my wife, but I sure wouldn’t be feeling like I’m reeling from one near-death to another. I rub eyes with my fingers. I’m happy that I don’t have these existential moments very often, because I’m pretty sure I’d be a wreck. It’s not that I never plan anything, I do. But I tend not to plan my day, even before Maurice came along and started planning it for me. I just showed up and things happened. People asked me for things. I provided. I asked back. They sometimes provided. Then I ended up doing a fair amount by myself. And that was okay. They were days and there were more after them and I never thought that I was going to die.

The door to the cockpit whisks open and Laura calls, “Rick, we’re here.”

I stand up and go in. “Where’s here - oh, Jesus.”

22

‘Here’ is right in front of the Scorpion Clan’s stronghold. It’s a proper stronghold, a space station squeezed into the caves and tunnels of a mined-out asteroid. Ends stick out like mushroom caps on the rock’s surface. There are cannons, of course, all over the place. I count at least ten pairs of ships flying around on patrol. It’s a fortress and they know somebody’s coming.

“How are they not seeing us?”

“Cloaked,” Kiera says.

“Where’s the team?”

“Back where I told them to go,” Laura says. “We’re scouting ahead first. You know, like smart people.”

I hold up my hands. “Hey. I’m just using them for spaceball players. I never said I bought into the crazy.”

“You were crazy already, baby.”

“Just crazy for you, honey.”

Kiera makes a gagging sound. “I’m gonna barf.”

Laura fiddles with some controls and a comlink comes up. It’s Kissy.

“Hey, Steel Tits,” Laura says.

“They’re not actually steel,” Kissy replies. “You should know, you made them.”

More fiddling with controls and a holographic map of the asteroid appears above panel Laura’s working on. A tiny blinking blue dot that I can only assume is Kissy, is down near the bottom of the station. My stomach lurches. She’s a lot closer than I thought she’d get.

“Did you find Dexter?” Laura asks.

“Yes, he’s being held near my position. His IIDS tag is twenty meters away.”

“What’s the closest access point to your location?”

“An airlock. I think he’s in it.”

Laura frowns. “So they can kill him in a hurry if Jager doesn’t do what they want.”

“Presumably.”

The floating map zooms in on the airlock in question. “They might as well have just handed him to us,” Kiera says. “That’s on an exposed section. We can fit right up against it. We’ll extend our own airlock’s atmospheric shield to cover their opening, and then cut through. We’ll have him out in less than forty-five seconds.”

“You can cut through the hull of another ship in less than forty-five seconds?” I ask.

“In one second. Most of the actual time is just going to be flying over there.”

That’s good to know.” It isn’t, though. All that did was make my fear of space travel all that sharper. One second to cut through a ship’s hull and expose all of its soft parts to the cold vacuum? “Why don’t people get hijacked more often?”

“It’s a military-grade boarding assault cutter. A little hard to get, these days.”

“Oh.”

Kiera looks at Laura. “Well, do we go in and get him?”

“We can’t,” Laura says. “Not yet.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because Jager and the Blood Suns came for blood, and they’re going to get it whether Dexter is safe or not. We’ll go back and pick them up, give them the suits, and then come back here and give them their proper battle.”

Kiera’s eyes widen. “Oh, no. I am not letting that band of hooligans on this ship.”

“Oh, don’t be such a baby, Kiera,” Laura says. “What are you going to do, let us assault the station in the team bus? We’ll all be killed before we even get within visual range.”

Kiera holds up her closed fist and raises her index finger. “One. You asked for a ship to go in and rescue a hostage. You didn’t say anything about an embedded station assault.”

Laura rolls her eyes.

Another finger goes up. “Two. I’m not an idiot, I’ve seen the vids. Your team bus is a blockade runner. It’s armored to the gills. You could drive that thing right up to their front door and knock, hell, you could crash right into it, without worrying about a hull breach.”

Laura huffs and looks away.

A third finger. “Three. We grab the hostage and take him out of the equation. We get the kid out of danger. Jager will adapt, he’ll just attack the Scorpions out of retribution instead.”

“Fine, fine,” Laura says. “But just so you know, we don’t think it’s a kidnapping at all. We think the boy’s mother coordinated it and has other ideas about today’s outcome. And if we run in there and take Dexter, we may never find out what the real story is.”

Kiera stares at her. “His mother had him kidnapped?”

“She’s Echelon,” I say. Not because I have a lock on some of the information to be dispensed in this conversation, but because I’d like to be included and not just standing here like some sort of ornament.

Kiera doesn’t even flinch at that information. “Which means her son is, too.”

“He’s fifteen.”

“Doubt it. I bet he’s older. Maybe not by much, but Echelon trains their agents young.”

“He is her son, though. Jager’s, too. DNA match and everything.”

“How do you know that?” Laura asks. “They don’t seem like the kind of people who’d just let you take a DNA sample.”

I tell them about my excursion through Kissy’s eyes.

“You knew about that and you didn’t tell me?” Laura demands.

“I forgot about it, actually. I’ve had other things on my mind.” I get skeptical face. It’s that stare from Laura where she’s not sure if I’m telling the truth or not, and she’s waiting for me to confirm the lie so she can continue believing her assumptions. I shrug at her.

Kiera taps her fingers on the arm of her chair. “She planned to use that as leverage somehow.”

“I dunno,” I say, “she seemed genuinely surprised when I told her Jager was helping out with the team.”

“Fake, I’d wager. Echelon agents are good at seeming all sorts of things. It doesn’t matter. You’d never get the real story out of either of them, anyway. In fact, if you really want to know what’s going on, we’re better off just asking Mabel.”

“Who is Mabel?” I ask.

“The leader of the Scorpion clan.”

“The Scorpion Lady is named Mabel? Huh. I guess I just don’t look at the vids and think ‘Mabel’.”

“That’s not her.”

“What?”

“The Scorpion Lady is an actress named Lahu, she’s just a figurehead. Mabel Ereban is a sixty-year-old matriarch and she’s shaped like a giant cork ball. She did a recruiting campaign a few years back with Lahu and it was so successful that the story went further than the Rim, which is why it’s on the vids and you believe it’s true. Everybody out here knows exactly who the real leader of the Scorpions is.”

“That’s awful.”

“Why?”

“It’s such a letdown.

Laura gives me a sort-of kidding kick to the shin. “Stop it.”

“It really is,” I say. “I’m getting really disenchanted with everything out here. Everything is fake, it’s a big melodramatic play designed to make everybody feel scared, or in awe, and the people in charge are charlatans who’re just as grubby as everybody else.”

Kiera fixes me with a look that makes me want to step back several meters. “Who’re you calling ‘grubby’?” she asks.

Laura steps in front of me and grabs Kiera’s shoulders. “Mabel isn’t going to tell us what we want to know if we take Dexter from her. Especially if we cut a hole in her station to do it.”

Kiera stops glaring at me and smiles at Laura. “Oh, we won’t have to steal him. Mabel will give him to us. Or to me, rather. Then I’ll sell him to you.”

That didn’t compute at all. “Sell?”

“I’m going to be the one getting him, not you. Left up to her, Mabel would take you and ransom you to Chippers. Hell, I want to ransom you to Chippers, but Laura probably wouldn’t like that.”

“Not much, no,” Laura says.

“What do you want for him?” I ask.

“Oh, it’s not what I want,” Kiera says. “It’s what Laura wants.”

No. This isn’t happening. This is Kissy and Laura and the apology all over again. “She can already have whatever she wants from me.” I look at Laura and she’s got that greedy expression on her face that I only ever see when she’s lusting after those miniature Christmas villages that come in four hundred different sets that cost a month’s worth of credits for each one. “Oh, God. What do you want?”

“A pony.”

I stare at her. “Are you serious? Where the hell am I supposed to get a pony? And where are we going to keep it? Feed it? And you do know those things shit, right? All over the place?”

“Not an actual pony, you jackass. P.O.N.I. A Personal Omnicutter and Nanotool Interface. Military issue. Fleet ordered them from Chippers Conglomerates right before war broke out. They’re sitting in a warehouse on Pronos, still in their boxes. I saw the requisition order. Brand new. I want one.”

“And five pallets for me,” Kiera says.

Laura nods. “And five pallets for Moo-Moo.”

I look back and forth between them. “And you think Chippers is just going to hand them over? One, I can see. But a pallet? Five of them? Don’t you think you’re being a little greedy?”

“Do you want your kicker or not?”

“We could just as soon run down there and grab him ourselves, now that you mention it. Who gives a shit what Jint’s up to?”

“We can figure out today what her game really is,” Laura says. “We ask Mabel.”

“You says she even knows? She could be caught up in this, just like us, dancing on Echelon’s strings.” I look at Kiera. “You were all gung-ho to run over and snatch him.”

“And now there’s six pallets of PONIs on the table.”

“Six? You said five.”

“I said seven, and the number is going up the longer you argue.”

“Jesus Christ, I’m not a skeleton key to Chipper’s stuff.”

“Eight.”

“Fuck, fine!.I’ll get Maurice on it. He’ll know how to talk to Chippers in his own language.”

The ship starts to move and it’s just then that I realize that Kiera isn’t doing anything to pilot it. Neither is Laura. “Who’s moving the ship?” I ask.

“I am,” Kiera says.

I make the connection. “Neural link? You can fly without controls?”

“Yes.”

“That’s pretty cool.”

“That’s it? Just cool?”

“What, cool’s not enough?”

“Well, usually everybody wants to know how it works.”

“Will I understand anything you say to me when you’re describing it?”

“Probably not.”

“Then we’ll stick with ‘pretty cool’.” I realize that we’re flying toward the top of the asteroid, not the bottom. “Hey, we aren’t going to get Kissy. Where are we going?”

“To talk to Mabel,” Kiera says. “Have you forgotten already?”

“What’s wrong with a vidlink?”

Kiera shrugged. “You want to business with someone out here, you do it face to face. How many of your conversations with Jager have been over the vid?”

“I haven’t had many, thank God,” I say. “But now that you mention it, none.”

Kiera nods. “That’s right. To them, the vid is impersonal, cold. You can’t see a person’s entire body language on the vid. It’s fine for commands and reports, but not business transactions. But you want to know the biggest reason?”

“What’s that?”

“A person is a lot harder to fake.”

“That’s a problem?” Laura asks. “It’s really easy to tell if the vid is a simulation.”

“Not a few hundred years ago, it wasn’t,” Kiera says. “All of the counterfeit signal detection software in the vid links we have today didn’t exist back them. They used to have real issues with vid hacking, clan wars over fake signals, and so they stopped using the vid for business, even after the anti-spoofing protocols were invented. It just stuck.”

“Hold on a second,” I say. “The only way I’m going to go along with this is if we go and get Jager and the team first. None of this lone wolf stuff. If it goes sideways on us, and I pretty much guarantee it will, we’re going to need all the help we can get.”

“Fine,” Kiera says. “We’ll go and fetch them. But they don’t set foot on this ship. We’ll transfer the suits to their ship.”

“Also fine,” I say.

“Are you done adding stipulations?”

I make a show of thinking about it. There isn’t anything I want from Kiera. Everything she has to offer likely comes with a price tag measured in bodies. “Yes.”

“Good. Let’s pick up Kissy and get this over with.”

The ship stops down at Kissy’s position, but I don’t see her anywhere. We’re really close to the asteroid now, less than a spaceball field’s distance. It’s mostly rock where we are, the closest exposed section of the station is a few hundred meters away. The airlock. With Dexter in it. He’s right there. Kiera said it would take less than thirty seconds to get him out. We could get him right now and get the hell out of here, and I wouldn’t have to tell Maurice to ask Chippers for eight pallets of military hardware to give to a gunrunner. However, said gunrunner is in charge, and eight pallets vs no pallets is a hard sell.

I get a sending from Jager. *Mr. Stern, where are you?*

“Jager wants to know where we are,” I say.

“Tell him we’re coming to get him,” Laura says, “and we know where Dexter is. Tell him we have the suits.”

I relay all of that.

I get *Good. We are here. Waiting.*

Then I hear grappling sounds on the ship’s hull. A green light on the dashboard turns red, and then turns green again.

“Kissy’s onboard,” Kiera says.

My quarterback arrives at the cockpit dressed like she’s just been at a cocktail party. No battle armor, no harness. Not even boots. She’s wearing a little black dress and heels.

I don’t open my mouth because I’m going to get in trouble with somebody if I do.

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It never occurred to me when I got up this morning that my day would progress is this madhouse fashion. I figured that by lunch, I’d be working on plays, watching drills, and thinking about our next game against the Varyin Stonemen. They’re not actual stone, that would be weird. No, their planet’s prime export is stone and yes, that threw me the first time I heard it, too. The Universe has no shortage of rocks, they’re spread out all over the place. There’s so many that they bang into each other and make rock babies. But none of it is like Varyin marble, which glows softly after being polished. The colors depend on the emotional state of the sculptor. There’s a cottage industry around not only interpreting abstract sculpture and what it means, but now interpreting that same abstract art along with its glow, and what that means - as if art critics didn’t get paid too much already dreaming up random shit to go along with other people’s dreamed-up random shit. I thought the whole thing was very fascinating right up until I learned about the black-market industry of torturing sculptors to produce deep red and black glows.

Speaking of torture, there’s a surprise waiting for us at the rendezvous point.

Oh, the team bus is there, all safe and sound. It’s not the only ship, though. Collected around it in a giant ball are thousands of starfighters, a couple hundred frigates, fifty cruisers, sixteen dreadnoughts, and hovering directly above the bus is what looks like - “Is that a Fleet battleship?” I blurt.

Nobody answers me. They’re taking it in.

“I said, is that a battleship?” I ask again.

“That’s Jager’s ship,” Kiera says.

“It’s his? How did he get it? That thing is enormous. It looks like it can barely squeeze through a Gate.”

Nobody comments on that, either. Kiera looks upset. Laura looks awed. Kissy looks like Kissy.

“I take it this is a new thing for everybody.” I observe.

“That’s gotta be…all of them,” Laura says. “It’s got to be.”

“All of who?”

“The clans. He brought all of the clans.”

“I’ve never seen this many in one place before,” Kiera says. “That’s not all of them, though.”

“How do you know?” Laura asks.

“Jager couldn’t have gathered them all by himself. He’s not - he doesn’t have that authority.”

“Doesn’t matter if it’s all of them or not,” I say, “We don’t have to bargain with Mabel now.”

Kiera snorts. “Where did you get that idea?”

“Well, I’m looking at enough firepower to turn that rock of hers to dust.”

“Aside from the precedent he’s setting here, none of that means anything to her. She’s got Dexter. Jager wants him, and she knows it. He’s not going to blow up her station with him on it.”

“He probably would if turns out his son is Echelon,” Laura says.

“We don’t know that,” Kiera says, “and until we do, we’re not saying anything.”

“Please don’t,” I agree. “I’d have to find another kicker.”

Kiera gives me an astonished look. “You’ll still field him after this?”

“Sure. He’s got an amazing leg.”

She looks ready to make another retort and gets a faraway look instead. “Jager’s calling,” Kiera says.

Jager’s head appears before us. He looks pleased with himself or hungry. I can’t really tell. “Mr. Stern,” he booms. “Good. Everyone is here. We can begin, and - “

Jager notices Kiera for the first time. He blinks. A slow smile creeps across his face and then it’s gone. He ducks his head at her and without a hint of sarcasm says, “Welcome to our little gathering, Your Grace.”

Kiera looks frosty. She inclines her head. “What did I tell you would happen if you ever called me that again?”

“You said I would no longer get my special deliveries.”

“Consider them revoked.”

Jager doesn’t flinch. “So sad. But you are not only supplier.”

“Bartrand’s quality is terrible, Jager,” Kiera says. “You’ll come to regret it.”

A slight smile from the grizzled clanmaster. I realize this is a game, of sorts, and whatever they’re talking about isn’t reason to spike my blood pressure more than it already is. “Jager, what’s with the army?”

“We will be assaulting stronghold. I did not know what reinforcements you would be able to acquire on such short notice. I was right to do this.” He gestures at us. “One ship will not be sufficient in this endeavor.”

Kiera doesn’t correct him about which ship this is. So I don’t, either.

“We can’t just go in there guns blazing,” Laura says. “They’ve got Dexter in an airlock.”

Jager shrugs. “Is old ploy. He is not there.”

“What? His IIDS node–”

“Fake. You were tempted to bargain with Mabel directly, were you not?”

“How did you know that?” Kiera demands.

Jager laughs at her. “You are lucky you did not. We would not be speaking now if you did. Mabel is getting better offer from Echelon for weapons, ships, supplies. Much lying around after war. You and your ship would be nice bonus.”

“Why did she kidnap Dexter, then?”

Another knowing smile. He’s starting to freak me out. “Where’s Jint right now?” I ask.

“She is on team bus,” Jager says. “Regardless of our relationship, is prudent Echelon stays off my ship.”

Well, that answers that question. Jager knows who Jint is. Probably has known from the start, and didn’t say anything. I’m not sure what his agenda is here, and I decided that not knowing isn’t in my best interests anymore. “Jager, how long have you known that Dexter is your son?”

“Since he was born, of course. I would not be good clanmaster if I lost track of children.”

I’m getting a headache. I rub my temple. “So, you know that Jint is orchestrating this thing?”

Jager’s smile widens. “Of course. This is game. I have not been challenged in long time. Mabel thinks with her new Echelon friends that she can do this. I am here today to show her she is mistaken in this regard.”

“I take it you’ve planned this already?”

“Of course!.Did you think I just run around shouting foolish things and charging into battle without plan? Good. That is what you are supposed to believe. You will go and negotiate with Mabel for his release. She will attempt to capture you. When this happens, we will attack. During the confusion, you will grab her and my son. Once you are safely away from the station with them, I will obliterate it. What fun this is.”

23

We fly back to Scorpion territory, uncloaked. The Scorpions see us coming this time and several ships come out to meet us.

“I want to talk to Mabel,” Kiera tells them.

“She’s a little busy today,” the lead pilot says, “come back tomorrow.”

“Ask her if she wants the Cryta clan to get their ammunition at half-price.”

Silence.

“Follow us.”

We’re led into a hanger filled with short-range starfighters. There must be two hundred of them in here, and I didn’t think for an instant that this was the only hanger. I’m not very impressed, though. If we’d come here first, I would’ve been impressed. But after seeing the armada that Jager collected, I almost feel sorry for the Scorpions. Almost. Still, I’m happy we didn’t need the suits and I say so.

“These little mousetraps are no match for the suits,” Laura says.

“They’re spaceball suits,” I say. “Yeah, I know some of them are military - hell, mine still gives me crowd control instructions whenever I put it on. But they’re just suits.”

Laura looks at Kiera. “Just suits, he says.”

Kiera gives me a sideways glance. “Does he know?”

“No,” Laura says. “He hasn’t had an opportunity to see them in real action.”

“A spaceball game isn’t real action?” I ask.

Kiera snorts. “No. That’s just a game. It’s different when people are actually trying to kill you.”

“Right,” Kissy says. “Next game, Coach can put you in my place. We’ll see how you feel about it after taking a snap.”

We land a little off to the side and disembark. Not through the airlock, like we came in. A gravity elevator near the cockpit deposits us on the ground under the ship’s nose. I glance back and then do a double take. The Phoenix is a lot smaller than I expected. It’s sixty meters long, tops. This thing is hyperspace-capable and it goes up against Edochian destroyers? The team bus is bigger than this toothpick.

We stand in the gravity beam for a few more seconds while it matches our pressure to that of the hanger, and then it switches off and the hatch above our heads closes with a barely audible hiss.

The Scorpions lead us into a large cafeteria. There are clansmen scattered across the room, eating. They look random, but my pattern-recognition software picks up on the fact that all of them have a line of sight to one person on the far side. The person is big. Female. Mabel.

There’s another person sitting next to Mabel. Young. It’s Dexter. He’s talking to Mabel. He doesn’t look afraid or otherwise uncomfortable. He’s smiling. Having a good time. So Jager was right again, Dexter isn’t in the airlock and they’re spoofing his IIDS tone. Mabel laughs out loud, her donkey braying echoing in the room. I notice then that she and Dexter are the only ones talking, none of the other clansmen are doing anything other than eating. Pretending to eat, anyway. I’m not seeing a whole lot of food traveling to mouths.

The room is a trap.

*It’s a trap*, I send to Laura.

*Of course it’s a trap. I’m not a moron, you know.*

*Just trying to be helpful, honey.*

Mabel pretends to just notice us. “Kiera. Nice of you to drop by. Who are your friends?”

I’m looking right at Dexter when he turns his head to see us. No surprise. No fear. A grin. Maybe Kiera was right, thinking he was Echelon along with his mother. I start counting the exits and replay our walk in here in the corner of my eye. There were a lot of turns and I want to know which way to go when we start running.

“You know who they are, Mabel,” Kiera says. She gestures at Dexter. “I was going to negotiate this boy’s release, but it seems that not everything is what it seems.”

“You mean Dexter here? Oh, he’s our honored guest.”

“I was under the impression he was here against his will,” Kiera says.

“Then somebody’s led you astray, my dear girl,” Mabel says. “Dexter here was just telling me all about his last game, where he saved the day at the last moment.”

I snort. “He was on the field five times for a total of forty-seven seconds. Not at the end.”

“That’s just the kind of hurtful thing a man like you would say.”

“A man like me?”

“Selfish glory hounds like you build themselves up by knocking other people down. I don’t know how you sleep at night.”

“Like a rock, actually.”

I’m trying to figure Mabel out. She’s talking like a warm fuzzy mom-type who’s obsessed with all of her children and they can do no wrong. But she’s a clan leader. Warm and fuzzy don’t climb pirate corporate ladders all that efficiently. She’s doing it on purpose, obviously, and I can tell from Kiera’s face that this hokey act is driving her nuts.

“Mabel,” Kiera says. “Regardless of how well you two are getting along, we need Mr. Cribbens back.”

“Oh, he’s happy here. He’s going to stay, actually.”

The cafeteria eaters all stand up. We’re surrounded in two seconds. A shitload of guns point at us from all sides.

Kiera doesn’t even twitch. “Mabel, what are you doing?”

“I’ve gotten a better deal, Kiera,” the old woman says. She’s practically glowing with excitement. “One that will ensure that we never have to deal with you or Beane again.”

“Echelon, Mabel?” Kiera says. “Seriously?”

Mabel’s grin slips.

“They’re promising that to anybody they can,” Kiera goes on. “They even came to us. They’re desperate, Mabel. You think you’re getting support from them? It’s the other way around. They’re a noose you’re tying around your neck. Willingly. What did Jint promise you?”

The smile on Mabel’s face is becoming a little fixed. “You’re lying.”

“Ereban,” someone shouts from the other side of the room. I look and see a clansman standing in the doorway with a panicked expression. “Jager is here.”

“Well, it’s about time he dragged his ass–”

“He’s gathered a fleet. He brought the Issari.”

“WHAT?”

“Oh, I forgot to mention that,” Kiera says. “Jint’s promises might have seemed worth it, Mabel, but it’s not going to matter for you.”

The lights go out.

Someone sweeps my legs from under me. I go down. I manage to put my hands out so I don’t bang my face off the floor.

Mabel screams, “What the fuck?”

I hear the unmistakable whir of monofilament blades. They’re whizzing in seemingly all directions.

Thuds. Soft thuds. Bodies dropping. More thuds, but different. Crashes, more like. Further away. They’re reverberating through the walls, through the asteroid itself. Jager’s forces have opened fire.

I start to get up.

Laura’s urgent whisper in my ear, “Stay down.”

My fight or flight instinct has an argument. I stay down.

A gun goes off.

A lot of guns go off.

More screams and shouts and gurgles and scary knife whirring and thuds and more gunfire and more screams.

Silence. Except for the intermittent explosions coming from somewhere else on the station. Jager is attacking, but he’s leaving this section alone, which is nice, because he strikes me as the sort of person who gets carried away when he’s shooting something.

The lights come back on, flickering.

“You can get up now,” Kiera says, her voice somewhere above and away from me.

I stand up and look around. It seems like all of the clansmen are on the floor. Some of them are moving, but it’s the slow twitches of a body in shock. Kiera is stepping through them, checking them for something. I realize she’s checking them for life. Because one woman raises a hand and Kiera bends over her and puts her arm out. With that scary hum, a monofilament blade lances down from a hidden arm holster beneath her sleeve and pierces the clanswoman’s throat. No gushing blood, the blade cauterizes the wound as it passes through. It snaps back up into its holster. Kiera doesn’t hover over the woman, but stands up and moves on to the next one. Methodical. Without mercy. I shiver.

It’s not like I’ve never seen someone die before. Spaceball is dangerous. Happens less than you’d think in the spaceball arena, but it happens. Never like this, though. Alive one moment, perfectly capable of surviving. Then dead the next. Alive. Dead. Alive. Dead.

Someone squeezes my hand and I look and see Laura watching me. A bit worried. “I’m fine,” I say. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” she says. “Are you?”

“I don’t think so.” I see Dexter. He’s on the floor with his hands tied behind his back. He’s not moving. I figure out cold, because why tie up a dead man? I’m not sure who tied him up, and I ask.

“I did,” Kiera says.

“What are you, a ninja?”

She pauses mid-strike. A see a faint smile cross her lips, then she shakes her head and it’s gone. She goes back to killing the wounded clansmen.

I don’t see a big fat body. “Where’s Mabel?”

“She got out,” Kiera says mid-strike. “Kissy went after her.”

I hear muffled thumps from outside the room. Kissy reappears. She’s wearing that cocktail dress of hers and dragging an unconscious Mabel by the hair.

I wonder if it’s part of Kissy’s programming or some weird, twisted cross of artificial neurons that makes her wear outfits inappropriate for the moment. She doesn’t need clothes per se, they serve no function for her. She doesn’t need them for warmth. The opposite, really, since she’s got a small fusion reactor driving her and she has to bleed off heat to keep from melting. So, in reality, the garments are only there to satisfy those of us looking at her, so we can place her in a mental bucket and move on. I decide that she’s doing it on purpose. Maybe she wants people to notice her and not categorize her by what she was made for. I make a mental note to ask her, later when we’re not killing people and Jager isn’t shooting the place to pieces.

As soon as I think of it, the distant thumps become less distant and several panels along the far wall explode in a shower of sparks.

“We need to go,” I shout.

“Keep your shirt on,” Kiera mutters. “We’ve got plenty of time.”

“What, so you can keep sticking people with that knife of yours? They’re all going to be dead anyway.”

“I like to be thorough.” Kiera walks over and nudges Dexter with her foot. “Besides, this one is only pretending to be unconscious.” She bends down and waves the monofilament blade beneath his nose. Dexter eyes snap open and cross to look at the blade. He squirms and I see his neck muscles try to push his head through the floor, in much the same way that I try to get away from dentists. Kiera stands back up again with a satisfied smirk. “We’re done. We can go.”

I go over to Dexter and haul him to his feet. He’s definitely awake. His expression is…mixed. One thing I don’t see there is any fear. The wide-eyed boy persona he projected when I first met him isn’t there, either. He looks annoyed, and a bit disappointed. Makes me wonder if this whole situation was his idea and not his mother’s.

“Follow me,” Kiera says, and heads toward the door we came in.

I grab Dexter by the arm and push him ahead of me. He tries to shake me off, but I’ve got him with my right arm. “If you want a detachable shoulder,” I tell him, “then keep doing that. If you try anything, the first thing I’m going to do is squeeze as hard as I can. Got it?”

Dexter nods. I think he gets it, but I’m keeping an eye on him, just in case. He’s Echelon. There’s all sorts of interesting training involved with joining a cult like that.

Laura falls in behind me and Kissy brings up the rear with her frumpy luggage. “You still going to play on the team after this?” I ask the kid.

“Are you serious?” he says. “Not in a million years. I can’t stand the innocent teen act.”

“How old are you, anyway?”

“Twenty-two.”

“I know a guy like you.”

“Like what?”

“He’s forty-three and looks like he’s eighteen. It’s really fucking annoying.”

“That’s great. Look, Stern, it was fun to play in the games. But I’ve got more important things on my mind right now.”

“Yep, I’m sure. I don’t know what’s going to happen to you in the next hour or so, but I would greatly appreciate it if you’d consider returning to the team. You’ve got an amazing leg and I’d hate to have to replace you this late in the season. Who knows, maybe it’s something to fall back on if things don’t go your way. Don’t answer now. Answer me later. You know, if you live.”

Dexter shrugs. Best I can do. I don’t know what’s going to happen to him, either. Jager probably won’t kill him, unless he’s the kind of guy who eats his young. With him, I just never know.

Except for us, the hallways are bereft of living things. They’re also bereft of consistent light and debris-free floors. After I trip over three things, Kiera stops and turns around. Exasperation paints her face. “Is there something wrong with you? Don’t have you have ocular implants?”

“Yeah,” I say while skirting an exposed panel hissing steam and sparks. “For seeing details ten kilometers away. Ten meters in the dark? I see as shitty as everybody else.”

She gestures at Dexter with her chin. “You want me to take him, so you can concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other?”

“Nope, I got him. I don’t want you to get carried away with your murder stick.”

She snorts and turns around.

A clansman darts out of a darkened doorway and runs toward Kiera, something clenched in his raised fist.

The lights flicker and I only catch fragments.

Kiera’s monofilament blade snicks out.

“Now,” someone yells behind me.

I hear something clunk and rattle on the floor nearby. I look down and see something oblong and black skitter toward us.

WHAM.

Blinding white and purple light fills the hallway.

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My ears are ringing. I have an incredible headache. I can’t see very well. My vision is dark and shadowy. Blurry. The hallways slowly come into focus. I realize from my perspective that I’m sitting on the floor. My elbow hurts. I’m still holding onto Dexter. He’s on his back and looks to be about in the same shape as me.

Laura.

I see her a couple meters away, face down. She’s moving. Groaning. I let go of Dexter and scrabble to her side. I flip her over gently, and her hands go to her forehead in pain. She’s got a pretty good bump at her hairline, but no blood.

“Mabel,” I hear Kiera shout. “Where is she?”

“I’ve got her,” Kissy says.

I register that Kissy has transformed into her armored mode. I thought she looked scary the first time I saw her in the arena, at a distance. This close, she’s something out of a nightmare. Her eyes burn. The white tattoos on her body move in unsettling patterns. Her skin looks scaled, like tiny armor plates. Red and black flames writhe from her exhaust ports. She has to stoop to fit in the corridor, and her crouched stance and wild red hair reminds me of a demon in a horror vid that gave me terrible dreams for days.

There are several bodies lying around her, their limbs and necks at odd angles. She’s still holding Mabel by the hair. “It was an attempt to retrieve her. Apparently, they did not count on me being immune to a flash-bang.”

I help Laura to her feet. She’s a little wobbly. I duck my head under her arm. “I’m okay,” she says.

“Sure you are,” I say. “Just for a little while. Dexter –”

Dexter waves me off. “I don’t think you need to worry about me, Coach. I’m pretty sure that Kissy isn’t going to let me go anywhere.”

Kissy fixes him with an unblinking demonic stare. “You are correct. If you try to run, I will chase you down in four steps and beat you unconscious with this one.” She raises Mabel off the floor.

“Let’s go, folks,” Kiera says. “We’re close to the hangar.”

We don’t run into any more surprises in the corridors and when we run into the hangar I realize that there was a welcoming committee at one point, but something happened to them. There are bodies all around the Phoenix with scorched holes in them.

“Your doing?” I ask Kiera as we jog toward the waiting gravity lift.

“Yep,” she says over her shoulder. “You think I’d charge in here without clearing a path first?”

We pile onboard and leave just in time. A maelstrom of laser and kinetic weapon fire is pounding the station as we fly away. Large pieces break off. Depressurizing compartments blast their contents into space. I see bodies floating about like spent chaff. Kiera weaves in and out of the debris field around the station and we clear it into open space. She brings us up into the main body of the pirate fleet and turns us around in time to see the station tilt on its axis as if guided by a giant invisible hand. A bright blue explosion shudders and shoulders its way from the core, fragmenting the asteroid into several big chunks. Then everything splits apart as if each piece can’t wait to get away from the rest.

The fleet stops firing. We sit there and watch as secondary explosions keep the destruction going, like some sort of macabre fireworks show.

“Jager’s calling,” Kiera reports.

The clanmaster’s head appears. He sees Dexter and smiles wide. “Good! You made it! What of your charge?”

“We’ve got her,” Dexter says.

I look at him. He looks satisfied with himself. “Wait a minute,” I say. “This was the plan all along? You were in on this?”

Dexter smiles at me. “Yes. Jager got wind of an Echelon deal with Mabel a few months ago and asked me to look into it. Mom was trying to broker the deal, and I came with her on the pretense that I’d be running backup. She’s going to be rather upset with me when she finds out I wasn’t playing on her side this time.”

Jager looks disappointed. “I do wish you would call me ‘Dad’, son.”

“On special occasions,” Dexter murmurs.

“But you’re Echelon, aren’t you?” Laura asks. “Are you a double agent or something?”

“Something like that,” Dexter says. “My father needed an asset there, and my mother wasn’t going to help him. So I was the logical choice. I wasn’t happy about it. I really liked my life out here.”

“You are young,” Jager says. “You adapted quite well. We will discuss your next career path this evening over supper.” Jager turns to us. “Please, bring Ereban to me. I have some words for her, words she deserves to hear herself.”

24

The insides of ships always look the same to me, so once I board the giant pirate flagship I stop thinking about how big the place is. I never see an entire ship. It’s always the airlock, some hallways, a room. There’s a discussion. Sometimes I stay to sleep, so more hallways and another room with a bunk in it. The only ship in recent memory that’s been different on the inside is the Phoenix, and when I leave through the gravity lift into a hanger that could fit the *Hercules* and still have room to spare, I’m a little sad knowing I won’t get the experience of exploring the rest of Kiera’s ship.

No, that’s not a metaphor.

A squad of uniformed guards are coming our way. Two of them are guiding a grav-stretcher. It’s a little strange to see uniforms on a pirate ship. When they stop in front of us, they all make a little bow to Kiera, who inclines her head at them. The woman in front steps forward and says, “If you would follow me please.”

We make a move to follow and we get an upraised hand. “I’m sorry, just her.”

“Not bloody likely,” Laura says.

“It’s okay, Laura,” Kiera says. “I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t give a shit. We’re going together or not at all. If Jager wants Ereban, we all go together.”

“It’s not what you think,” Dexter says. “My father wants to give us an opportunity to clean up before dinner. That’s all. We all get escorts so we don’t get lost.”

Laura snorts. “To separate us, you mean, so we can’t make mischief?”

Dexter shrugs. “I can’t stop you if you insist on looking at it that way. But you know as well as I do that my father’s blood oath with the Blood Suns prohibits him from harming any of us.” He glances over at Mabel as Kissy deposits the woman on the stretcher like a bag of potatoes. “Except her, of course.”

“And me,” Kiera says. “I’m not protected by the team’s oath.”

“He would die to protect you, Your Grace,” Dexter says. “We all—.”

“Don’t call me that,” she snaps at him. “Don’t ever call me that again.”

Dexter shrugs again. “We are what we are. Running from it doesn’t help.”

“You shut up.” Kiera looks around at our group. “We’re going to split up and go with them. We’ll get clean. Maybe get some nice outfit sims out of it. Then we’ll meet and have dinner.” She turns to Dexter. “If your father tries anything untoward to myself or my friends here, you have my oath that I will burn this entire fleet to ashes.”

She turns and walks away, her startled guards trailing behind her. It seems to me that she knows exactly where she’s going. Dexter and the other guards watch her go. I read a mix of awe and a bit of sad hope on their faces.

“Someone’s going to have to explain all that royalty business to me,” I murmur to Laura as we allow ourselves to be led out of the hanger by a pair of guards. “And by someone, I mean you.”

“She’s the last of the Etheri royal line,” one of the guards says. An older man, with some pretty impressive scars on his face. He pauses, almost as if waiting for one of his companions to stop him, and then continues. “Her family ruled a Rim planet called Etheria, a beautiful world. Her husband’s great-great grandparents worked with her Grace’s family to research hyperspace drive technology. The Edochians found out about it and made an example of them. Of their entire world. Our world.”

“Wait a second,” I say. “Are you saying the clans came from there?”

The man nodded at me. “We renamed our families, but each of the clans are descendants of Etheri noble houses. We scattered across the Rim and answer to no authority. This ship you’re standing on is the *Issari*, the last Etheri capital ship.”

“Is Kiera related to Jager?”

“No. He actually has no clan, but his family descends from the royal protectors. It took Jager <time> of bargaining, calling in favors, handing out threats even, for him to organize this gathering - and what you see here today is a fraction of our true strength. Her Grace has but to ask. One word, and we would come. We would all come.” We arrive at our rooms and the guards pause outside and let us in. “But she will not. It frightens her, I think.”

“What could possibly frighten that woman?”

“The power. The responsibility. And that is why we would all come to fight for her, if she asked, because we know that she would not lightly cast us into the void. She would bleed for all of us. Enjoy your stay. Few outsiders see the *Issari*.”

We all get split up. I don’t like being separated from Laura, but I feel reasonably sure I’ll get to see her again. It does mean I won’t be doing much exploring. However, much the old guard said I should enjoy my stay, I don’t feel like testing that invitation with a jaunt around the ship. I just want to eat and go home.

Home. I roll the word around in my mouth like a pebble. Not something I think about very often, not since Earth. Usually home just means the last place I slept more than three nights in a row. The *Hercules* has been the most permanent abode for me since the sleep pod on Pronos, and I find right now, as I take a shower in this relic from a bygone era, that I miss the ungainly lady.

Kiera. Royalty. Holy shit. Did Laura know? I didn’t get to ask her before were separated. Nah, of course she knows. Childhood friends, there’s no way that kind of secret stays kept. How many other people know something like that? All the pirates, surely, which means it’s common knowledge out here on the Rim. Did that old guard tell the truth, that all the pirates would come her banner if she called? If he was right, then there’s a huge army out there just waiting for battle - a scrappy one that spends all of its time fighting with unconventional tactics and no rules.

I’m curious about where people are going to sit at the table. Jager at the head? Kiera? Yeah, he’ll probably put her at the head, with himself at her right hand. Fitting for the whole royalty thing going on.

<notes for later

It’s a round table. Etheri thing. Arthurian influences?

Dinner

Jager

Kiera

Rick

Laura

Jint

Dexter

Ereban

Kissy

Dexter’s cover is not blown. Ereban and Jint both believe he is on their side. Is he outed during dinner? No, Jager keeps him under wraps. Or at least tries, Jint realizes it halfway through dessert.

Jager uses dinner as an attempt to groom Kiera for rule. It’s tantamount to treason that a clan would enlist the help of Echelon, of any Earth-based organization, since this would consist of collusion to the First Consortium and threaten the clans’ neutrality. Jager sees if Kiera will make a decision regarding Ereban’s punishment.

</end note>

Jager looks at Kiera. “This cannot go unpunished. What do you think we should do, your Grace?”

“I told you not to call me that,” Kiera snaps.

“You can shoot me for calling you what you are, I suppose,” he replies. “What will you do with her after I’m dead?”

Kiera eyes Ereban and purses her lips, thinking.

I watch Ereban’s eyes dart from Kiera to Jager and back, and I see her realize that Jager is serious about asking Kiera’s opinion. The older clanswoman’s face turns a bit pale and she shifts in her seat under Kiera’s stare.

“I have no use for someone who invites Echelon or any other Earth-based organization to set up shop on the Rim,” Kiera says. “This truce won’t last. If you had succeeded, Ereban, you would have wiped away the fragile neutrality the clans have maintained in this war, and we would be spending our time fighting the Nokkrans and Edochians.”

“You have some serious brass ovaries to be saying that,” Ereban scoffs. “You and Beane started the war!”

“The war was coming either way,” Kiera says. “This outcome has been set for centuries. If not us, someone else. Perhaps not this generation. The next, or perhaps ten from now. It would be the same. Humans are too curious, too determined. Telling us we can’t do something is the same as instructing us to forever make attempts. The Edochians never had any intention in sharing FTL travel. Make no mistake, this war is for our survival. So far, the Edochians have not considered the Rim as a threat. They think it too fragmented, the clans squabbling amongst themselves and best left alone. That’s what we want. The clans are a strategic asset, and you jeopardized it with this ridiculous ploy.”

Ereban shakes her head. “I can’t believe —“

“Shut it,” Kiera says. “Your life depends on it.”

Ereban falls quiet. She simmers, though. I can tell she isn’t cowed by Kiera, but she stays silent. I wonder if she’s smart enough to realize that Kiera is revered by every clansmen in the room, and there are no advantages to be had here. I really wonder if it goes sideways, if Ereban won’t try something drastic. Cornered animals, and all that.

Kiera looks over at Jint. “What did Echelon hope to gain by this?”

Jint hasn’t stopped eating during the discussion and sticks another forkful of strawberry shortcake in her mouth. She chews.

“Well?” Kiera says.

“This is really good,” Jint says, pointing with her fork at the last bite of shortcake on her plate. “Just the right amount of butter, the right amount of flake. Can I have the recipe?”

“You cannot,” Kiera says. “State secret.”

“Since when are you a state?”

“Since I was born.”

There’s no note of resignation in Kiera’s voice, no humor, just a statement of fact. Jager is watching Kiera with undisguised adoration. Laura looks set to burst with pride. Dexter looks bored. He hasn’t touched his shortcake. Mine is gone, but his is free for the taking and I want it. But he’s four seats to my left and I can’t get his attention without getting up and making a scene, or asking Laura to ask Kissy to ask him, and who knows what the message would be after going down that line and coming back. I resign myself to finding shortcake crumbs on my plate.

“What did Echelon hope to gain by this play?” Kiera asks again.

“A foothold on the Rim,” Jint replies. “We have a presence everywhere else but here. The clans have always been, shall we say, vigilant.”

Jager nodded. “We only have a few edicts. One is ‘Don’t fight the fights of others.’ Your wars are yours and we will not get involved unless we ourselves are wronged.”

“Again, that’s rich,” Jint echoes Ereban’s previous comment, and points her fork at Kiera. “We’re here because of her. What does your edict say about when it’s your fault that we even have a war in the first place?”

“I just said–”

“I know what you just said, and I think it’s a convenient cover for what you knew to have profoundly serious consequences. I’m not going to argue about it, I don’t blame you for it. I think we needed to break the FTL tech monopoly. But please don’t insult our intelligence by saying that the inexorable march of time exonerates you and you husband for violating treaties. You weren’t doing it for the good of humanity. You wanted FTL for yourselves, and you were damn sloppy about it.”

“Excuse me?” Kiera says. “Sloppy?”

“In your rush to achieve the tech, you didn’t hide where it came from. If the enemy is expecting you to act, don’t let them know it’s you who’s doing the acting. Make it look like someone else acted and benefit. Amateur hour bullshit.”

“Who cares?” I ask, then stop, surprised that I said anything at all. Maybe it’s shortcake withdrawal. I look around the table. “Seriously, who gives a shit what has happened already? It happened. It’s over. A war started. A planet blew up. People died. Some ships flew around, blowing up other ships. More people died. The universe keeps on expanding. You know what’s really funny about you lot? You think you can change things. You think you can make a difference. You can’t change shit.”

“I think you would be surprised at what we can change,” Kiera says.

“No offense, but the more I learn about you, the less I want to know. I woke up this morning with a small todo list. Instead, I get dragged onto a ship, invade an asteroid base, learn one of my players is a pirate spy, get shot at, get flash-banged, watch that asteroid get blown up with who knows how many people on it, and then listen to you fuckers try to blame each other for something that was the culmination of a million little things, and you all have the arrogance to think that you had some sort of direct hand in it. The only redeeming thing from today has been this fucking shortcake.”

Laura is kicking me in the shin. She’s amazing, because she’s doing it without moving her upper body. You try to kick somebody in the shin under a table without wiggling your top half.

I stand up. Half to avoid the kicking, half to get out of this fucking place. “I’m leaving. If you want to sit here and whine about what you did do, could do, didn’t do, wouldn’t do, feel free to do it without me.” I point at Dexter. “Game day is tomorrow. Be there.” I don’t wait for his response and look at Jager. “Thank you for dinner.” I ignore whatever he does next and extend a hand to Laura. “Coming?”

Laura stares at me. Blinks a few times. I’m relieved when she puts her hand in mine. I wasn’t sure what I would’ve done if she just kept looking at me like I’d just whipped out my dick and jerked off in front of everybody. We walk out, hand in hand.

I have no idea where I am and how to get to the hanger with the Bus, but I wait until we’re out in the hallway, with the door closed behind us, before I ask the guard standing out there for directions.

25

Compared to the previous day’s festivities, the Stonemen game is an almost sedate affair, made more boring by the fact that they’re the equivalent of nuns on the ASC. No amount of taunting can get a rise out of them, and this is not to say that the Blood Suns don’t give it their best efforts, all things considered. None of them actually got to shoot anybody yesterday during the fracas with the Scorpion Clan, so the pent-up frustration is palpable. Fourteen penalties, three unsportsmanlike conduct calls, and one of the Mine Twins gets ejected from the game after taking a swipe at a bee. Even after all that, we limp away with a win after squeaking by with just a field goal expertly placed by Mr. Cribbens in the final seconds of the fourth quarter.

“Hey, Coach,” he says to me at the after-game party in the KornerStone Club, “thanks for letting me back on the team.”

I look him up and down. He’s dropped the adolescent act and is standing and dressing more like his age. Even his face looks older. He’s got a drink in his hand and a girl hanging off his other arm. She’s young and pretty, and with a mostly vacant smile - except, hang on a minute. I almost miss the signs, and if I hadn’t been exposed to these charlatans I wouldn’t have even noticed. She’s trying to hide it, but I can see the intelligence back there, the scanning of the room, the calculating looks when she takes in everyone around her. Echelon, she has to be.

She sees me looking and gives me a smirk.

I smirk back, but it’s half-hearted. Gods, I don’t even want to know who she is, or what she’s doing here. Games within games, wheels within wheels. “Look, Dexter, I’d like to say it’s because I’m a really nice guy, but seriously, where was I supposed to get somebody with a leg like yours in less than twenty-four hours?”

Dexter shrugs. “Hey, I’ll take it. See you around, Coach.”

I watch him and his spy girl leave.

Maurice replaces him. “We have a problem, Mr. Stern.”

“What?”

“As a result of your extracurricular activities yesterday, you missed an extremely important meeting with the League.”

“I think it’s funny that you think yesterday was extracurricular. What does the League want?”

“They want to bar the Blood Suns from the playoffs.”

“WHAT? We’re undefeated. We get in automatically.”

“Not if you’ve been cheating all season.”

“The Blood Suns have NOT been cheating all season.”

“The League disagrees. You had a hearing with the League to defend the Blood Suns, but you missed it.”

“Did you tell them what I was doing?”

Maurice looks at me like I’m an idiot. “Did I tell them you were on a known criminal’s ship, and that criminal is wanted by the Edochian First Consortium for starting the war? Did I tell them you were on the Scorpion Clan’s headquarters and kidnapped their clan leader? Did I tell the League that you missed their hearing about alleged wrongdoing because you were committing piracy, kidnapping, aiding and abetting mass murder, and collaborating with enemies of both the human government and the Edochian Consortiums? Are you really asking if I told them all of these things?”

“Well, did you?” I ask, just see his expression.

I am well rewarded. “I am not a moron, Mr. Stern,” Maurice shouts. His eyes go wide and just a little bit crazy. I wonder if this is a prerequisite for anyone being run by a Terrance Boy, to get them to go over the edge like this. It should be in the fine print of the handbook: at least once, make your Terrance Boy lose their stack. Then I remember that the first time we met, he threw me across a room and here I am, standing less than a meter from him.

Maurice controls himself with several deep breaths. “The League seems very serious about this, Mr. Stern. You should treat it at least as serious as they are doing.”

“What does the Court think about this?”

The Court of Public Opinion is the side effect of a misguided attempt on Earth during the 22nd Century to implement 100 percent democratic rule, by implanting every citizen of the planet with the ability to vote on any question put to them. It was a disaster. No topic discussions, only the fickle whims of an electorate that allowed itself to be swayed in whichever direction the media conglomerates cared to whip them. Only after a world war wiped out a fifth of the planetary population did normal technocratic government resume. The Court still exists, doing what it should have done from the start, which is gauge what people thought about something, not what they wanted to do about it. If I acted on everything I thought about, I would be dead or locked away, as I would be justifiably considered an insane person. The Court is much diminished as of late, since the recent destruction of Earth has reduced the available pool of voters.

“You can look for yourself, you know,” Maurice says.

“I can’t,” I say. To ask the Court a question, one must be in the Court, or at least allow the Court access to some of your thoughts. “I opted out of the Court when I became a spaceball coach.”

“Why? The Court is anonymized.”

“Sure, but information has to come from somewhere, and if there’s only one person in the universe who would know it in the first place, then it’s easy know where the information came from. I’m a forgetful guy. I knew that I’d forget to turn off the connection, and then the Court would become aware of my pre-game plans. I might as well hand out wins at that point.”

“I believe that is what is considered a ‘cop-out’. Do not explain, I am uninterested in further excuses. I will look.” Maurice pauses and then he says, “The Court is curious how the Blood Suns have remained undefeated this season. Twenty-three percent think the cheating story is plausible.”

“That high already?”

“You shot a referee,” Maurice says. “Cheating might seem like a step down to people.”

“If they were really serious about it, they would’ve sent a Bookie to see me. They’re fishing.”

“We received an injunction this morning,” Maurice says, “during the Stonemen game. The Blood Suns are not allowed to play another game until the League is satisfied the Blood Suns have not cheated during this season.”

“An injunction?” I ask. “And they actually worded it that way?”

“Yes,” Maurice says. “Is that not something they would say?”

I let myself relax. This isn’t as bad as I thought it was. “That wording is code, because they can’t ask that question for real. Everybody cheats. If any of us say, “I have not cheated”, we will be lying our asses off. Anybody watching us say it with a lie detector implant will know we’re full of shit. We all play dirty, every one of us. Well, except maybe for that bullshit team we played, the Whimsions. They don’t play dirty, which is why they lost so badly.”

“I thought there’s a field AI to ensure there is no cheating.”

“Well, there’s cheating, and then there’s really cheating.”

Maurice rolls his eyes. “What is the difference?”

“There are rules to make sure we play the game correctly, so we’re not windmilling all over the place. We want to have some semblance of order, but at the end of the day it’s about the mayhem.”

“Really? The mayhem?”

“Remember that if wasn’t for the fans, we wouldn’t be playing this game. They want a show. They want a spectacle. Most of the rules are there to make sure we don’t kill each other, but they’re loose enough so we can have a serious spectacle.”

“I understand that the major draw to spaceball is the potential for televised homicide,” Maurice says. “I also understand that I asked you to explain cheating, and you have deflected the question.”

“I’m not deflecting, I’m explaining.”

“In circles, Mr. Stern, you are explaining in circles. I’ll ask again, what counts as cheating? To you?”

I spread my hands. “It can be so many things.”

Maurice squints at me, and then his eyes go distant again. “There are 493 references about cheating in the Spaceball Rules of Play.”

“God. Nobody pays any attention to that. It would take me a month just to read it.”

“I have seen the Blood Suns violate at least thirty four of these rules, and that’s just at a moment’s glance. I’m sure I could find more.”

“I’m sure you could. Look, Maurice, was the Court considering this topic before I fired Bucky?”

A few seconds later, he replies, “The Court was not. They didn’t start trending on it until two days ago.”

“Is there a specific accusation, or is just a general ‘they must be cheating’ theme?”

“The thread began with a mention about ‘must have used EMP bombs to bugger the Albraxan Bulldogs.’”

“That sounds like Bucky.”

Maurice sighs. “Did we really use explosives on the Bulldogs?”

“Maybe? I don’t know. I’ve had a lot going on this season.”

“Why do you think it’s Mr. Buchannan?”

“Bucky sent me a message after I fired him, saying that he’d get me, and I wouldn’t see it coming. I’m hoping this is it.”

“That’s a strange position to take, this is very serious.”

“This? Not really. I’m hoping this is it, because this is easy to fix. Remember what I said about the injunction being a code? The League is telling us that this can go away for a price. It’s in their best interests that we play, revenue is up. Injunctions are League-speak for ‘pay us some money and we’ll drop it’. That they mentioned the cheating in it is a good thing, because when it does go away, the League will bury the cheating accusation. What’s our budget for bribes?”

He gave me a hard look. “You’re not supposed to know we budget for that sort of thing.”

“I’m not a moron, Maurice,” I say. “Chippers didn’t get to where he is without greasing a lot of palms. He’d have budgeted for it. How about this? You don’t tell me what the budget is, but you handle this.”

“How do I do that? Is there a League office for the handling of illegal payments?”

“There is. Put a call into Lost and Found. Tell them you lost your dog. They’ll ask for its name. Tell them your dog’s name is Blood Suns. If they’ll deal, they’ll charge you a giant finder’s fee and then they’ll tell you where to send the money.”

“Are you serious?”

I nod. “It’s how it’s always worked. Hopefully they haven’t changed it.”

Maurice’s eyes unfocused. His expression goes from mild interest to incredulity to boredom to resignation, then back to mild interest at the end. Refocuses. “It’s done. I can’t believe that worked. They didn’t want very much.”

“Just a slap on the wrist, then. We’re okay.”

“They wanted me to pass on a message to you.”

“Oh?”

“They’re expecting a serious spectacle from the Blood Suns in the playoffs.”

“Of course, they are. It’s the point of playoffs.”

“Isn’t the point to win?”

“That’s secondary.”

26

Here’s the thing about playoffs. Any team that’s gotten this far has been through some harrowing events. The Blood Suns have been through a bit more than most. So, when it comes time to have “the talk” about ensuring that for each game, we lay it all out on the field, that we play our hardest, we focus more than ever – well, some teams have been known to ask, “what the fuck have we been doing so far?” The Blood Suns didn’t need any such talk. I’ve never had to give any sort of speech. No uplifting drivel about life and destiny and hard work. None of that bullshit. I just point. They do the rest. Sometimes I wonder if I really needed to be here at all. Maybe I’m like that hot chick who’s the public face of the Scorpion Clan. Just a figurehead. I feel like Chippers could’ve gotten a figurehead more pleasing to look at for his money.

Luckily, we only have to play one playoff game. It wasn’t always this way, the playoffs used to be nearly as long as a regular season, but the war had whittled us down some. Not enough teams are available to give the playoffs a full run. So, we only have one game.

I wish we could’ve drawn a different opponent, though. The Blood Suns are playing the Harbingers.

A Nokkran team.

Pirates hate the Nokkrans even more than the rest of humanity, even before the Nokkrans started helping the Edochians pick off human ships caught between Gates. The Rim borders Nokkran space. If the Nokkrans were interested in raiding, they raided pirate territory first. The Blood Suns didn’t need any pep talk before the game.

We arrived ready to fuck some shit up.

The Harbingers win the coin toss and elect to receive, and then they spend the first drive fucking us up instead. They score a touchdown inside of two minutes.

“Sysianti,” I say on the coach comms. “This isn’t the defense I was hoping for.”

“Your old colleague is here,” Sysianti says.

“Where?” I ask.

“Mr. Buchannan and his wife are on a small shuttle in the wash of the battlecruiser. They’re trying to remain out of view, but I can sense him.” Sysianti makes a huffing sound. “His mind is revolting.”

“Bucky’s a revolting sort of fellow,” I say. “Is he really helping the Nokkrans?”

“Yes. He is feeding them intel about the Blood Suns. Which players are which, their strengths and weaknesses.”

“That’s not very nice of him.”

“He is very angry with you.”

“The feeling’s mutual. Thank you for the information. I can get somebody to jam his communications.”

“I can do that if you’d like,” Sysianti says.

“You can?”

“It’s trivial. It will be better if I do it. I can change the message. If you just jam him, the Nokkrans may get suspicious that he’s stopped transmitting.”

“How do you change the message?”

“Telepath, remember?”

“Sure, but are you controlling Bucky?”

“Control is such a rudimentary term.”

“Are you making him say things or not?”

“Yes, I can make him say things,” Sysianti says, “but I do not like to make it sound like I can control everyone in the system.”

“I didn’t ask if you could control everyone in the system,” I say, “so I think it’s strange that you’d say something like that. Can you control everyone in the system?”

“I will change what Mr. Buchannan says to the Harbingers.”

“You didn’t say no, Sysianti,” I say.

Sysianti doesn’t respond and I let it drop. Her answers would probably just upset me. Most people don’t have much experience with telepaths, so fear does a lot of the thinking for them around the subject. Unless the person is a strange human-Edochian half-breed, telepaths don’t present in humans. Andosians don’t expand so nobody cares, and only people who know about how the Edochian culture works even know that an enslaved social caste is telepathic. I wonder if Sysianti could really control anyone she wanted. The idea makes my skin crawl. I don’t even like it when alcohol or drugs are changing my behavior, so the thought of another person twiddling with my thoughts and making me do things gives me the willies. At least with booze, it’s still me doing things. A more inebriated, less impeded by social pressures me, but still me. Another person handling the reins? Might as well be a skin puppet at that point.

These fears aren’t unfounded. When people first started screwing around with cranial implants and brain machine interfaces, people got the strange idea of cramming a fully-functional AI into their own heads. As if the usual voices weren’t enough. I guess the “I wonder what will happen if I put my finger in this electrical socket” impulses never really go away. A machine can think a great deal faster than a human, and its motivations aren’t the same. People got weird real fast. Almost overnight a cottage industry was born around insanity defenses. “The machine made me do it!” and all that.

Brain machine interfaces eventually smoothed out, but there were definite bumpy spots along the road. The history channels say one whole mining colony was lost to AI implants. They didn’t reproduce. No desire for it, they were too busy building a paperclip machine. They were supposed to be mining ore, but instead started converting that ore into paperclips. Then they started converting everything into paperclips. Probably would have taken over the entire planet had they not been bombed into smithereens.

I’ve never been one for an AI implant, myself. AI-enhanced people tend to be less creative. Their intuition withers away for some reason. Since I do most of my thinking when I’m sitting on the toilet, showering, or otherwise not paying much attention, I’m pretty certain that my contributions to society would tank if AI were in charge of my limited brain capacity

About halfway through the second quarter, I notice that we seem to be getting a lot of foul calls. I call up the visual overlay for fouls and find a long list of them. A disproportionate number compared to the Harbingers. Offsides, clipping, false start, chop block, personal foul, checking – I thought that was hockey – targeting, unsportsmanlike conduct – what do they think this is, a daycare? It’s a lot of fouls. At any given point, there’s at least one frozen Blood Sun on the field.

“The bees are really getting on my nerves,” I say to no one in particular.

“Are you truly surprised?” Jager asks.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“One of them are related to the <name> clan.”

That’s the bee with the siren wife.

I look at the foul list again. Sure enough, it’s one bee doing all of the extra fouling. I don’t recognize the name, though. Must be on the guy’s side of the family – the male takes the female’s clan name during marriage in Veeni culture. I can’t argue with the volume of fouls from this one bee, and I also trust that Jager knows what he’s talking about. I don’t ever want to be present or worse, be responsible for correcting Jager on anything.

“Holy shit. Jager, tell everybody to be extra careful in this game. Don’t give him an excuse to foul us. Well, any more than usual.”

“They are finding all the excuses they need, unfortunately.”

I hop on the bee channel. It’s not broadcast with the regular game transmission, but on a separate one that goes into the spaceball archives. For ‘history’, but everyone knows it’s to help settle grievances and disputes with Bookies. The vid network knows about it and taps it during games to add an extra layer of drama.

There’s usually nothing going on, so the bee channel doesn’t get much attention, but once in a while a head coach enters the channel. Nobody is announced going in and out, but anyone looking at the channel logs will notice a new connection. In a spaceball game, everything I do is watched. Dissected. So, I know that somebody is going to notice, if they haven’t already, that a head coach has connected to the bee channel. A defensive or offensive coach in the bee channel is nothing to get excited about. But a head coach? Entering the bee channel is tantamount to me throwing a glove on the field.

There’s a steady stream of conversation in Veeni. My cranial implant translates it in real-time.

“Watch H23,” a bee says, “potential false start about to – no, never mind.”

“B10 is doing something strange,” another bee says.

“What is strange?” a third asks, “I don’t see anything strange.”

“Yes – it’s another chop block – fouling B10.”

B10 is <name>, and I zoom in on them to see that they are indeed frozen on the field. Play goes around them, but at one point during the snap a Harbinger smashes into them and sends them spinning. No foul for that, of course. Typical.

I hear a frustrated grunt from one of the bees. It’s the closest thing to a direct disagreement you’ll ever hear on the bee channel. The bees know this channel is recorded, so they do their arguing on encrypted channels where no one can hear them.

So, the bees aren’t happy about what’s going on any more than I am. Not all of them are related to <name> clan, then. Still, I have to be really careful about what I say in here. If a coach complains to a bee, the audience goes berserk. It’s a sign of weakness. The Bookies really like it, when it happens, since it can cause a quarter point movement on the debt ratio. People believe they can read games, tend to bet more heavily when they think that they’re right, and that combination leads to fairly dumb monetary decisions that end up with a visit from someone who loves breaking bones to extract blood from stone.

“Hi, this is Coach Stern. What’s with all the fouls?” I ask.

Silence. Not totally unexpected. The encrypted side channel they’re on probably just lit up, though.

“You will receive less fouls if you stop violating the rules.”

I have no idea which bee is which, so I can’t tell if the one speaking is the one freezing my players. “Great, so I expect the frequency of that to go down, then.”

I hop off the channel. I don’t need to hang out in there. Don’t really expect anything out of it, other than a friendly *Hello, I’m here and I’m watching you watch me.*

I certainly didn’t expect one bee to foul three players at once on the next snap. False start.

“Oh, come on,” I mutter into the coach channel.

Then the field AI overrules that last foul and unfreezes my players.

That almost never happens. Maybe once a season, and it’s usually because a bee is having a medical event.

I connect to the referee channel again as the Blood Suns line up for the next play. We have possession. Snap, Kissy drops back, about to pass.

“B1, delay of game,” a bee reports.

“Now, wait just a –” another bee says.

It’s too late, Kissy gets fouled, delay of game.

Before I can even complain about it, the field AI overrides that foul, too. Then a distinctly mechanical voice rumbles in the channel, “Bad call, reversing.”

That’s the field AI. They all sound like that. Intimidating.

A frustrated grunt in the referee channel.

On the next play, it happens again. Kissy, delay of game. What the hell is happening here?

The field AI says, “Bad call, reversing. Ejecting.”

Ejecting? What does that mean? I’ve never heard a field AI even say that word before.

I notice a bee floating behind the area of play.

Frozen.

I’ve never seen this.

Ever.

A bee, frozen.

I didn’t think that was even possible.

Nobody else thinks it was possible, either. The whole game stops for ten minutes so that the vid replays, which have an orgasmic reaction to this new event by dissecting every tiny detail, can catch up to real time. I’m sure the vid programmers caught on to the bee’s relatives far faster than I did, and my sordid story is being refreshed in everybody’s heads right now. Some people don’t even watch spaceball for the game, but because it’s the backdrop to a giant soap opera. Everybody wants to famous, but I’d prefer it was actually fame, and not infamy.

We start off the third quarter with a slim lead, and then something really underhanded happens.

I’m sitting on the coach’s channel, watching <something happen>, pretty much minding my own business, when I hear a very, very familiar voice on the ASC.

Just a low-level crooning, followed by, “You want to slow down, you want to sleep.”

Every male player on the Blood Suns stops what they’re doing, right in the middle of a play. <someone> has the ball and gets tackled. Fumble!

Harbingers recover!

Blood Suns are sitting around, just floating there.

Remember what I said earlier about AI in my brain? How I don’t track with that shit? I lied. There’s one thing I added after that truly terrible day way back, when a Veeni siren fucked with my head and then fucked up my life. I added an AI-enabled audio filter to stop Veeni suggestion from affecting me. I’d actually forgotten about it. I’m surprised it still works.

“Get off this fucking channel,” I growl into the ASC.

“Rick?” <name says> “How are you–”

“Audio filter, you fucking bitch. Get off our channel.”

“Rick,” Laura says on the coach’s channel, “you gotta listen to me, this is –“

“I’m okay,” I say, “I’m okay.”

“You are?”

“Audio filter.”

“Oh. Oh, that’s great, I’m really glad. Look, I can handle this, if you let me.”

“Yes, please do.”

“Great.” She keys off.

A moment later, Kissy leaves the field. She’s not heading toward our bus. She’s heading into the spectator area, into a collection of ships that I never pay any attention to. <describe them anyway> I configure my visual implant to zoom in on her, extrapolate her trajectory, and then see where she’s heading.

There’s a Veeni ship right on the edge of the spectator field. <what does it look like>

I contact Laura directly on a private channel. “Hey,” I say, “where our quarterback going?”

“You said I could handle it,” Laura says.

“I did, but that doesn’t mean I don’t get to ask questions, right?”

“It makes me feel like you don’t trust me.”

“I do trust you, I’m just wondering if it’s a good idea to send Kissy out there by herself.”

“Kissy can handle whatever comes at her.”

“I’m sure she can, but what if it’s a torpedo? She’s in neutral space. No protection.”

“Kissy’s battle armor isn’t just for show, Rick. She can handle a torpedo.”

“How does a person-sized object handle a tactical nuclear warhead?”

“Let’s just say that Kissy can outrun a torpedo. Look, does it make you feel better if I tell you that Veeni ship, where that woman’s transmission is coming from, it outside the spectator area?”

“Oh. Then yes,” I say, “yes, it does.”

There’s a set of standing spaceball rules around interfering with team communications during a game, as in, it’s specifically not allowed. No one in a spectator or team area is allowed to transmit into another team’s internal communication channels. In return for abiding by this rule, and all other spaceball rules, the League protects anyone inside the spectator area from violence.

The Veeni ship is outside the spectator area, ostensibly so they can’t be penalized for messing with our comms. But it also means we can mess with them.

“How is Kissy going –“

“Just watch, Rick.”

Kissy flies right up and lands on the Veeni’s forward airlock. <what does the ship look like> I zoom in to see what she’s doing. She’s <distance> and I’m at my maximum filter strength. I can see words on the interface pad, but I can’t make out what they are. Kissy’s not pressing the pad. I notice a cable coming out of her wrist. She’s jacked into the ship itself.

Normally, this would be completely illegal, as in established AI law and treaty illegal, but the Veeni aren’t humans and don’t have general artificial intelligences installed in their ships. They don’t use general AIs for anything. Their culture is still grappling with the idea and aren’t as far along with the technology as other species.

The airlock door snaps open, then snaps closed again.

Open. Closed.

Open. Open for longer.

Kissy flips to the side as a massive cloud of air and small debris blasts out of the airlock.

“Did she just ventilate that ship?” I ask, horror mounting.

Kissy then enters the airlock and disappears from view.

“What’s she doing?” I ask.

“Making sure,” Laura says.

“Making sure of what, exactly?”

“That the job is finished.”

“I’m realizing now that I should have been more specific about what ‘handling’ meant.”

“Kissy is just protecting her team.”

“Does this count as overly protective?”

“Not to me, it doesn’t.”

Kissy emerges from the airlock and speeds back toward the field. I toggle her channel and say, “Kissy, did you just kill everyone on that ship?”

“Oh, hi Coach,” Kissy says.

“Kissy, please answer the question.”

“I did,” she says.

“That’s part of your programming?”

“Well, I wasn’t always a quarterback.”

“You killed people during sex?”

“No. I wasn’t always a sex robot, either.”

I want to ask about that but out of the corner of my eye, I see a flicker of light. The gate at the other end of the sector. It’s a bit brighter than the stars in the background, so it stands out. It had gone dark for just a moment, as if something had obscured it. Something came through. Something big to obscure its halo at this range.

I zoom in to see what’s over there. The gate looms in my visuals.

In the foreground is a Veeni cluster.

Where human ships tend to be long and relatively blocky, Veeni ships are tall and narrow, made of bulbous shapes piled atop one another like some sort of strange hive. From a distance, they all look like one ship. Zoomed in, I can tell that they are, in reality, hundreds of smaller ships flying in close formation. All Veeni ships can join together this way. Any of them, at any time, can form a much larger vessel. Each ship is designed to be its own entity, but get enough Veeni together, and they can match or exceed the size of even the largest human battlecruiser.Some of the ships in the center of the mass are connected. Latched together in the core, to share power and redirect it to temporarily-expanded weapons arrays. Tiny ships tend to have small offensive capabilities, but a cloud of torpedoes is a cloud of torpedoes. It becomes a battle of probabilities, and the probabilities are high that at least one of them will get through a defensive array.

“Shit,” I say into the coach comms, “a hive cluster just came through the gate. Everybody, recall your groups to the team bus.”

“Belay that, it won’t be necessary,” Laura says on the comms, so everyone can hear. “It’s just for show. They’re at a significant disadvantage here.”

“Laura, that’s a hive. There are hundreds of ships.”

“Doesn’t matter. No AI – “

A great, intimidating voice booms on all open channels, “This is the Spaceball League field AI. to the Veeni ships which just entered this sector. Your presence here is not necessary nor desired. Depart.”

The Veeni cruiser’s engines fire up. It’s too far away to tell if it’s moving, but I know it’s coming this way.

“Defensive measures will be taken to protect the game’s participants,” the field AI rumbles. “Do not approach this area.”

The Veeni cruiser makes no course corrections. I still couldn’t tell if it was any closer. Just a speck at the end of visual range. Zoomed in, though, and the thing fills my visuals.

“Are we staying or leaving?” Jager asked over comms.

I hesitate. The field AI hasn’t given an evacuation order, so if we leave the field, we forfeit the match. “Staying,” I reply, “but standby for evacuation.”

I toggle my channel so that I’m just speaking with Laura, not the whole team. “Laura, when will they be within range to fire?”

“No, no, we can’t go yet,” Laura says, “it’s too early, the audience isn’t big enough.”

“What?” I ask.

“Rick? Shit, wrong channel.”

“Who else are you talking to?”

I get nothing. She’s off on whatever channel she thought she was on. What did she mean, the audience wasn’t big enough? Was she talking to Kiera? To Beane? Anxiety smashed into me. God, please let this not be the end game, please just let me get to the championship. All hell can break loose after I get to that. I’ll just die if we did all this crazy, all this work, just to die in an energy blast from a Veeni cruiser in the middle of a fucking playoff game. It’s like tripping over a rock at the end of a five-day race, and a one-legged man beats you across the finish line.

I wait for Laura to come back. A few seconds later, I hear her come back. “Rick?”

“Laura? Please say that this isn’t the event. I’d really like this to not be the event.”

“It’s not the event.”

“Oh, thank God.”

“What were you asking me?”

“Are the Veeni in range to fire?”

“They’re in torpedo range right now,” she says. “I’m guessing about, ah, two minutes before they’re close enough to do any energy damage. I’m not worried about torpedoes. The field AI’s drone swarm can handle those.”

<will mention the swarm earlier>

“I’m not worried about torpedoes, either” I say. “It’s lasers that freak me out.”

“We’ll be fine,” Laura says. “I think the League can handle one Veeni cluster. The field AI is more than capable of finding the master node and destroying it.”

Describe earlier where the field AI “lives” during a game. Drone swarm locations and numbers.

“Won’t they recouple at that point? Just select a new master node?”

“No, that’s the fun part. The Veeni typically setup a recovery chain beforehand just for those cases, so that the second one in line takes over and the cluster reassembles around it. An AI can infiltrate the master node before destroying it and transmit a new second node. Then the master node is destroyed. When the first master node is gone, the infiltrator becomes the new master. The hive is theirs at that point. Hives are inherently vulnerable to attacks against the queen, something the Veeni would understand if they embraced general AI instead of shunning it.”

“None of the other races embrace general AI,” I point out. “They all think we’re crazy.” I think about Kissy, the used-to-kill-people robot, turned sex robot, turned quarterback, turned kill people by venting their atmosphere robot. There’s a story there. A good story. Maybe when this was all over, I’d ask to hear the whole thing.

<Rick asks Sysianti if she can help. She demurs, saying the field AI is more than capable, and that she isn’t strong enough at the Veeni’s range. Rick isn’t totally convinced, but doesn’t push it.>

“What can you do to help here?”

“My participation is not merited,” Sysianti says.

“Why not?”

“The League’s field AI is more than qualified. I fear that I am not strong enough to be completely effective at that ship’s range. I will likely make it worse. The Veeni have peculiar thought structures and are highly suspicious of external mental influence.”

“So, they’re weird and they hate telepaths.”

“That’s what I said.”

**<NOTE: the rest of this is a plot point outline for the rest of the story>**

Kissy flies back to the field to get within the participation area.

Cruiser ignores the field AI and targets the Blood Suns (everyone’s suits light up with incoming danger alerts).

Field AI demonstrates defensive capabilities of a League spaceball field and cripples the attack cruiser with a drone swarm.

League tugboats gate in and remove the cruiser from the area. Three League cruisers gate in and position themselves right near the gate, all weapon ports open and ready. Basically, anything coming through the gate will have to survive a three-sided broadside. Can’t pre-emptively clear them by shooting a torpedo through a gate. Been tried, they never come out. No one knows where they go.

Veeni are fined for delay of game, the bees are replaced with new ones, and the Blood Suns go on to win – even though the Harbingers took advantage during the confusion and scored twice.

Kissy is not penalized, since all violence occurred in neutral space.

Blood Suns are undefeated for the entire season. Only other team to manage that is the Milkmaids.

I can’t believe we’re playing the Milkmaids. The Andosians are always in the Cup Championship game. It’s like, one of the fundamental laws of the universe. The Andosians play for the Cup.

The Milkmaids knocked them out in the playoff round by a single field goal.

Two undefeated teams are meeting for a single game. The vids are saying it’s going to be the bloodiest game ever. They expect deaths. A bloodbath. The League brought in extra communication buoys to relay all of the feeds back through the Gate.

On the plus side, I don’t have to give a stupid speech pumping up the team. Jager’s got that covered.

Due to the Veeni threat still lingering, the *Issari* is present during the game. Kiera didn’t call it, but there is a heavy clan presence around the field. They’re not in the spectator area, which announces that they are ready for a fight.

The Cup Championship Game

The whole shebang led up to this.

Blood Suns face the Milkmaids in the Cup game. Nicci makes short work of the penal colony team’s offense, and Laura adds special defensive capabilities to the suits to prevent damage from blades, bombs, and other debris. Blood Suns are about to squeak out a win, when: every Blood Sun will be revealed to have a short-burst hyperdrive in their suits. Not illegal in game terms, since nobody thought to do that before. It basically allows each suit to teleport a few kilometers in any direction (but not through anything, as one player discovers when they try to travel through Freehaven Station). The chaos created by the tech’s emergence pales in comparison to what happens when the Edochian First Consortium shows up, live on the vid.

The First’s mothership appears. Beane/Tyler (I need to reiterate to the reader about them waaaay before this) show up with their stolen destroyer, and the remainder of Beane’s Phoenix cruisers. Most of the Blood Suns make it onto the destroyer, but some scatter and a few are picked off by the First. A bit of a standoff, as Beane’s ships have enough firepower to significantly weaken the mothership.

Tyler attempts to free the First’s shipmind, but is rebuffed. The First has created some telepathic shielding. Nicci offers her assistance, has been quietly assembling most of her parts within the Cup game’s system. If more of Sysianti’s nodes are within range, her telepathic power increases. Get enough of her together, and she can dominate a Navigator. With her help, Tyler overwhelms the shielding and free’s the First’s shipmind.

The Second Consortium appears. Then the Third. Three Edochian motherships! Live to the universe! With the First’s ship crippled, the Second and Third open fire and destroy it. Then they broadcast a short vid: “the Gates are open to non-military craft, free of charge. Weaponized platforms attempting to use Gates will not appear at their intended destinations – or anywhere else. Interstellar peace, or else. Oh, and do what you want with hyperspace. It’s expensive, dangerous, but go ahead. We will not help you, but we won’t stop you, either.”

Cup Game is over. Shambles. Blood Suns were winning, but most of both teams were lost when the First appeared and started shooting at the players. Game is declared forfeit by both teams. First Championship to go without a winner since the Volorian Plague of 2489 stopped interstellar travel for the last half of the season.

League reinstates Rick’s ban, on grounds of bringing mayhem and death to the sport.

“So, what’s next for you, Coach Stern, now that you’re banned again?”

“Vacation,” I say. I squeeze Laura’s hand, and she squeezes back. “Then, well, I dunno. There’s a sport trying to make a comeback on one of the Rim Colonies that I’d like to try.”

“What’s that?”

“Some crazy shit called golf.”

END