

# Poshlost

by Robert Hansen

The faraday vault was a converted janitorial locker. Originally intended to store equipment and a dozing petty officer, it, like most other spaces aboard the *Nain Singh Rawat*, had been overhauled in a rush when things went pear-shaped a few months ago. Even as the *Rawat* was picking up survivors from the late *Meriwether Lewis*, Fleet infotechs were stripping the locker to the bulkheads, yanking every netjack, cutting every datapipe, rerouting every power conduit, and then wallpapering it in layers of mesh: copper, room-temperature superconductor, and some metallic red scrim they weren't cleared to know about. By the time they were finished the room was even more secure than the classified documents vault it was part of, immune to conventional surveillance and even counterfactual quantum methods.

Spending time in the faraday vault was almost a form of torture. Janitorial implements had been replaced with a desk, a locked safe, a chair, a wastebasket: atop the desk, a notebook filled with elegant Cyrillic script and a nub of pencil—and not much else. Instead of life support being piped in by the ship's airplant, an emergency portable unit hummed quietly from atop the desk. Illumination came from chemlights that filled the space in harsh greens and razor-crisp shadows.

The wastebasket was half full of spent quarter-hour chemlights: the man sitting at the desk had been there a while.

He'd spent so long waiting for a knock on the vault that he didn't trust himself when he heard it. Ships made lots of strange clanking noises, after all; was this another? It wasn't until the vault opened and the full-spectrum light of the space outside flooded in that he realized it was real.

He tried to rise until he was stopped both by his shattered pelvis and a call of, "Don't you dare rise."

Instead, he straightened in his wheelchair. "Attention on deck!" he called out.

Commander Gae Jang-mi stepped into the vault, looking around at the austere and surreal environment. "Lieutenant Modi, I don't think there's room for three. Lock us in." Her English was flawless, even if it was a bit odd to hear a Korean woman with a South African accent.

Modi's response was automatic, as it was for any Marine given a direct order. "Aye aye, ma'am." The steel hatch shut with a heavy clank. Gae let the regulation ten seconds pass to allow the outside team time to ensure the vault was surveillance-proof before she spoke to the man she was sharing the room with.

"Marine First Lieutenant Arkady Ily'ich Golinov. Are you in good health, lieutenant?"

Golinov gave as crisp a nod as could be asked for. "Yes ma'am. Recovering, ma'am."

"Do you need food, water, a visit to the head?"

"No ma'am."

“As you were, then.”

Golinov settled back into his wheelchair with the artificially crisp movements the Marines had inculcated. “Thank you, commander.”

Gae lifted a hand to run through her short hair. Golinov couldn’t help but think she looked nervous. “You look better-composed than I am, lieutenant,” she offered with a hint of a smile. Gae doled out emotional reactions with a teaspoon; this was an unusual degree of frankness for her.

Golinov gave a wan smile of his own in return. “What is it Texans say? ‘Not my first rodeo.’” A brief moment passed. “Commander. What happened was not your fault.”

“I know. Thank you.”

“So it is final, then? Investigation concluded? Decision reached?” His English enunciation was excellent, but his grammar lagged behind: if Russian lacked a certain part of speech, his English command of it was spotty.

“Yes.” The single word weighed heavily in the tight confines of the vault.

Golinov took it stoically. “I understand. When?”

“Once I take your final statement, lieutenant.”

“I have prepared it.” Golinov picked up the notebook and handed it off to the commander, who looked puzzled as she leafed through the pages.

“I don’t read Russian, lieutenant.”

“I understand. You must get linguists to read it before delivery.”

Gae’s look to Golinov escalated from puzzled to confused. A few seconds passed as she thought it through, then rapped on the vault hatch with her knuckles. The petty officer who opened it wished she hadn’t; Gae’s look was a hull-breach. “Mister Modi!”

Modi appeared in a few seconds. “Yes, Commander.”

“You received a directive an hour ago.” The rest of the crew in the office beyond the vault immediately began to studiously pay no attention. A civilian might not notice a difference between *Mister* Modi and *Lieutenant* Golinov, but to the Navy the difference in titles was a strong signal the sanitation conduit was about to get rerouted through the airplant. By long-standing Naval custom, junior commissioned officers were entitled to their rank only at the pleasure of their superiors.

The difference was not lost on Modi. The immaculate Indian did the only thing one can do when faced with an angry officer: agree with everything. “Yes, Commander.”

“Why has it not been followed?”

“Begging your pardon, ma’am, but your orders have not yet been read.” Gae’s look of annoyance was sufficient to convince Modi to tack on an explanation. “It came with a FARADAY handling instruction, and the vault—”

A petty officer with more courage than sense handed an envelope and a sheaf of old-time paper photographs to Modi. Most of the time envelopes were e-paper with fonts, artwork, and even video clips containing specific instructions. This one, though, was metal foil with ominous words written on a shipping label:

**TOP SECRET**  
**SPORTING-FAIRCRIKET**  
**FARADAY**

Gae took the envelope from Modi as he was still talking. “—is in use—” was the last he made out as she slammed the hatch. She placed a hand on the bulkhead for a moment, leaning on it as she collected her thoughts a moment. Then, turning to the still-silent lieutenant behind the desk, she spoke.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Three days ago...*

The physical training center aboard the *Rawat* was further proof the god of the League Navy hated Marines. The naval PTC was concerned with making sure troops were able to pass physical fitness requirements and counter some of the health effects of micro- and low-gravity, and consisted of a few treadmills and weight machines that were kept sparkling by the professionalism of the chiefs; the Marine PTC was concerned with providing enough gravity to let them retain their ability to fight and win in all manner of gravity levels, and the gunnies tended to think it needed to look more like a professional fighting ring. On top of that, ever since the recovery of so many souls off the lost *Meriwether Lewis*, it had been converted into also serving as living quarters for the few souls who stretched hammocks in the shoothouse and tried to ignore the boisterous Marines.

The Marine PTC was completely inadequate for habitation: it qualified by dint of the current emergency and the fact it had room to hold people. After all, it was a converted cargo module that sat alongside the spinning *Rawat*, connected by graphene cables the thickness of spider silk to a spinning ring that belted the ship’s hull, counterweighted by an equal mass tethered to the other side of the vessel. It was too far from the ship to fall within the artificial gravity field, but centrifugal force worked just as well. A pressurized umbilical ran between the PTC and the *Rawat*, with cargo netting strung along the walls. Each Marine each day had to climb hundreds of meters of netting to reach the PTC; each hated each second of it; they hated even more hearing the *Lewis* survivors grousing about it.

It could be brought in closer to the *Rawat* or extended further away in order to adjust apparent gravities, Coriolis forces, and the like, to whatever the Marines needed for practice. But no matter what, the journey back mocked them at the end of each workout. On the plus side, there wasn’t a squid in the League who’d

make that climb voluntarily, so the PTC was in effect a Marine-only berth, an answer to the League Navy's goat locker.

This made that day's visitor all the more significant.

"Attention on deck!" came the leather-lunged call from someone in the physical training center. The *Rawat's* complement of Marines—a lone squad of nine men and one woman—clamored to their feet from their weight benches, dropped off their chin-up bars, or abruptly ended their sparring. None were in proper dress: Marines allowed individuals some latitude in PT attire, with most wearing shorts and T-shirts from prior postings.

Over at the combat mats a powerfully-built man in a black *judogi* was getting his cerebral bloodflow altered by a blonde woman half his size whose *judogi* was patterned on the rainbow pride flag. At the call to attention she released the sleeve choke she'd been holding and tapped her partner, who gave a thumbs-up to indicate he was okay. She then rose to attention, and he followed a few seconds later.

As such, he was the last to reach attention, and the last to realize the commander herself was standing beside the combat mats, looking specifically at him. A Navy warrant officer stood beside her, a tall brunette woman with the lanky ranginess of a devoted athlete: she'd never be a ballerina, but was murder in a racquetball court.

Once the man in the black *judogi* reached attention Gae looked around at the other Marines. "Give us the room," she directed, although not rudely.

They sounded off in a crisp, unified, "aye aye, ma'am!" and left for the locker room in a well-ordered line; the woman in the rainbow *judogi* was kind enough to throw him a smile, along with a towel from the bin by the door, on her way out.

Golinov mopped his face and did his best to appear dignified. "Commander Gae. It is pleasurable to see you."

A faint smile tugged at Gae's mouth. "Lieutenant Golinov. Did we save you from that mean old Marine?"

"Sergeant Valentijn holds certification of instructor in judo and gives me education."

"An instructor's certificate, lieutenant, and she's giving you an education," the athletic woman beside Gae spoke up.

"Ms. Osokina!" Gae reproached. Unlike with commissioned officers, as a warrant officer Osokina was entitled to no rank at all, just "Ms. Osokina".

Golinov raised his athletic-taped hands, palms-out. "Is okay, commander, is okay. I asked her, please help me with my English. When I bungle grammar, she corrects me. She is doing me favor." He looked over towards the warrant officer, giving her a polite nod of thanks. "Thank you, Kseniya Nikolayevna."

Osokina gave a brief, professional smile in return. "Mishka."

Gae looked at Osokina quizzically. “Ms. Osokina—”

“Is okay, commander, is okay,” Golinov answered. “She is not being informal.”

“She’s calling you by a Russian diminutive.”

“Begging pardon, commander. No, she is not. I am Arkady Ily’ich. She is calling me Mishka.”

Gae gave a look that urged Golinov to get to the point.

“*Mishka* means ‘bear’. Is my radio identifier: ‘Bear’.”

Gae looked up against centrifugal force’s pull. “You’re the Russian bear. I hate puns.”

“I apologize, commander. Where were we? Yes, you saved me from mean Sergeant Valentijn.”

Osokina’s smile lingered about a second more than was strictly appropriate, but fortunately Gae didn’t see it. “With me, lieutenant,” she commanded before turning to walk into the shoothouse, Osokina following discreetly behind. “Regs say all temporary quarters must be inspected weekly.”

“Yes ma’am. Regulations must be adhered to, deviation can mean death.”

“Because space is an unforgiving environment. Lieutenant, how old are you?” Gae asked as they stepped into the mock CIC. She didn’t look at him as she referred to a tablet and studied the room, occasionally checking off an item with a stylus.

“Twenty-five, ma’am.”

Gae continued her inspection for another minute before she spoke next. “Does the PTC have fire suppression, lieutenant?”

“Yes ma’am, vapor flooding, vacuum blow as backup.”

“Those require sufficient emergency oxygen bottles for the crew.”

“Yes ma’am, we stockpiled extra for our guests.”

“Thank you, lieutenant, I hate cutting deviation-from-spec orders. And the datapipe to the *Rawat* is...?”

“Two optical fiber links running in umbilical, ma’am.”

“I’m Navy, lieutenant, not Marines, you don’t have to end every sentence with ‘ma’am’.”

Golinov paused, then settled on a polite, “Thank you.”

“Two links in the same umbilical. Housing requires two datalinks running in two different umbilicals. So that’s been out-of-spec for weeks. I solemnly swear it’s a wonder we’re not all dead.”

“Lack of second umbilical that much of health risk?” It took an effort for Golinov to override his ‘ma’am’ reflex.

“No, lieutenant, the fact the deviation-from-spec authorization hasn’t been cut for a month. I’m pretty sure the Fleet sends pirates and ninjas after you for that.” Gae made another note on the tablet. “Your jacket says this is your first tour after Space Operations School. Prior to that was the Great Unpleasantness at the Old Maw; going back further, Advanced Ground Infantry School and Ground Infantry School.”

He nodded.

“I never asked. You went from the Old Maw to the Starmarines. How did you pull that one off?”

“Already had orders cut for SOS prior to Old Maw.” Golinov’s voice was as calm and even as if he was discussing the morning coffee in the mess.

“Ah. And the Marines didn’t change those orders?”

“No ma’am.”

Gae’s voice was perhaps a slight bit more understanding than normally. Almost. If so, it was nearly imperceptible. “We’re very glad they didn’t, Arkady Ily’ich. You did excellent work on the *Lewis* recovery. History will remember you honorably, when the time comes it can be told.”

“Yes ma’am.” The morning coffee was apparently unremarkable.

“As well as at the Old Maw.”

Silence ensued for several seconds before he interrupted it with, “Permission to speak freely?”

“Go ahead, lieutenant.”

“I do not think you came all this way to chat. Or to inspect quarters.”

Gae tucked the tablet under her arm and turned to face Golinov, smiling. “I did not. But I like to know all my officers, lieutenant, and I don’t know you. You can read a Marine’s personnel jacket but it doesn’t replace looking them in the eye. And this provided some cover for our conversation.”

“Could read court-martial transcript.”

“I stopped after the word ‘acquitted’.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Of course the mess over-roasted the coffee. They always over-roast the coffee.

“So, induction, GIS, AGIS, SOS. You’re a Starmarine: a hostile-environment close-quarters specialist entitled to the dagger and fourragere. You *correctly* relieved Colonel Sun of command at the Old Maw during the uprising, were *acquitted* of mutiny, led a matter-transmit run to retake the *Lewis*’ CIC, succeeded, lost your arm in the process, had a new one cloned in sickbay, and just now have been fully cleared to return to duty. You’re twenty-five years old and apparently cannot be killed by conventional weapons.”

Golinov said nothing: it didn’t seem as if he should do otherwise.

“Word is Valentijn fights dirty.”

“Only with black belts.”

“So that’s a ‘yes’.”

“I admire her devotion to ancient honorable art of cheating.”

Osokina, standing behind Gae, bit down on her knuckle to suppress a laugh. Gae was apparently unamused. “You’ve been helping Lieutenant Modi stand watches?”

“Since being medically re-cleared, yes, ma’am.”

“Why do we have two Marine lieutenants on board?”

“I do not know, commander.”

“Guess.”

“PersComm is mysterious bureaucracy and weeps bitterly at idea of me in comfortable station posting and nice bachelor officer quarters?”

Osokina’s face contorted briefly as she stifled a laugh. Gae had no such difficulty. “Personnel Command is indeed a mysterious bureaucracy and they hate Marines, lieutenant, yes. But that’s not why we had three lieutenants aboard for a while.”

The death of Lieutenant Carrie Carson a few days prior brought a halt to the conversation for a few seconds. “She was a fine officer,” Osokina offered after a few heartbeats’ pause, finally breaking her silence. “Hell of a thing, to survive getting the *Lewis* getting blown out from beneath her, to die here—”

“—She’d want us to move on,” Gae answered, but not unkindly. “Lieutenant, ship’s computer is currently recording your statements. On the basis of your achievements you’ve been selected for a classified project, SPORTING, and your subproject will be FAIRCRIKET. Do you acknowledge these new projects and accesses, and your continuing obligation to protect information that if released may grievously harm the League and all humanity?”

“I do.”

“Stop recording, end surveillance,” Gae narrated to the ship’s computer. “Lieutenant, welcome to hell. I’m glad you’re with us. We’re going to need a Starmarine by the end of this. Hit the showers and meet me in the classified documents vault in one hour.”

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[SCENE OMITTED]

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The wastebasket in the faraday vault was empty. Commander Gae took the seat behind the desk and opened a drawer to reveal a bin full of chemlights. She took one, peeled it free of its packaging, shook it to bring it to life. This one was a pleasing natural-daylight blend. “You ever heard of FARADAY handling, lieutenant?”

Golinov, now standing in a Marine work uniform with a Scratchard knife hanging at his belt, stood in front of the desk. The faraday vault was so small there was only room for one chair. “No, ma’am.”

She nodded, crumpled up the chemstick packaging, and lightly tossed it into a recycling bin. “Up until last week I hadn’t, either. You’re familiar with how classified materials work in the League Navy, yes?”

“Commander.” He delivered it in the tone suggesting he was almost professionally offended.

Gae raised one hand in a gesture of placation, and a trace of good humor lit up her smile. “Let’s pretend this is your six-month refresher, lieutenant. Classified materials are rated according to the damage the information could do if released, the groups responsible for maintaining and disseminating the information, and the specific rules for how it should be handled. Some things can be sent in the clear, some require encrypted traffic, some have to be couriered and can’t be sent over the radio. You know the drill. FARADAY is a special handling procedure. The meaning of FARADAY is simple: ‘this material is so sensitive it must not be spoken of, read, reviewed, or stored, within a hundred meters of an electronic device.’”

Golinov did a double-take. “Commander?”

Gae nodded. “I get it. ‘Commander, this is a starship, everything here is an electronic device.’ That means FARADAY materials are a cast-iron bitch for us. Since we don’t have anywhere like that, we’ve rigged up this vault. The entire vault is a faraday cage. You know what a faraday cage is, lieutenant?” Golinov knew the question was rhetorical: he nodded in the affirmative, but Gae went on regardless. “It’s basically a metal box that keeps every kind of electromagnetic energy outside. It’s a great way to ensure we’re not being surveilled. Unfortunately, it’s also, as you can tell, not a place you want to spend a lot of time.”

Golinov gave a crisp nod. “I understand.”

“Oh, no, lieutenant. Not yet you don’t.” Gae opened a drawer to pull out a shallow rectangular box perhaps fifteen centimeters by five. “You ever heard of a wristwatch?”

“No, ma’am.”

“You’re going to be isolated from the ship’s network. No comms, no voice commands, no informational assets. You can’t even ask the system what time it is, because there are no microphones inside. Before the information era people used to keep track of time with mechanical timepieces they’d strap to their wrists. Some of the best were made for the Royal Navy by the Cabot Watch Company. I had the repair crews fire up the three-d printers and make you one.”

She placed the box back in the drawer, closed it, then turned to the safe. “Have you ever seen a combination lock, lieutenant? No electronics, just mechanical tumblers. I’ll get you the numeric sequence you’ll need to remember to open this.” She took hold of the dial, rotated it one way and the other, and twisted the handle. Much like a miniature vault the heavy safe door opened, revealing a stack of paper inside.

She handed it off to him. “This is almost like *book*,” Golinov scowled. “Very nice sitting on bookshelf, bric-a-brac, you know. I never thought actually ever use it.”

“It’s not electronic and it’s hard to surveil it,” Gae answered. “The full briefing is in there. Lieutenant, this is the *only* room in which you will review your orders, the *only* room in which you’ll write FARADAY reports. And everything connected to FAIRCRIKET is under FARADAY rules.”

Golinov nodded. “What is FAIRCRIKET?”

Gae gestured to the packet. “It’s all in there, lieutenant. The short version: SPORTING details our first contact with the Karthians and their attempted takeover of League vessels.” There was a beat.

Golinov waited a moment before asking, again, “What is FAIRCRIKET?”

“Our capture of Karthian prisoners of war.”

Golinov nodded again, automatically, before freezing a moment. “Lieutenant Carson.”

“She was the jailer for the Karthian prisoners, lieutenant, yes.”

“She was officer of military police.”

Gae nodded. “Certified for warden operations. She ran security aboard the *Lewis* until the *Lewis* went down. We picked her up and assigned her to handle the Karthian prisoners.” The ‘Karthian prisoners’ was softly extended, underlined, emphasized, and in a moment the news percolated through Golinov’s mind.

“*We have Karthians aboard this vessel?!?*”

“Several, lieutenant. Didn’t you wonder why we had repair crews sealing off half of the laboratory sections and throwing equipment overboard?”

“We took damage while recovering survivors from *Lewis*!”

“It made a convenient excuse. Lieutenant, those ‘sealed-off’ laboratory sections are now jail cells for Karthian prisoners of war. Each contains one Karthian, a few Marines originally from Lieutenant Modi’s platoon, and a xenologist trying to make sense of their culture and language.”

Golinov leaned heavily against the hatch, head spinning. “Lieutenant Carson?”

“The Karthians killed her,” Gae answered flatly. “Well, one did, and he’s been crowing about it for two days straight. That’s where you come in.”

“I do not understand.”

“Lieutenant, you’re here because we were hoping Karthians to come after us, not the *Lewis*. Our orders were to not engage with the Karthians, but I wanted a Starmarine lieutenant aboard just in case. You did excellent work retaking the *Lewis*, and don’t think I’m unmindful of your successes or how badly the Karthians injured you. But now we’ve got prisoners we’re not properly equipped to handle and the only officer with warden experience is dead. We lost our warden. We need a new officer to command the secure brig. I can’t spare Lieutenant Modi for this detail. I have you.”

“Commander, I am not qualified. I must respectfully refuse this assignment.” He knew as soon as he said it that it was a mistake. “I mean! Commander, I am not qualified. Appointing me warden will jeopardize lives of crew. Lieutenant Modi—”

“—hasn’t gone through military police school, either, much less warden school.”

Golinov blinked. “Crap.”

“Normally I disapprove of such language. This time I think it’s appropriate.”

“So my orders, in nutshell: assume command of smallest, most secret prison in League. Establish order. Maintain discipline. Keep my people safe. Preserve secrecy. Do so with no electronic support whatsoever, insufficient personnel, no training. Detainees are alien soldiers wanting kill every human being they find. And previous officer assigned this task was murdered.”

“In the night, by a Karthian who got his hands around her neck and snapped it. Yeller’s a fast one. Those Karthians are strong. Just one hit’s all it takes, lieutenant.”

“May I call on Ms. Osokina?”

“She’s cleared for SPORTING—everyone aboard is—but not FAIRCRIKET. She’s not to know we have them aboard.”

“Commander. She is botanist, scientifically oriented, speaks flawless English. I am knuckledragging Starmarine who trips over English grammar!”

“Lieutenant, that was a polite way of telling you ‘no’. I can repeat it again impolitely if it’ll make the message more clear.”

Silence fell on the vault.

“You sweet on her, lieutenant?” The question was sharp-edged, and it needed to be: shipboard relationships, while not technically illegal, were so fraught with risk that many commanders instituted rules against them. Gae hadn’t invoked that yet, but it was a threat lingering overhead.

“No ma’am. She…”

“You thinking of those long legs wrapped around you, lieutenant?”

“No ma’am!”

“Then you’re going to need to explain to me why it is you two are thick as thieves. I am not going to have this voyage’s operations jeopardized by two officers making googly eyes at each other in the hallway!”

Golinov stood for a moment in silence that would do a stone proud. Then, “She is Russian.”

“Oh, come *on*, lieutenant, you’re not even trying.”

Golinov’s anger flashed in his eyes for an instant, but he had better sense than to let it infect his voice or posture. There are certain levels of insubordination senior officers would accept, certain levels they would not, and courts-martial were not kind to junior officers who misjudged where the line was drawn. “Do you know word ‘*пощлость*’, commander?”

“*Poshlost*? No, lieutenant, I don’t speak a word of Russian.”

“Is untranslatable. Cannot express in English.”

“You’re telling me that in how many centuries of translation, nobody’s been able to come up with one? Lieutenant, please.”

“Vladimir Nabokov—you are familiar, yes?” Gae gave a polite nod of acknowledgment. “Nabokov called it ‘posh lust’. Most famous English translation. ‘Posh lust’ is best translation English has, and is absolutely terrible. Russian is full of these things, commander. Words cannot be translated. In Russian I make puns, I quote Pushkin and Turgenev. Before Old Maw I recited Voznesensky’s ‘Hunting Hare’. I *like* being literate, commander. Can only be literate in Russian! Rest of the time I am stumbling over damned definite articles, contractions, and weird way of English when forming possessive!”

Gae was silent for a while, partly to let Golinov rant and partly to process his explosion. “The authors you just mentioned, lieutenant. I’ve never heard of them. Except Nabokov. But. She helps you express yourself in English.”

“She helps me be *artful*. Sound like man of education and wit, not dancing bear in circus.”

She nodded. “I think I understand, lieutenant. But — how would you translate that ‘posh lust’ thing?”

“I do not know. Have thought about it since I began studying English. I am no closer than Nabokov ever was.”

Gae nodded. “When you come up with one, lieutenant, let me know. It seems like a good word to add to English.” After a moment she stood to leave. “Make a hole, lieutenant. Vault’s yours. Read up, and when you’re ready, head to the ‘under repair’ lab sections. The Marines have been told to admit you, but those guys do *not* know what’s going on inside. They’re Modi’s troops. The ones inside are yours. And you may speak to Ms. Osokina, but only about SPORTING.”

Golinov opened the vault door and stepped outside to make room for Gae’s exit. Wordlessly she departed; wordlessly he stepped back inside and sealed the hatch shut.

Ever the professional, he waited the requisite ten seconds before screaming.

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[SCENE OMITTED: Golinov and Modi discussing something privately. At the end they encounter PEREZ, a minor female character.]

One of Modi’s guards, a lance named Perez, read Golinov’s nametape with a handheld scanner. Nanoparticles embedded into the cloth meant it was capable of storing a small amount of read-only data, one or two libraries’ worth. “Lieutenant Golikov.”

“Golinov. Arkady Golikov is someone else.”

Perez checked the scanner again. “Golinov. I’m sorry, sir.” She signaled the other lance, and in unison they pressed their palms against access panels to open the brig.

“Lieutenant,” Modi said towards Golinov as the latter began to step through. Golinov turned to look at him. “Tell your troops I said hello. If any of them feel like talking, and if it’s permitted, I’ll be out here a few minutes.”

Golinov nodded. “Yes.” He set foot in the brig. As the guards closed the hatch behind him, he heard Modi beginning to upbraid Perez for misreading an officer’s name.

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[SCENE DELETED: arriving in the brig. Upcoming bit is the first appearance of METCALFE, who will likely be a major character in future work.]

Logbook in hand, he pounded three times on the first hatch. He received a pair of knocks back, which was the day’s proper “area secure” signal. Unlocking the hatch, he stepped into one of the most unpleasant jails

he'd ever imagined. Five meters wide by ten long, it was partitioned by heavy reinforcing rods that had been turned into brig bars. The side he was on was about five by eight: the other side, the actual brig, was five by two. On his side of the bars were two annoyed-looking Marines and a civilian; on the other, a Karthian who was lying on a cot looking at the ceiling with a thousand-yard stare.

One of the privates made eye contact with Golinov but didn't otherwise speak, or even nod: his nametape called him Bowyer. He was poorly groomed, sported a few days' growth of beard, and his outfit was far short of standards. His partner Kellogg was in the same shape: shaggy, undisciplined, and sullen.

Golinov gave Bowyer a significant stare. "Call it, private."

"What?"

"Call to attention."

"Oh, jeez." Bowyer came to attention, as did his battle-buddy a moment later. "Attention on deck!" Bowyer shouted. Neither of the Marines looked happy; they looked even less happy standing at attention.

The civilian in the cell, a xenologist, looked over at Golinov. "Please don't do that," she told Golinov. She looked about thirty, with bubblegum pink hair and a satchel covered in decals of children's cartoon characters. "We're trying to determine how Karthians prefer to interact with us. We're trying to give them little clue how we interact with each other."

"What?"

"You only get to do a First Contact once, lieutenant. If you want to talk, do it outside or in the common locker down the hall, last door on the side that's not a nuclear reactor."

Bowyer's impassive gaze made it clear he had no dog in this fight; seeing a near-total lack of support from his battle-buddy Kellogg, Golinov bowed to the inevitable. "Meet in the locker. Bring logbooks. Be prepared to make report."

"Sir?"

"Am I unclear, private?"

"Sir, uh, the locker's, uh, occupied."

"What, you keep girlfriends hidden there? What do you mean, 'occupied'?"

"Take it to the hall, gentlemen!"

Golinov gave the bubblegum-haired xenologist a glare before giving his troops the 'follow me' signal and stepping into the hallway. They followed after, of course, and the hatch was closed.

[REST OF SCENE DELETED]

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Golinov pounded on the hatch, and a few seconds later the pink-coiffured xenologist opened it to allow him in. “Good day,” he greeted her as he entered.

“Shh! We mustn’t interact!”

Golinov gave her a mild glare, the “drill instructor conveying mild displeasure to a new recruit” setting, and she took a step backwards; then, turning away, she returned to her seat and picked up her notebook.

He grimaced slightly. “I apologize for my manners. I am Lieutenant Golinov—”

“—I don’t care.”

Golinov stood there mute for a moment before taking another tack at reconciliation. “You may call me Arkady Il’yich, if you wish.”

She sighed, put down her notebook and pen, and gave Golinov her full attention, her absolute silence, and her total surliness.

“We appear to be getting off on wrong foot.”

Total surliness melted to near-total surliness, but nothing else happened.

“I am warden of this brig,” he continued. “I am responsible for safety of prisoners, of staff, of maintenance of good military order. Kellogg and Bowyer are taking hour fifteen of liberty—”

“—oh thank *heaven*.” Her voice was one of anger, frustration, and sincerity. “They were going *nuts* in here.”

Golinov nodded but remained silent. In lieu of speaking he made a point of investigating the light fixtures the repair crews had improvised.

“—Do you have the authority to get more troops in here?”

Golinov shook his head. “Thirty Marines already tasked to guard five prisoners. Outside here, ten Marines are doing work of entire ship’s Marine complement.”

“Because this is *inhuman*,” she went on without stopping. “They hadn’t been outside in weeks. Sixteen-hour days, eight hours of sleep, do it all over again, one hundred twelve hours a week of boredom until a Karthian *kills someone*—” She cut herself off abruptly, then looked at the comatose Karthian in the cell.

Golinov stopped looking at the lights and moved over towards the bars. The Karthian lying on a cot within was in miserable shape: the fine fur, normally so carefully groomed, was matted and dirty; his uniform, which like League garments were highly resistant to wear and tear, had reached the limits of that resistance. His glassy eyes were open, unblinking, staring at the ceiling.

“I am sorry,” Golinov told him quietly. Silence ensued for several long seconds before Golinov backed away from the cell, only turning his back on it once he was out of the Karthian’s grabbing reach.

The pink-haired xenologist offered, “Amanda.” Then, after a brief pause, “It bothers me what happened to him.”

“Doctor Amanda Connor Metcalfe,” he answered. “M.D., Ph.D. in xenology, doctoral thesis on Rulomani financial development, contractor with Xenotel Limited, thirty-one years old, divorced, one son, Brennan, age four. I read my briefing packet, Amanda Connor.”

“Amanda ... Jacob? My father was Jacob.”

Golinov bowed his head slightly. “Amanda Yakovlevna. Thank you. Do you often see your son?”

Metcalfe gave him a look, the “I cannot believe how dumb the incoming undergrads” look she likely used in graduate school.

Golinov winced. “No, he would not be on *Rawat*.”

“He’s at Vivarium.”

Golinov looked over his shoulder at the comatose Karthian, then back to Metcalfe. “You said, ‘what happened to him’. What, precisely, happened to him?”

It was her turn to grimace now. “Biologically, as near as I can tell with the clunk-tech available to me—”

“Clunk-tech?”

“Medicine’s always been dependent on technology, lieutenant. In here, with the facilities available to me, it would be like ... a battlefield physician from the First World War would have as good an idea. We’re working from the same tech level thanks to this FARADAY thing. Clunky tech. Clunk-tech.”

“A doctor of that era did not have benefit of your education.”

“Flatterer. Prionic biology doesn’t help me if I can’t synthesize protein fragments.”

“Indulge me, Amanda Yakovlevna. What is wrong with my prisoner?”

Metcalfe sighed and reached into her satchel for a thick binder. “Clinical observations,” she declared, “all of them redundant and useless. I tried to get into his cell to take his vitals, but he was so combative—if he’d been human I’d have filled a syringe with night-night and sent him to see the Sandman. But we don’t know enough about his biology to try any drugs. So all of my medical conclusions are ... in the beginning he was ambulatory, yelled a lot, appeared angry. We didn’t engage: Lieutenant Carson told Bowyer and Kellogg to not engage in any way so we could observe them without anthropocultural contam—”

“—I am sorry, what?”

“Anthropocultural contamination: exposing them to human societies and interactions would, in this environment, encourage them to adopt our cultures, mannerisms, mores, and so forth. The ‘Helsinki Syndrome’, it’s called—”

“—oh, yes, from that tragedy in Los Angeles in 1988—”

“—right, yes. Captor and captive affect each other’s behavior.” Metcalfe offered the binder to Golinov, but he waved it off. “Me, the best part of my day is getting out of this shithole. I don’t know how your Marines stand it. They’re not allowed to leave, can you believe—”

“—Lieutenant Carson made best orders she could in difficult time,” Golinov cut her off. “There are six highly trained Karthians in brig, only eighteen Marines, none armed with more than baton. Allowing Marines to go home would reduce manpower critically.”

“I don’t care, it’s *inhumane*,” Metcalfe shot back. “If you don’t have the men or equipment to accomplish this mission, don’t you have an obligation to refuse it?”

“Marines do not get to refuse tasks! We would not even if we could!”

“Then that’s just *stipud*!”

“Is not stupid—”

“It’s *stipud*, the special kind of stupid that can’t even spell itself! It’s—”

From within the cell, the Karthian made a noise, something guttural and soft. Golinov found himself reaching for an axe handle he wasn’t carrying while blaspheming in gutter Russian; when he looked back over to Metcalfe she was already over at the hatch getting ready to bolt like a scared rabbit.

“‘*Grthak na haag*,’ he said ‘*grthak na haag*’. He hasn’t made a noise in a week and he just said ‘*grthak na haag*!’” Metcalfe’s eyes were flickering across the room like a stimulant addict’s.

“What?” Golinov demanded. “What does that mean?”

“I’m not even here.” She looked over at him in near panic. “He’s not even here. *What does that mean?!*”

\* \* \* \* \*

[SCENE DELETED]

\* \* \* \* \*

When Kellogg and Bowyer returned, they found Golinov and Metcalfe kneeling atop a dead prisoner, desperately trying CPR meant for humans on a Karthian whose biology they barely understood. Bowyer and Kellogg had to pull the lieutenant and the doctor off the prisoner: dependent lividity was setting in, and it was clear there was no hope of resuscitation.

Golinov sent them to report the death to the commander, then released them for a day of liberty. He planned to give Rojos, their third Marine currently racked out, the same once Rojos woke up, but Golinov would never get that opportunity.

\* \* \* \* \*

“What now?” Metcalfe asked beneath the air vent, where she and Golinov were sharing an illicit nicotine vape underneath an air vent, standing along a wall that was unadorned except for a molly-guarded big red switch.

“What now, what?” He gave a shrug. “Kellogg and Bowyer return to Lieutenant Modi. You...” The sentence trailed off.

“Me,” she confirmed. “Lieutenant, look. Between us, this entire thing’s been a disaster soup to nuts. Everybody feels abandoned. Everybody feels useless. I’d call the morale here worse than mess slop, but that might be giving it too much praise.”

Golinov took a shallow drag on the vaporizer before handing it to the candy-coiffed Metcalfe. “What are you asking precisely?”

“To not come back here,” she said bluntly. “I don’t need to be here anymore. I don’t need to spend sixteen hours a day in a men’s locker room with a busted air plant and the smell of jock straps and sweat socks in the air. I don’t need to hear your Marines bitching about how they’re losing muscle tone because they can’t get to the PTC. I don’t need to overhear them gratifying themselves in the chemical toilet because they can’t work it off with their partners on a weekend. Kellogg, I swear the man’s part rabbit, he never stops. And let’s not even talk about the graffiti in the chemical toilet: the Sistine Chapel of Male Genitalia greets me every time I take a leak. And who the hell is Wagner? There’s no Wagner aboard. Why does it matter if Wagner’s gay? And I don’t need the fights. I don’t even—just—the fights.”

“Fights?”

It took her a while and two puffs on the vaporizer to answer. “Tempers flare,” she said laconically.

“I saw nothing of this in Lieutenant Carson’s reports.”

She handed back the vaporizer, now with a ring of lipstick the same color as her hair around the base. “She didn’t write them up. She said this duty was bad enough without throwing around ninja punches, whatever those are.”

“NJPs. Non-judicial punishments. Ninja punches.”

“One more militarism I hope to never again hear.” She ran a hand through her hair with exasperation. “Look, lieutenant, I don’t want to tell you your business, but.”

“Please, consider yourself invited. Tell me my business.”

She gave him a hard glare as she judged whether he was mocking or sincere. “Fine,” she said after making a decision. “Look, these conditions are cruel and unusual to the Marines. Humans are social animals and they’re not getting good socialization.”

“But not cruel and unusual to Karthians?”

“We tried putting them in cells together. Instant, immediate, claws-out, blood-on-the-walls violence. They hate each other as much as they hate us. We ordered the Marines to separate them before they killed each other. After that, solitary. But we don’t leave them alone, either. We don’t want them stir crazy. That we reserve for your Marines.”

Golinov took a deep drag off the vape before handing it back to its owner. “Blood-on-the-bulkhead.”

“Screw you. No, I’m sorry, screw you, *sir*. Look at you. Some élite Starmarine, right, whatever that is.” She took another dose, then stowed the device in her satchel. “Look. I can’t believe I’m asking this, but: what’s a Starmarine? What makes you special?”

Golinov scowled a moment. He breathed deeply, turned to lean his back against the bulkhead. “I am sorry, Amanda Yakovlevna. Conduct was ... unbecoming.”

“Make it up to me. Answer my question: what makes a Starmarine special? And my name’s Amanda. Call me Amanda like I’m a normal human being, not one of your...” She cut herself off. “Now I’m doing it, too. Call me Amanda like I’m not part of your Corps, because I’m not and I don’t want to be.”

“Amanda. You are aware all Marines train in physical combat, yes? Boarding actions, cutlasses and sabers, that sort of thing?”

She gave a nod. “I was there when the Marines cleared *Shadow Jack*. It was ...” She struggled for a moment with the memory. “... wet,” she finally finished.

Golinov nodded once, somberly. “I know *Shadow Jack*. Wet, yes. Very wet. But was in pressurized environment, yes? Ship had structural integrity. Starmarines... all Marines train for hand to hand combat. We specialize in it. All Marines train to fight in pressurized environments. We also train for extravehicular operations. Seizing asteroids, reclaiming derelict vessels, similar things. Four hours each day in PTC to keep muscles we need to fight hand-to-hand in full extravehicular suits.”

A dark look crossed her face. “You mean you’re Spaceforce.”

“No. Spaceforce uses distance weapons. Starmarines matter-transmit in. No ranged weapons. Hand-to-hand.”

“In vacuum.”

“Yes.”

“Was that the Old Maw?”

Golinov nodded.

“Was the Old Maw wet?”

It was a question he'd been asked many times in the past; he didn't have to fumble for an answer. “Old Maw was quiet.”

She shook her head and shivered, running her hands up and down her upper arms. “I'm sure you're very good at it.”

Golinov smiled. “I am Starmarine. All Starmarines, very good at it.”

“Okay. You see that, right there?”

The arch of Golinov's brow conveyed his question for him.

“You're proud. You've got a hard job and you love it. You've got fire and spirit and you love being appreciated for it. You've been in this environment for what, two hours, tops, and you're already irritable. These guys, they've been in it for two *months* of sixteen-hour days without a single one off, unable to see their friends or lovers, unable to drink a beer, and the guys in the second berth have to deal with Yeller *yelling* every waking second. They have to wear earplugs just to stay sane. Lieutenant Carson, she couldn't give these guys their heart back. Maybe you can.”

“Do you think Commander Gae chose me for ... for *morale officer*?”

“No. She chose you because after Yeller twisted Carson's neck around she wants the toughest sonofabitch on the ship around in case he gets uppity again. I'm telling you, though, that as much of a problem as Yeller is, this morale problem will bite you in the ass soon if you don't do something to turn it around.”

“And excellent start would be...?”

“Telling me I don't have to come back here and can file my reports from the forward vault.”

He nodded. “Amanda. You do not have to come back. File reports from forward vault, please.”

“Aye aye, skipper.”

“Skipper?” Golinov almost laughed.

“I’ve been stuck in a locker with Marines for two months. I’ve learned how to say nice things to officers.” A smile flitted over her face as she shouldered her satchel and made for the hatch. Once through it but before she closed it, she poked her head back inside with a serious look. “Oh, one last thing?”

“Yes?”

“Please tell me you know what that Big Red Switch is and why you don’t want to touch it.”

Golinov looked at the switch, thought for a moment, then looked back over to Metcalfe. “Fire alarm. Human-activated. Must alert other cells, yes?”

“And it blows the explosive bolts on the cell, so that you don’t have to fumble with keys while the cell’s filling with smoke.”

Golinov exclaimed, “It *what?!*” in a most unmanly fashion.

“Your predecessor insisted. League rules require that when a prison facility has a fire alarm, the cells in the affected areas must automatically open so prisoners can be safely evacuated.”

“Those regulations assumed *human* prisoners, yes?”

“Bingo. But regs are regs, and Lieutenant Carson insisted. So if a cell catches fire ... *don’t* hit the alarm. Not unless you want face time with insane Karthians. Barring this one, of course. On account of him probably being a dead insane Karthian. Toodle-oo!”

She closed the hatch, and a few seconds later pounded on it. Golinov went over to open it. “Did you leave your bag?”

She smiled wickedly. “One other thing I forgot to remind you of. You just relieved everybody who works here, and you’ve got a dead Karthian in the cell. You’ll find bodybags in the sleeping berth. Knock yourself out packing him up and carrying him to sickbay. Man, it’s a good thing you’re a big guy who works out four hours a day. I’m getting tired just *thinking* about it.”

Laughing, she shut the hatch. In his mind’s eye Golinov imagined her skipping down the hallway to her freedom. For his part, he looked over at the rigor-mortised Karthian.

“Чёрт возьми.”

\* \* \* \* \*

[SCENES DELETED]

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Golinov left Yeller’s cell after what seemed to him somewhere between a few minutes and a few hours: in total silence, without so much as a clock to look at, he knew his sense of time was totally askew. He

carried with him the strut which needed to be checked in with the security office. He first headed to the chemical head to take care of urgent business, but upon hearing it was in use by a severely sexually frustrated Kellogg, he turned and left the faraday brig. He pounded on the hatch and a few seconds later it was opened by a pair of Marines, one an Asian man and the other a petite blonde Dutch woman.

“Fujiwara, Valentijn?” he asked as he stepped through. “Good Christ. How long was I in there?”

“It’s Friday night now, skipper,” Valentijn answered. Golinov had a hard time telling her accent apart from the commander’s, although he knew both were sensitive about being mislabeled. “You off duty now?”

Golinov yawned abruptly. “It is strange. Up twenty hours and was not tired until you told me just now.”

“Yeah, well. Racking out, sir?”

“Soon. Socialize a bit first.”

“I’m off in a few hours, if you…”

Fujiwara rolled his eyes but remained silent. A hint of a smile appeared at Golinov’s mouth. “As honored as I would be to hot bunk with you, Anna, I am officer, you are enlisted.”

“Begging pardon, but I answer to Lieutenant Modi, not you. You’re not in my reporting chain, sir.” She gave a polite smile. “‘Sir’. Wow. That’s a word ... that’s a word that could be so much fun in a non-military context. And I would love, *love*, the chance to give an officer a proper ... salute. Up for it? No strings, just rope?”

Golinov gave a grin. “Incorrigible. Do you ever think about anything besides sex and fighting, sergeant?”

“I once heard gossip there were other things in life, but they keep telling us not to pay attention to the filthy rumors spread by the League’s enemies.”

Fujiwara remained stoic, but Golinov couldn’t help himself: he laughed. “Thank you, sergeant, but... I really am very tired.”

“No harm done. Offer’s open.”

As Golinov walked off towards the Ax, he heard Valentijn say to Fujiwara, “What? You miss all the shots you don’t take. Don’t look at me like that.”

Golinov entered the Ax, which he had all to himself. “*Command*, call Amanda Metcalfe,” he narrated to the air. Now that he was back in the pervasively-networked part of the ship, it took only a few seconds for a call to Metcalfe to be connected and her voice to emanate from the intercom speaker nearest him.

“Yes?”

“Amanda. It is Arkasha.”

“Arkasha?”

“The lieutenant you were—”

“Oh! Right.” A pause followed, and then, “What can I do for you, lieutenant?”

Golinov’s smile fell slightly. “I wanted to...” He thought about it a moment: being referred to as ‘lieutenant’ after implicitly giving her permission to call him by the familiar was, on second thought, answer enough. “I wanted to ensure you were allowed into forward faraday vault without incident,” he covered. “To file reports. Sometimes with change of command, existing authorizations are suspended.”

“Oh! Yes. No issue there, lieutenant.”

“Thank you, Amanda.”

“Any time. Have a nice weekend.”

Walking fore, he was amidships before he spoke again. “*Command*, switch command language to Russian.”

“I’m sorry,” came the serene tone of the shipboard digital assistant, “the Russian language pack is not installed.”

He considered swearing at the machine in his mother tongue but decided it would be too much of an affectation. “*Command*, list personnel with native proficiency in Russian.”

“Chief Warrant Officer Kseniya Nikolayevna Osokina and yourself.”

“I was hoping I overlooked someone.”

“I’m sorry,” the ship’s dijassist said in the exact same tone. “Conversations with dijassists are prohibited under General Order 7 in order to help inhibit the emergence of artificial intelligences. Please confine your interactions to commands and inquiries.”

“*Inquiry*, then. Where is Ms. Osokina?”

Almost half a second passed as the dijassist scoured the ship’s berths. “Ms. Osokina’s last watch, roving security patrol, ended at 1400 hours. She has been positively located in her quarters.”

Reaching the crew compartments shortly after, he left the Ax without a word. It wouldn’t do for him to talk to himself, after all. Once a body got in the habit of that, people started to whisper dark rumors about conversations with computers.

\* \* \* \* \*

Six minutes later, Golinov palmed the pad beside the hatch to Osokina's wock. Warrant officers' quarters — "wocks" — were technically in officer country, but the Navy had subtle ways of reminding the warrant officers they were there at the sufferance of others. Had Osokina's wock been in the enlisted spaces she would've warranted the amenities due a master chief, but here she was treated like a midshipman. Of course, the master chiefs were bunking three to a room nowadays what with all the *Lewis's* survivors, and midshipman berths offered the rarest commodity on the ship: privacy.

Having been in the faraday brig for several hours, Golinov was half-expecting the hatch to open under mechanical power. The silent, efficient powered hatch came as a welcome surprise. Osokina stood there, two inches taller than him, wearing civilian attire of jean shorts and a man's dress shirt rolled back to her bicep. She did not appear pleased.

"Lieutenant," she greeted him.

"Kseniya Nikolayevna."

Silence ruled for ten seconds before she next spoke. "I don't have much time. Three minutes."

"Как жаль." Just speaking two words in his home tongue put a smile on his face, which led Osokina to roll her eyes.

«Look, lieutenant, I'm not looking for a roll in the hay, okay? I'm not going to be swayed by your boyish charm, no matter how irresistible you're sure you are.»

«No, that's not why I'm here. I already got shot down once and that wasn't even for—»

«—Who?»

«—Is that really a concern of yours?»

«Yes, dammit. Who?»

«Dr. Metc—»

«*Bubblegum Barbie?*» Osokina's face took on a sour expression. «Right, because every woman likes to know she comes in second to a pink-haired beauty queen with children's stickers on her satchel.»

«She has a young son, Brennan,» Golinov ventured. «He's at Vivarium; she hasn't seen him in months. I think he's the one who decorated her bag; it must remind her—»

«—Lieutenant, no woman likes to know she's a fallback plan, and no woman likes to have a man humanize the first-place finisher. Are we done here?»

Golinov was caught off-guard, and visibly so. «I'm sorry for bothering you, Kseniya Nikolayevna. I will—»

«—Next time don't come hunting here for a warm bed on a Friday night, lieutenant. It's disrespectful.»

Golinov put his hands up in the universal sign of surrender. «I'm sorry. Thank you. It was nice to hear you, even if...» Silence followed for a few heartbeats. «I'm sorry, I don't know where I was going with that.»

«Nice to hear me.»

«Yes.»

«Not nice to see me. Nice to hear me.»

«You're — uh — I don't think there's a good way to answer that without digging my grave deeper.»

Osokina leaned up against the doorframe, arms folded over her chest, and she regarded Golinov with a skeptical eye. But, if she was skeptical, it was at least that true kind which does not exempt itself from scrutiny. «Straight up, lieutenant: why are you here? We're running out of time, so cut the crap.»

«Just to talk. To *talk*. Honestly. Nothing else.»

«About what?»

«I don't even care!» Golinov exploded. «About soccer teams, about Pushkin and Tsiolkovsky, why Grigori Adamov is overrated, how *Timur and his Gang* is a fascism manual for children! Politics! Nuclear fission! How annoying it is people keep on confusing Bremsstrahlung and Cerenkov radiations! The best place to get sushi on Vivarium! Why you're wearing a man's shirt! The worst places we've ever been posted! Religion! I haven't been able to have a real conversation with another human being in three weeks: I keep on stumbling over loose bits of English grammar and I sound like a dancing bear in a circus! You know what it's like: before you lost your accent and could pass for native, you had the same experiences, yes?»

The corner of her mouth turned up as he fumed but vanished by the end, replaced with a deeper sadness. «I grew up speaking English at home, Arkady Il'yich.» As Golinov sputtered she continued with, «My grandparents taught me Russian when I was a little girl. I just... took to it, I guess.»

Golinov put his head in his hands for a moment. «Our three minutes are up,» he finally said. «Thank you for your time, Kseniya Nikolay—»

«—Ksjusha.»

«—Thank you.» Golinov was no longer thanking her for her time; Osokina understood. «May I ask what I've kept you from?»

«The start of Shabbat,» she answered nonchalantly. «I stay inside and study Torah for a few hours.»

«I'm keeping you from a religious observance?»

She shook her head no. «You look like you need a friend, Bear. So... this is my observance.»

«'Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.'»

A hint of a smile decorated her face. «You've read the Tanakh?»

«Russian Orthodox Church.»

«Close enough.» She stepped aside from the doorway and gestured for him to enter. «Please. It's been years since I've had company for Shabbat. Let's talk, Bear, about politics and nuclear fission, but only after we get the candles lit. We're already late.»

\* \* \* \* \*

The *Rawat's* only warrant officer had the same housing as a midshipman, which was to say cramped: a single all-purpose room with a couch-bed that folded down from the wall, a kitchenette too small for either Golinov or Osokina to comfortably stand in, a private head. A small mezuzah on the inside of the doorframe and a Tanakh on the table were the only hints of religiosity save for the Shabbat spread. Modeling clay was set out upon the table in lieu of candlesticks, with unactivated chemlights jutting up from them in lieu of candles. Near them, a plastic glass held no more than a swallow's worth of wine, and a washcloth covered two snackbreads looted from a combat ration. Peeking out from beneath the snackbreads were two small foil-wrapped wet-wipes.

Osokina was seated on the couch, Golinov in the room's sole chair, the table between them. «This is ... regulation?» Golinov asked.

«Oh, go ahead, make the pun,» Osokina said with a wave of her hand. «It's completely kosher. Literally. The bread's vegan, so I don't have to worry about meat-and-milk laws, and ship regs *do* allow for wine for religious purposes, in the minimum amount necessary to suffice. One kosher-for-Shabbat meal, coming up. But we're already overdue, so...»

She reached for a chemlight, then stopped herself. «I haven't done this in a long time. I'm probably shaming every ancestor back to Rachel.»

«Rachel? Why not Sarah?»

Osokina grimaced. «Because I meant Sarah. The legend of her Shabbat candles lasting all week and all. Sorry. Yeshiva was a long time ago. Do you mind if I... I talk myself through it, I guess?»

Golinov shook his head no.

«Candles. Or, in this case, chemlights, fire hazards and all, Rabbinic authorities say it's an okay substitution since fire on a ship is a hazard to life. Candles, two, representing Hashem's Commandments to me that I must remember and observe Shabbat.»

«May I—»

«—It's the woman of the household's job. Me, woman, this, my wock.» With that she reached for each chemlight, snapping it to life and sticking it back in the modeling clay. The room was flooded with chemiluminescent red light, lending a surreal cast to the evening. She waved her hand briefly over them once done, then looked away with her hand covering her eyes. A sentence of Hebrew followed, the syllables sounding magnificently broken. Only then did she look back over towards Golinov. «A Hebrew prayer. Telling Hashem I was remembering His Commandments, basically. You want to take the next?»

«Uh—I don't know Hebrew.»

«Last I heard, Hashem speaks Russian.»

«What is it?»

«I can't remember. The dijassist would know. Oh, but pick up the wine, first.»

Golinov laughed. «Okay, okay.» He reached over to a wall display and tapped out a request. Then, picking up the cup of wine, he read from the wall display: «And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day...» He continued through the rest of the Kiddush, occasionally stumbling where he needed to adjust language to reflect the fact he wasn't Jewish. In time, though, he came to the closing benediction.

Osokina picked up a wet-wipe, tore open the foil, and said something in Hebrew as she cleaned her hands. She then tossed him the spare. «Say something nice to the Almighty while you're washing up.»

«Lord God, thank you for wet-wipes, the best rifle cleaning tool known to man—»

«—You're awful!» she interjected, but she was laughing.

«Look, I know they're called 'baby wipes', but have you ever cleaned a baby with one? I haven't. Maybe someday. Have you ever tried to clean a rifle without one? I have, and *never again*. God's down with David, Gideon, Jonathan, Saul, Joshua, and all those other groundpounders. He gets it. He understands. God, thank you for wet-wipes, best tool around for keeping my gear clean, me alive, and delaying our inevitable meeting.»

«Prayer isn't supposed to be a comedy performance.» She was smiling, but her words were serious.

«I think if you can make people laugh while telling the truth to Him, that's golden.» So was he, and so were his.

«Maybe,» she granted, before reaching for the washcloth over the snackbreads. As she pulled it back she recited another Hebrew prayer, then picked up one and passed it over to him.

«Do I eat this?»

«I think so.»

«You *think* so?»

«Honestly, we've reached the end of my Shabbat ceremony knowledge. I eat alone on Shabbat! I read from the Tanakh! I don't have guests! Most Friday nights my idea of eating kosher involves a vegan ration! I mean, by *any* reasonable standard I've made a complete hash of it here, I mean, seriously, chemlights? We are deep in goy-as-fuck territory.» The last sentence came out haltingly and self-consciously as she dipped a toe into Russian's rich vulgar dialect.

«Goy as fuck?» Golinov had fewer compunctions.

«My bat mitzvah authorizes me to make such pronouncements. It would take a *minyan* to promote us to merely goy, and a full *beth din* to reach just 'doing it so very wrong'.»

«I think tonight's been in fine tradition—»

«—How would you know, you're not even Jewish!»

«'Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.'»

Osokina stopped for a moment, looked as if she was about to say something, then finally decided to say something else. «I guess we did that part right,» she offered quietly. Then, impulsively, she reached for the cup of wine and drained it of the trivial amount that was in it. Setting it down, she picked up the wet-wipe and dabbed at the corner of her mouth. «There. You're not getting laid, but at least you can tell your friends you did your best to get me all liquored up.»

«So what do we do after dinner?» Golinov asked as he tore off half his snackbread. «I mean, in true Marine fashion, a packaged ration can be completely consumed in two minutes forty-five seconds. I know this thanks to Ground Infantry School.»

«Three minutes.»

«For you Navy layabouts. Marines work harder.»

She rewarded him by laughing and throwing a crumpled-up wet-wipe at him, and for a moment she looked about sixteen. «Lout.»

«Seriously. What next?»

«I don't know. What do you want to do? — Besides boning Metcalfe.»

«I didn't—»

«—that was petty of me. I'm sorry. I just get... tired, you know?»

«Of what?»

She didn't answer immediately. Instead she removed the chemlights from the modeling clay and handed him one of the chunks that had served as a candlestick. «No woman wants to be a fallback choice.»

Golinov's eyebrows raised as he began to play with the clay. «This is about whom I—no—you don't—»

«I mean, it kind of surprised me: I know Valentijn's been—»

«—she's on duty—»

«Oh good *grief*—» She threw the ball of modeling clay at the wall in violent frustration, but the wock was so small it bounced right back to the table. She frowned at it before picking it up and looking over towards Golinov. She took a breath, smiled, and put on a cheerful face. «Choose your next words carefully, Mishka, I'm armed,» she said as she mimed hurling the clay at him.

He took the hint, took a couple of breaths, took some time to say the right words as opposed to the almost-right. «I know she's on duty because I walked past her on the way here. She was looking for a date later on, I was looking to talk right then, we weren't what the other wanted, we smiled and moved on. I'm not looking to get laid, okay? I turned her down.»

«Why? You know she's got a torch for you.»

«She's got a torch for lots of people.»

«She's not a slut.»

«I didn't say she was. I said she has a torch for lots of people.»

«She's always been nice to me,» Osokina continued. «Why did you say no?»

Golinov smiled. «Like I said. I'm looking to talk.» When she lifted the clay ball as if to throw it, he put his hands up defensively. «Okay, okay! I'm not a monk or anything, I just ... Lieutenant Modi asked me to not get tonguelocked with anyone in his command. I understand his position. He doesn't need the headache. He and I have a stormy enough working relationship without adding that to the stress.»

«Oh. So that means me, too.»

«Oh, you're extra doubly off-limits. Commander Gae told me to stay away from you—»

«—*what?*»

«—but I'm here, aren't I?»

A sudden heavy weight crashed down. It took several seconds for Osokina to speak. «Are you disobeying an order from Commander Gae?»

«No. She'd rather we not—»

«—The commander's clearly expressed desire *is* an order, Arkady Ily'ich.»

«Damn it, she didn't tell me to *avoid* you, it's just her wish that we keep it *professional*.»

«What exactly did she say? Because I'm not going up against Gae.»

Golinov rolled his eyes. «'You thinking of those long legs wrapped around you, lieutenant?' And I said 'no'. And then she said she wasn't going to have operations jeopardized by a lieutenant and a CWO gazing at each other lovestruck in the corridor.»

She relaxed somewhat; the oppressive weight lifted. «That's not a no-contact order,» she observed as she finished her snackbread.

«It's a, 'keep the relationship professional,» he agreed.

«We're professionals. We're having dinner. Talking,» she continued.

«Professionals talking professionally,» he concurred.

«Professionals talking professionally about why we're not fucking.»

The sudden juxtaposition of the vulgar dialect made Golinov do a double-take. Osokina laughingly pelted him with the modeling clay, as she'd been threatening to do. He collected himself, then handed the clay back to her. «You should also probably stop calling me 'Mishka', too,» he offered. «It's not quite right.»

«Why?» she frowned. «Everybody knows that's what you name a bear. It means 'little bear' and you're my little Bear, I've got five centimeters on you.»

«And that's kind of the problem,» he answered, «it's the name a girl gives to the bear she snuggles up with in bed. It's not just familiar, it's *intimate*. Right now without the Russian langpack installed we can get away with that, but.»

«But it's not professional.»

«Yeah.» He paused before continuing with, «But I think my heart would break if you called me 'Lieutenant', it's so sterile and artless. Arkady Ily'ich?»

She nodded. «Okay, Mishka.»

«I'm serious—»

«—the door's closed, we're both clear on the lines between us, nobody will be getting the wrong idea. Besides. I *like* having a Little Bear. I haven't had one since I was ten.»

He gave a laugh at that and nodded. «I'm your Little Bear, then. And about the professional lines—»

«Yes?»

«Would you like to dance?»

Osokina blinked. «What?»

«The Corps and Navy have formal balls. They're professional functions. We're allowed to dance at them. So I can at least ask you to dance, can't I?»

Osokina shook her head no. «Get Gae's signoff and I'll break out my best boogie shoes, Little Bear. But we're officers. We set a standard of not just what's permissible but what's *right*. And until the commander says so... it'd be permissible. But not right. She's made her wish clear and that's an order.»

Golinov sighed. «Yes,» he agreed. «You're right, of course. But still. Thank you.»

«For what, a vegan combat ration?»

«For letting me talk, converse, *think*. It's so hard in English. My emotions feel so tamped down, my thoughts feel so plodding and unimaginative. In Russian I feel free. In English I'm a dancing bear.»

«Not until Gae clears you *and* I see a waiver you're not,» she laughed. «No dancing for you. Deviations from orders must be documented.»

«They must!» he laughed. «The Navy runs on vodka, deuterium, and regs: for the sailors, the ship, and the shit we have to deal with.» And then suddenly, abruptly, out of nowhere, his stomach did a turn that had nothing to do with vegan snackbread. «Oh no.»

«Are you okay?»

«The headsets. The throatmikes. There was no order cut for them. But Carson would've insisted the deviation be documented. *Carson didn't know about—*»

Golinov looked over towards the hatch, where the strut wrapped in transparent plastic was leaning against the doorframe. He rose from his seat to grab it, then brought it back to the table. «Ksjusha. Look at this. Does this look like it someone was dragging it across a metal grate for hours?»

«What is this? It looks like a bed strut.»

«It is! Now, *does it?*»

«No,» she answered definitively. «The paint's just anodized on. Metal-on-metal would make it chip, scratch. This thing's pristine. What is this? Where did it come from?»

«Listen! Call Lieutenant Modi; tell him I need operational control of his troops *now*. I don't have time to explain. Then roust the commander and tell her the brig is a murder scene.»

He ran to the hatch, then remembered his manners and ran back to the table. Silently he clasped Osokina's hand in both of his, a wordless gesture of gratitude and respect. Then he went off again, racing back to the Ax.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Valentijn, Fujiwara! *Make hole and follow me!*" Golinov shouted as he approached the faraday brig. The two Marines had apparently just received orders placing them in Golinov's command, because neither of them batted an eyelash. Submachineguns clattered to the ground as they traded ranged weapons for batons, firearms being illegal inside a brig. Weapons in hand, they palmed the hatch panel and it slid open just as Golinov hurtled through into the main corridor of the brig.

Upon reaching the appropriate hatch, Golinov picked up the fire extinguisher he'd left there earlier and pounded hard upon the metal. He didn't have to wait long: Mendoza and Santos opened it quickly. In the cell the Karthian stood on the bed in almost supernatural stillness, not making a single sound; Mendoza and Santos still wore their throatmikes but were without headsets.

It was at this moment everyone discovered certain critical things they had not considered. Valentijn and Fujiwara both screamed bloody murder and went racing back for their submachineguns when they discovered there was a Karthian aboard and no one had told them.

[REST OF SCENE deleted. Valentijn and Fujiwara get locked out. No further female presence in scene.]

[SUBSEQUENT SCENE deleted.]

\* \* \* \* \*

Osokina was sitting at her duty station preparing a report on the murder of Lieutenant Carson when her system alerted her to an incoming audiochat request by the commander. She looked around for a moment, then straightened her uniform and began the conference. It may have only been an audiochat, but no one ever regretted attending to their uniform before speaking with Gae.

"Ms. Osokina." From the background noise and the fleeting fragments of half-heard conversations it was clear Gae was standing in the well of the CIC. "I've just received word our lieutenant regained consciousness. Briefly. Sickbay reports he's a long recovery ahead of him, but his prospects at the end are excellent. Details beyond that – you understand the medical privacy regs."

"Thank you." She thought a moment about what more to say, what she could say, but ultimately settled on nothing.

"I'm sure you're wondering why Lieutenant Modi isn't the one passing the news. Sickbay reports when he came to he said a few words, but the Russian language pack isn't installed. I'm sending the audio to your personal file store. This may be relevant to ship's security; it may be relevant to your investigation. I need to know right now if there's anything important there."

Osokina gave the only approved answer to a direct command. “Aye aye, ma’am.” It took only a few seconds’ interaction to hear the ship’s recording of Golinov’s narcotic-slurred words. She didn’t repeat the recording: the quality was perfect and Golinov’s words relatively clear. “Ma’am, it was a brief prayer.”

Gae had the patience of a saint. “I gathered that. Is there anything important there?”

“Uh—”

“Is there anything *directly influencing health or safety* in there?”

“No, ma’am. It sounds to be a—”

“—Then stop. We don’t need to know beyond that.”

“Thank you. Is that all, ma’am?”

“It is. Good day, Ms. Osokina.”

After the call ended, Osokina listened to the recording another time before deleting it with a smile curling up the corner of her mouth. “Bang-on right, Arkady Ily’ich. Bang-on right.”

A few seconds later she initiated an audio request with Valentijn. “Sergeant.”

“Yeah.” She was out of breath, with the sound of the PTC in the background. “What’s the word?”

“He regained consciousness. Briefly. But he’s going to make it.”

“*Fucking awesome!*” Valentijn hollered this loudly enough that everyone in the PTC heard: soon there were hurried explanations and the sounds of high-fives and cheers. “When can we get in to see him?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t talked to Sickbay yet.”

“Well, *do*.” A moment passed before Valentijn added, “We should totally tell him we were squabbling over him. It’ll make him feel special.”

Osokina grinned and, for not the first time, was grateful to be Valentijn’s friend. “Deal.”

“Men and their pride,” Valentijn answered with as much admiration as contempt.

“If it wasn’t for how useful they are, there’d be a bounty on them,” Osokina agreed with mock seriousness.

“Yeah. Reaching that top shelf.”

“Speak for yourself, short one.”

Valentijn laughed. “I have to get back to work. Give me a ring when you’re ready to hit Sickbay.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Two days later, with cloned tissue filling in what parts of him had been torn out by bullets, Golinov was provisionally released from the sickbay to deliver his initial report to the commander. Every inch hurt: even the best medicine of the day couldn't completely restore him in that short a time period. He'd live, and in time return to active duty, but that was still weeks away. Despite this he showed up to the forward faraday vault in a freshly-pressed uniform and freshly-polished wheelchair, with extra layers of bandages beneath to ensure there would be no bleed-through.

He sat there for hours with nothing but a bucket of fifteen-minute high-intensity chemlights, a notebook, and a pencil, until Commander Gae arrived.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I don't think you understand, lieutenant," Commander Gae said as she opened the metal foil envelope and extracted a paperwork packet, which she set on the desk along with the sheaf of photographs. "I have here a pretty good picture of what happened. What with Santos and Mendoza being the obvious culprits in Lieutenant Carson's death, that made it pretty easy for Ms. Osokina to start digging in and discovering *how*." Humor tickled the corner of Gae's eyes, and for once she didn't bother to hide it. "Had you forgotten your botanist girlfriend is Lieutenant Modi's 2IC on security, or that he trusts her to do internal security investigations?"

"She is not my—"

"—I'm not asking, lieutenant. More than that, I don't want to know. Tell me what you think happened in that cell."

"Morale was poor. Terrible. Everyone commented on it. I did not understand discipline had already ruptured. But when each cell is its own microcosm... they felt alienated, detached, remote. Like no one cared. So they left, illicitly, to get contraband to make life easier, better. Noise cancelling headphones. Throatmikes. Brought in pistols, because was silly we expect them to guard Karthians while armed with batons. Hid this gear when Lieutenant Carson came by to make her daily rounds. One day she found it, probably threatened court-martial. One of them snapped, assaulted Carson, got her in a baton choke. Killed her on purpose, by accident... who cares. But now they have to blame Yeller. He was mostly catatonic. They enter his cell, *armed*, they're not stupid, break off a bed strut, invent this tale. It was good enough to stand up under initial questioning, but they became more and more stressed. When I show up with Valentijn and Fujiwara..." He let the sentence trail before finally adding, "It hurts to shrug."

Gae nodded. "That's close to what Ms. Osokina concluded. Why did you think you were going to be punished?"

"Conspired with soldier of Karthian Domains to kill two Marines. Soon Fleet will change my callsign to 'Cain'."

“Not on my watch. They murdered an officer and tried to murder you. What you did, I consider effective command and outside-the-box tactical thinking while you were bleeding out. You know the Karthian saved you, yes?”

Golinov shook his head no.

“When they cut through the door, he was standing over you. He’d plugged holes in you with his bedding. When Valentijn came in, she tried to wave him off with her gun. He pointed to the two pistols on the floor, but didn’t move. She moved closer to see if you were alive. He lunged when he thought he had a chance, swatted the gun out of her hand and headbutted her. She threw him against the wall...and then he just knelt, shaking his ruff out.”

“He what? That is not making sense. He is *talking?*”

“To Valentijn. And not if anyone else is in the room. Xenos are frustrated. Whenever someone else is in the room with her, he gets quiet. Just her, and she spars with him. After she knocks his face into the wall a few times, he seems *happy*. She’s having to learn to be a xenolinguist now and hates it.”

She paused a moment, then gestured to the documents atop the desk. “Anyway. In that packet, lieutenant, are orders cutting you thirty days light duty, a 96-hour liberty at your leisure in the next thirty, a classified letter of commendation for your role in resolving this matter, and photographs from the infirmary for your scrapbook, memoirs, whatever keepsakes you collect. Leave the commendation letter in the safe. The rest is unclass.” She turned and battered on the hatch. Soon Lieutenant Modi opened it, and Gae left without further word.

Golinov waited ten seconds before picking up the letter of commendation. He made it halfway through before he set it aside in favor of the photographs, and he leafed through them with a smile. One was of Modi and Kellog in full dress uniform standing at attention, flanking his bed; another was of Metcalfe smiling at the camera as she sat near his unconscious body, with Fujiwara standing honor guard; one of Valentijn in full dress bending down to kiss his forehead; a long series of photographs of the ship’s crew and his fellow Marines attending to a wounded brother.

At the bottom of the stack was one of Osokina on a stepladder, zip-tying an icon to the ceiling.