

On the Emperor's Account

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SHEVRAN METADATA

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Introduction

Chapter 1

Boarding

The *Debrovech* was easily the biggest ship I'd ever been assigned to. As our shuttle cruised into the docking bay, I realized an entire frigate could probably fit comfortably inside and still have room left over for a shuttle or two. "How many people on this thing?" I asked Commissioner Sarize, my voice slightly fainter than I'd have liked.

"Eight hundred and twenty," she replied. "Half of that's crew; three captains, eighty-three command staff, three hundred general service; the rest are marines, ground troops – y'know, my people."

"Lord Benedir does not fuck around," I muttered. "Suddenly I feel all provincial."

Sarize grinned and punched me in the shoulder. "You still haven't been assigned to a house majoris I take it. When they go and put you in a carrier for the first time, that's when you can talk to me about feeling provincial."

I shivered. "We'll see if they ever put me up that high."

Sarize shrugged. "They wouldn't have started bumping you up the ranks if you weren't useful. There's a good half of the Office doesn't even ever make it shipboard, and once they take you off frigate duty they're going to keep moving you up."

Our shuttle had crossed the border of the airlock, and strobing lights lit up the catwalks as the massive iron doors began grinding shut. The Mentex Megascale logo glinted cheerily up from the floor of the bay where it had been chiseled in the concrete and illuminated with bronze plating.

"That was my fourth commission," I said. "They had me attached to a House Tilippe rustbucket doing supply duty between one godforsaken backwater and another godforsaken backwater. The crew was a nightmare; I spent most of my commission wanting to shoot everyone aboard."

"Harlots, woman; whose daughter did you screw to get landed there?"

"Oh shut up. Fifteen years later and I can still remember that ship's ID. *Seven-eight-seven-bena-hera-cas*," I recited, shuddering. "I lost track of how many 'accidents' almost got me killed. After a while I started making sure I had one of the Guard with me whenever I left my quarters."

"Heads up." Sarize steadied herself. "We're about to dock."

I loosened my hold on the rails, pushing my feet away from the bulkhead. The tremor of impact came moments later, battering against the hand I still kept on the railing. Sarize kept her position with surprising elegance, holding her own against inertia with only a few, barely visible twinges of muscle against the rails; I of course struggled not to smack headfirst into the viewplate.

"All hands," called the pilot over the tinny intercom, "docking clamps secure. Shipboard time is one-seven-one-three, end of the third shift; airlock will be repressurized in ten."

"For a shuttle, it hasn't been a bad ship," I said. Judging from the carpeting and how unusually soft the seats were, I'd guessed it had belonged to some civvie merchant in a past life, before it got impounded for contraband and got pawned off to the Commission. I'd debated setting up my office aboard, but decided it wouldn't be worth the massive enterprise of software wrangling it would take to set up the interlink hardlines I'd need for classified data access, and anyway looking like you're ready to bolt isn't a great way to get on the crew's good side.

That didn't mean I wouldn't keep the ship well-stocked in case me or Sarize pissed the wrong people off. Of course I still wasn't sure who the ship actually belonged to; it'd been foisted on the two of us together and there wasn't clear protocol for who got to keep the thing for the duration of our assignment. She was the more senior of us, but then again I was in charge of the spacers which put ships more in my domain than hers – I made a mental note to call Garhech once all the pleasantries were taken care of and see if he had any idea; I hadn't found an etiquette question yet that would stump the canny old bastard.

That said, in the two weeks I'd spent with Sarize I'd decided I'd liked her, so if there were any mutinies I probably wasn't going to leave her in the lurch one way or the other.

Sarize nodded. "Clearly the justiciariat was too lazy to rip out all the cushions before they passed it on."

I grinned. It was always nice to find a good healthy hatred of the justiciariat in my fellow commissioners. "Terrible oversight, that."

"Do you have any preference for the meet-and-greet?" Sarize asked. "I don't want to step on your toes if you have a particular way you prefer to play it."

"Uh, not really sure," I admitted. "I know they'll probably send up an off-duty captain; is the company commander likely to show up too?"

"Be very poor form not to," said Sarize.

"So we'll both have our groups. Spacers outrank everyone when you're on a ship, so I should probably take the lead." I grimaced. "I'm sorry, this seniority setup is going to be awkward, isn't it?"

"Oh absolutely," said Sarize. "Don't worry, I'm not going to make a fuss about protocol unless you *severely* fuck up."

"I'll try not to."

Someone rapped on the port. Sarize glanced at me; I nodded. "Enter!" she called.

The port swung back and my porter, Sibir Rhévech, poked his head in. He saluted sharply. "Ready to deboard, miladies. Your kit's been packed and the housing staff are ready to receive."

I nodded. "Very good, Sibir. The usual precautions?"

He shook his head. "Housing got cranky when we asked. Orders would have to come down from a captain to the shipmaster and get routed through IT."

I sighed. "I'll take care of it then."

"Very good, ma'am."

"That'll be all."

Integrating our staffs during the flight had been a difficult job, and after staring at the problem for a few minutes me and Sarize came to the unspoken mutual agreement that we'd let them figure it out themselves, which I suppose was lazy of us but it gave the underlings something to occupy themselves on the flight. In the end they'd resolved it through a traditional combination of seniority, bragging, dice rolls, drinking games, and drunken brawls, which are always fun to watch in zero-G. Sarize's porter had put up a spectacular fight but Sibir had Persivan's own liver and in the end Porter Fyaloat Itízvech Gírecvech had hit the floor first. After drinking that much brýset he probably still had a headache.

I fished my uniform jacket out of the locker in the debarkation room, and pulled it over my shoulders. It was a ridiculous outfit, emblazoned with every symbol of the Empire and House Barendya the designers had been able to find in a dozen history docs, along with some very impressive naval rank insignia. Sarize gazed bemusedly in my direction.

"You're actually going to wear that?"

"Aren't you?"

"Fuck no. I haven't touched the damn thing in years." Sarize yanked the uniform off my shoulders. "Stick to something simple. You wear a uniform, you're telling the soldiers you play by their rules. Take it off and you own your authority. It's a simple thing but it makes a difference in how they look at you."

"I'll give it a try." I tossed the jacket back in the locker, and pointed a stern finger. "Any mutinies are on you, though."

Sarize snorted. "If the crew's full of picky fashion critics, we're doomed either way."

I studied my reflection in the hullmetal for a moment. My sarena was white, contrasting sharply with the black halflet and skirt, and I wasn't sure how well it worked — it might come across as bold and striking, or it make me look like the brooding hormonal adolescent I'd been when I first adopted the style. "How do I look?"

"Dead sexy," said Sarize. I snorted.

"You're awful."

"How often do we even have someone around we're allowed to fraternise with?" She winked. "I'm not letting a chance like this go to waste."

"So you're awful *and* desperate, gotcha."

"With expensive taste in wine."

The airlock creaked as the inner port swung open. Instinctively I bent my foot toward my hand, checking my boot for the small heatknife I habitually kept sheathed.

"The name," murmured Sarize, glancing at me. "Do you know whose it is?"

"Sorry?" I made as if to scratch at my foot; Sarize didn't look fooled for a second.

"Oh, I mean the *Debrovech*," she said. "Do you know who it's named after?"

“Some Rhyschean religious figure,” I replied. “Son of some prophet or other. Lots of the Benedir ships have names like that; I think the Count says he’s descended from Rhyschea herself, so.”

“Oh, is *that* why the whole sector’s Rhys’? I didn’t pick up on that.”

I smiled faintly. “You know anything about House Cenegon?”

“I know they’re out on the marches, not anything else, though.”

“The whole sector’s been on the brink of a civil war for ages. The Damcyards and Rhys’ are constantly trying to get one leg up on the other and people have got pretty bitter. It got to the point that they had to start segregating the fleet on religious lines to keep mutinies down; I wound up, because of course I did, on the very last ship in the fleet with a mixed crew.”

“Ohh.” Sarize winced. “That must have been a fun ride.”

The hiss of hydraulics and the flash of warning lights told us the outer airlock was about to open. I beckoned to our Guard complement to head out first; it was never hurt to give the rabble some shiny rifles to stare at.

“I put down three mutinies that year. I’m in the habit of keeping track of who’s with what church nowadays.”

Once the Guard had taken up their place outside the airlock, I gripped the rails next to the portal and launched myself after them. It’s impossible to look dignified in zero-G by a groundpounder’s estimation — I’d given that up as a lost cause years ago — but spacers had their own peculiar standards and I’d spent a long time learning the little twists and flourishes that were the free-fall equivalent of swaggering. I took a deep breath as we floated into the hangar; the air was bitter and industrial, unpleasantly reminiscent of home.

As we floated out of our airlock, the captain and the major saluted crisply.

The captain and the major had decided to try and make a good show of it themselves. Thirty spacers hovered at attention on one side of the chamber, thirty troopers, marines and groundpounders both, on the other, five or six meters beneath the command staff. I wasn’t sure how to read that yet; either the brass were eager to show their respects to representatives of the Emperor or they wanted to make it clear who had the most muscle behind them. Either way, the contrast between the two parties was stark: most of the spacers were marked by bulky arms and chests, with slim, atrophied legs speaking to years of disuse; the troopers, on the other hand, were all muscle, their bodies preserved from void sickness by exercise and stimulants. I realized to my delight that if there was a garrison of ground troops aboard, there would be gravchambers aboard I could use, which would save me some precious credits in recovery treatments the next time I was planetside.

“Captain.” I returned the salute, a bit more lazily. “Commissioner Verane Alochinzha Zypovezha, spacecorps attaché.”

“Welcome aboard the *Debrovech*, ma’am. Captain Ealirt Ealirtvech Pýrhvech, second shift commander.”

“Commissioner Sarize Bemyózha Joaltse,” announced Sarize, “army attaché.”

“Major Gejal Árisvech Oavinvech,” said the major, inclining his head. “Welcome aboard, ma’am. If you’d come this way?”

Sarize nodded. “Lead the way, Major.” They floated off towards the halls, Sarize’s

retinue following closely behind.

“I’m sure it’s been a long journey,” said Ealirt. “I would like to formally extend an invitation to dine in the captain’s mess with the senior third-shift command staff before the custodians show you to your quarters—”

“That can wait,” I interrupted, waving him away. “I’d like to jump right in, get up to speed as soon as I can. I’d like to go over some details with you right away, if you wouldn’t mind showing me to your office.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Ealirt saluted again.

I glanced toward our ship in search of my retinue, and nearly had a heart attack. The full vastness of the docking bay stretched away behind it, in what would have been a several hundred foot drop if there had been any gravity aboard. With a huge effort I managed not to show any outward sign of distress, and beckoned to my retinue.

“—eating makes her feel sick, she’s very thin compared to most Imperials of her class

—It was a sobering reminder that for all the size and power behind this cruiser, it would take a Thalisan ship ten seconds to tear the superstructure to pieces and kill every living thing on board, before our weapons could even scratch their hull paint. Mentex had tried to build a more decentralized design with thicker bulkheads and independent generators; when it finally went into battle in the ’08 Skirmishes the Mark Two lasted a whole twenty seconds against a Thalisan midrange before there weren’t any guns left to fire.