

Oh, Commander! My Commander!
By Shawn Carter

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The cafeteria wasn't any less quiet. Though instead of a cacophony, it was more of a melody that a person could enjoy. Children giggled as they tossed a rubber ball at each other. Their parents sat at tables chatting away about their lives before the war. A group of refugees sat by a tv with news on it. Their glum expressions spoke volumes to what they were witnessing. Veronica could only catch a few words here and there, but what she gathered painted a grim picture. More systems had fallen and new worlds became battlefields. Veronica couldn't catch if the allied forces had gained any amount of ground. If they had, she imagined it was incremental at best. The Nightmares were many, and the Alliance was few and stretched to a breaking point. It was a miracle they could even hold onto the systems they had.

Don't focus on that right now, you must find the commander, Veronica thought as she scanned the crowded tables for anyone resembling what a commander could look like. It would have been nice for Teresa to give her a photo of this man or woman. She didn't have a name either, so Veronica had to go by profiling. So far she hadn't seen anyone that looked like they ran a ship of refugees fleeing from a terrible all-encompassing war. Just disheveled and exhausted people on their last nerves eating. After meandering around with little success she came across a door that read with big bold letters, CREW ONLY. "Finally!" Veronica cheered. A few people looked up from their food and at her. Her cheer had been louder than she attended. "Sorry," Veronica whispered as she reached for the door.

The crew's break room was like the rest of the cafeteria. Though there were many more couches and armchairs. There were a couple of long tables that ran down the middle. As far as Veronica could tell she was the only soul in the room. Apart of her wanted to sit on the couches and just wait for the commander to come. Maybe they were doing their commander duties and hadn't grabbed their lunch yet. Or got sidetracked on something and decided to just skip lunch and go straight to dinner. Veronica had done such a thing more times than she cared to count. The life of a doctor was often all-consuming and offered little breaks. Being on this ship allowed her to step away for a little and smell the roses. "As depressing as that smell is," Veronica whispered as she made her way to the lounge area of the crew's break room. "Is someone there?!" a voice yelled from somewhere. Veronica stopped looked around for the owner of the voice. She couldn't tell if it were a male or female voice. The owner was just far enough away.

Veronica was unsure as to what reply with, "Yes someone is here," was what she came up with. She could hear shuffling in the foreground. A large THUD which was followed by the crashing of silverware onto a metal floor. Veronica winced at the unpleasantness of it. Whoever this person was, they were not coordinated at all. So there Veronica stood in the middle of the

break room waiting for this mystery person to show their face. A part of her hoped it was a man. Like the generic know it all commander who took orders from no one, even from a woman. Though that would get exhausting real quick. If it were a woman, she had no doubt there would be some kind of professional courtesy and the commander would take into consideration what Veronica was asking her. One thing she knew for certain, this person was a Normal, and she had no way of knowing how they took to Shadows in general. Veronica turned as the footsteps grew closer.

“Sorry. I thought I was the only person here. The rest of my crew had left to either the bridge or whatever post they were assigned too,” Veronica just nodded as she faced the man. He wore a typical military dress with a patchwork of medals on his left breast. He was well kept together and took whatever his job was serious enough. His eyes were a bit droopy and skin a bit pale, but that was ship life. Veronica couldn’t guess the last time this man had seen an actual sun. “So, what brings a Shadow to the crew break room?” this man didn’t beat around the bush. Already Veronica was impressed. He didn’t seem intimidated or buffing his chest to show his superiority to her. Instead, he was indifferent and was curious as to why someone of her kind would grace him with their presents at all.

“Well, I’m here to speak with the commander of the ship. I have orders from the Saint herself to give,” sounding so official irked Veronica. It sounded like she was just moments away from taking command of the ship. When in reality she had no intention or desire too. To his credit, he just stood there in shock.

“The Saint has orders for me? Should I feel blessed or inconvenient? Or a little of both?” the commander pondered his predicament as Veronica gathered her thoughts.

“Probably both, if I had to guess,” the commander shrugged with indifference. “I am sorry where are my manners,” Veronica extended her hand “I’m Veronica.”

“Steve,” Steve replied as he shook her hand. “The previous commander was transferred to another ship and well my ship was the first destroyed during the Nightmaric invasion,” his eyes fell to the ground and his face softened. “So Fleet Command transferred me here as temporary commander until we get to a transfer station,” just as fast as it appeared, his expression became joyful again. Veronica had seen his kind before. Always using optimism and positivity as armor. It was all people like him had during times like these. Most of her colleagues would have found Steve’s optimism infuriating, Veronica found it adorable. Not everyone needed to share their cynical and pessimistic view of the galaxy.

“Pleasure to meet you, Steve,” Veronica moved her hand away and back to her side. “The Saint wants to redirect this vessel to another fleet that will then escort you to a system that will take in the refugees,” Steve just took it all and shrugged.

“Sounds simple enough. I’ve heard about pirates raiding cruisers such as ours. So I appreciate The Saint concern for our safety,” he didn’t say it, but Veronica understood. The pirates didn’t scare this veteran many wars. It was the Nightmaric army. Officially the missing refugee cruisers were raided by pirates and the people taken as slaves and sold to the highest bidder. Unofficially

being raided by pirates would have been a more pleasurable fate. The shadows did their best to patrol and protect but cracks had begun to form. The increased “raids” were always a sign of an invasion. It wasn’t uncommon the first wave to be the refugees who had wished to find a home in that world. Persephone shared the same sense of humor as her parents. To see living people as just cattle and not breathing sentient beings. It sickened Veronica to the core of her being. “You have anything else?” Steve’s question shook Veronica from her stupor. She unclenched her fist she hadn’t noticed was clenched.

“Nope. That’s it,” Veronica replied as she handed him the coordinates and made for the exit. Some would have considered it rude to just leave without saying some sort of goodbye. Veronica didn’t agree with a lot of kinds of ways, but leaving abruptly was one she agreed with. Small talk after the initial discussion was always draining and boring. The Normals loved talking about nonsense. Most of her colleagues would just ignore and brush them aside. Sometimes Veronica would listen, but right now she wanted to visit the ship’s infirmary.

“ I’ll head to the bridge and punch in the coordinates.”

“You do that,” Veronica smiled as she stepped out and into the loud cafeteria once more.