

Assignment Day

Conrad slid his palms down the front of his Intellicorp Trainee jumpsuit. The weight of his hands failed to smooth its abundance of wrinkles. The jumpsuit was loose on him to begin with and its black and grey pattern only made his skin seem paler. His dark, thick hair hung below his ears. Most of his face was hidden beneath patches of stubble. He was waiting for his terminal to load. It was one of a dozen holo-screens lining the starboard wall of the SS Polaris' second deck.

"Conrad Peterson. Age twenty. Trainee. Date of established membership: January 15th, 2210. Intellicorp believes your duties are pertinent to the intergalactic success of this vessel. What can I do for you?" hummed the AI of holo-screen number two.

"I'd like to access the news station for Vale Compound on Euruta in the Hadrin Solar System." Conrad readjusted the collar of his jumpsuit.

"Shall I use the same query code as yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Give me one moment while I establish a link." After several moments, the projected lightfield turned bright red.

"Connection unavailable. There seems to be a problem with the host. Searching for alternative, relevant broadcasts." Conrad began rocking forwards and backwards on the balls of his feet.

The lightfield took the shape of a large desk with two humans seated behind it. Their representations were crude and featureless. Conrad bit the insides of his cheeks as he listened.

“Breaking News! The Vale Compound Administrative Forces, or VCAF, has had a satellite laser aimed at the planet’s core for the past century. They have repeatedly made threats against the lives of their Vale Compound subordinates. Today we have received reports that the radical group has destroyed the planet Euruta and all of its inhabitants.” The color drained from Conrad’s face.

“That’s right, Addison. The VCAF has done this in response to the beginnings of a revolution lead by common civilians.”

“We have recovered footage of -”

“Turn it off. Please, turn it off.” Conrad said. He was pacing in front of the terminal, sinking his teeth deeper into the insides of his cheeks.

“Broadcast connection severed. Do you have any other business?”

“No.”

“I will now log out of your profile, Conrad. Good luck on Assignment Day!

Remember: you matter to Intelli -”

“Mhm.” Conrad jammed his hands into his pockets and hurried back to his bunk.

Each trainee aboard the ship was given a private space just big enough to fit a bed and desk. Only those who were placed in managerial roles had the luxury of a porthole that looked out into space. Despite the limitations of his bunk, he still found ways to be inventive. He had saved every star map folded into the back of each issue of

“The Intergalactic Wanderer,” an obscure comic book series, and taped them to the walls of his room. He had arranged them to mimic the star patterns of the Hadrun Solar System. This was the only portion of his room that elicited any sense of order. His floor was decorated with dirty Trainee jumpsuits. His desk served as a display shelf for sticky coffee mugs and crumpled notebook pages. His luggage remained in one corner, open and face down over several pairs of sweatpants and graphic tees.

Conrad pushed the “activate door” button outside of his room. The door slid open with a sharp hiss. He flipped over his suitcase and unzipped a hidden interior pocket. He pulled out a set of silver dog tags. They had “VALE COMPOUND. OCCUPANT NUMBER 56009. BLOODLINE: PENELOPE & GERALD PETERSON” punched into their smooth surface. Conrad clutched them close to his chest and sat on his bed. He stared at the names of his parents and ran his thumb over the bumps that the letters made in the metal.

A second hiss blared from the doorway. Rushing through its frame was a short woman with dark skin and long, tight curls. She had unzipped the torso of her jumpsuit and folded it backwards so that it hung behind her. She was wearing a standard issue white tank top that exposed her muscular arms and broad shoulders. Embroidered on the front of the garment was “Vee Whitaker.”

“Conrad, what did you find out?”

Conrad looked up at her and opened his mouth. After a few silent moments he closed it and fixed his gaze on the dog tags in his hands. The corners of his eyes were

wet. Vee walked over and sat next to him on the bed. She placed her hand between his shoulder blades and waited for him to speak.

“VCAF destroyed Euruta. They destroyed Euruta and everything on it.”

“What about your pare -”

“Dead.”

Vee took her hand off of Conrad’s back and swung her legs gently back and forth.

“Do you have any nice memories of them?”

“My Mom always wore red lipstick. She came to every single one of my jet vessel races. She sat in the front row even though all the noise hurt her ears.” Conrad’s mouth twitched upwards into a faint smile.

“Haha, even though you never won?”

“Yeah. Part of me feels like she only came to make sure that I didn’t crash into the track walls or another racer.”

“What about your Dad?”

“He worked a lot so we weren’t really that close. Sometimes in the mornings we would do word puzzles together.”

“It’s important to keep them alive in your thoughts.” Vee said. Conrad put the dog tags in a pile on his pillow. He put his hands on his knees.

“I remember the look on Mom’s face when she heard the news about the Peace Treaty. She wouldn’t stop crying and dancing around the kitchen. She brought home the Ownership Transfer Application for me to fill out the very next day.”

“Was there a lot of competition?”

“Of course there was. The lines to turn in the paperwork stretched the entire length of the compound. I was one of only five hundred Vale Compound residents that were ‘gifted’ to Intellicorp.”

“You’re incredibly lucky.”

“I didn’t deserve any of this.” Conrad put his head in his hands.

They sat together in silence for a long while. Vee kept looking over at his hunched figure and then looking away. Eventually, she rose from the bed, picked up the set of dog tags and put the chain around Conrad’s neck. She turned around to leave his bunk.

“Thank you, Vee.” Conrad said.

She looked back at him over her shoulder once more and then left. Conrad tucked the tags underneath the front of his jumpsuit so that they touched his chest. He lied down, hugging his knees. A short, sharp ring blasted from the intercom speakers mounted on the ceiling.

“Happy Assignment Day, trainees! Your new life with Intellicorp starts at precisely this moment. Please proceed to the Assignment Bay where your future awaits you.”

Conrad closed his eyes and let the sound of the announcement wash over him. He could hear the sea of excited trainee foot falls rushing down the hall. He felt the rhythm of their steps through his whole body as they shook his bunk. He listened to their intensity fade and ultimately vanish. His dog tags were cool against his skin. He pulled them out from underneath his jumpsuit and pressed his lips to them. He uncurled his

body and stood up. He walked out the door and down the hallway, one foot in front of the other.