

WICKED TALENTS

I rub a hand against my cheek, and my stubble makes a sound reminiscent of scratching a dog. Heh.

Down the hall a door opens, out of sight from my cell in the brig unless I were to go to the bars and press my face against them. Footsteps approach. I yawn, covering my mouth, as Petty Officer Wanner enters my sight. He pauses, turns to me, and shows me his startled look openly.

“Chief Boston sir,” he says, and then he salutes me.

I stand up from the metal bench and give him a salute in return. I lower my salute, and he lowers his.

He asks me, “Do you need to be let out?”

“Check the logbook,” I instruct him.

He turns to a sheet posted between two of the (empty) cells opposite mine.

Not that I’m counting, but he has made three mistakes already, in his very brief time since entering the brig and walking down to my cell. Firstly, when entering he did not shout ALL UP, and then use the video streams on the station nearby to the door to ensure that all detainees have complied and stood hands-up in the center of their cell; his decision not to follow protocol will, likely, go unremarked upon, only because his only superior who is in this room currently is also one of the detainees, actually the only detainee at present, and, it’s been a long day for me, and if I don’t have to go through the rigmarole of turning naked in a circle to prove I’m not concealing anything, I won’t look a gift horse in the mouth. His second

mistake is that he has volunteered an offer to free a detainee, and this decision has only failed to be a catastrophe because of the detainee's good will. Thirdly, he has then turned his back to the detainee because the detainee asked him to, and this decision has only failed to leave him out cold on the teal nuvo-steel floor because the detainee has not smuggled or crafted any manner of shiv to throw (and, again, because of my good will).

This is not the kind of work that I like to see from my crew.

Petty Officer Wanner, reading the logbook, is currently finding out that I was checked in three hours ago by Petty Officer Yates under the authority of Master Amdi, who he knows (or, ought to know) is visiting to assess our operations.

Petty Officer Wanner takes in a long breath, and lets out a long, harsh sigh.

He turns to face me again, and asks, "You don't have any weapons or anything, do you?"

I spread open my bare hands.

He gives a little sigh. He does not like this. He asks me, "What are you in for? And—no, first of all, who's piloting?"

Ding ding, he has found the million dollar question to ask upon seeing that your pilot is locked up in your brig sans clothes or yokes. It's not that the work needs my supervision at all times, anyways: in the vastness of space, and with long-range sensors as good as ours, I can typically program a course days out. But yes, he indeed should be wondering who's deciding where we go right now.

"Master Amdi's pilot, Chief Nance, has taken over my responsibilities with regards to navigation."

He nods.

I could be making it up. He should not trust me. But I am learning today that I exude a very trustworthy aura—more-so than is always warranted.

He asks, "So, what the hell happened? What do they think you did?"

Even there: not "What did you do?" Instead he wants to know "What do *they think* you did?"

I tell him, "Imaginary treason."

He is perplexed. "Imaginary, sir?"

“As part of Master Amdi’s evaluation of me, I was placed into a simulation and given an assignment. As the situation inside of the simulation went on, I decided it prudent to abandon the mission objective, lie to my superior, desert, and pilot a Draather vessel to Earth.”

He looks at me, his feelings injured, as if to ask, “You? YOU would do that?”

“It’s the same decisions I would make in real life. They wanted to know what I would do? I showed them what I would do. There you have it.”

Petty Officer Wanner croaks out, “Why?”

In no hurry, I step forward towards my cell’s bars.

He backs up, making himself out of reach.

I rest my forehead against a gap between bars, glare at him, give him a really evil look, and I tell him: “They put my dog in the simulation. So I said, fine: gloves off.”

He nods, and then without another word, he continues past my cell, and exits through another door on the opposite end of the brig.

An hour later, my stomach is grumbling. It’s past what would normally be dinner for me.

A door opens.

“ALL UP!”

I rise from my metal bench, and stand in the center of my cell, hands up. One of Master Amdi’s officers who I don’t know has me turn slowly in a circle, hands still raised, and then she places some items of clothing on the ground outside of my cell. I dress in the pale blue t-shirt, the blue boxers, the white pants. She has even given me socks and sneakers. I am supposing that I will not get the opportunity to shave, but, notwithstanding, the outfit comes together well enough. It has a very civilian look to it. I embrace that.

Master Amdi’s officer who inspected me and gave me the clothing opens my cell, puts me in handcuffs and shackles, and then her and three more of Master Amdi’s officers perform a high-flight-risk escort on me, leading me out of the brig.

I expect that we are going to the interrogation room, and am surprised when I am brought to one of the conference rooms; Two types of rooms that are similar in concept, I suppose, but it

does feel quite a good deal more optimistic to be brought to the conference room, of the two.

In the room, there is a round table with an off-white surface. Upon the table are two dozen scattered candles, red wax, and these candles provide the only light in the room after the door is closed behind us. The walls are all painted black; there are display screens embedded at certain points within the walls, but, with them currently switched off, they blend in with the black paint. Master Amdi sits at one side of the round table. I am put into a chair opposite them, and then Master Amdi's officers back off to the edges of the room, observing. The round table is just large enough that leaping over it to strangle Master Amdi would be an awkward move, even if I were not in handcuffs and shackles (not to mention that my good will persists).

Master Amdi leans back in their chair for a moment, and then leans forward over the table, cupping their mouth in their hands, pensive, philosopher-like, wondering, staring at me.

I tell them, just like I told them when I got out of the simulation: "You wanted to know what I would do. I showed you what I would do."

Mouth still cupped in their hands, they say through their fingers, "Let's review what it is that you 'did do,' Chief Boston. I want to make sure we're on the same page about that."

I nod. I ask them, "What would you say that I did?"

"The simulation began with yourself, Commander Neemen, and Specialist Lim aboard a space craft orbiting a Draather exoplanet. A very, very cold sphere in the cosmos. Sunless, of course. The mission, as Commander Neemen went over with you, was that you and her were to be teleported down to the planet adjacent to a Draather arms factory, operate sophisticated surveillance technology to gain crucial intel about their supply routes, and then you and Commander Neemen were to each inject yourselves with a marking agent, allowing Specialist Lim to target each of you with the teleporter, and bring you back aboard the orbiting space craft. Do we agree, or do we not agree, that this is the board that we began with?"

"You had also put down a king."

Master Amdi sighs through their nose. They go on, "As Commander Neemen was discussing these items with you, you

were reviewing some of the intelligence that had been gathered about the exoplanet, and about the arms factory.”

“I was.”

“And what was it, in your words Chief Boston, that stood out to you from among that intelligence?”

“Vaquero.”

“Being?”

“Among the assets boasted by the arms factory, one was an Earthling creature of canid form, but with six robotic legs, each prehensile, and a pulse grav-pack apparatus allowing for the ability of flight. They claimed to have taken this Earthling creature from some type of celebration, honoring the creature’s accomplishments in war, and were studying the creature to be recreated for their own side. There were two photographs included as well. I recognized that they had captured my partner, Vaquero.”

Master Amdi does not nod, does not shake their head, does not sigh, and all around could be mistaken for a statue. They then say to me, “Tell me about Vaquero.”

I answer, “He likes butter.”

Master Amdi laughs. They pick up one of the red candles, and seem to ponder over it for a moment, deciding whether to do something with it (throw it at me? blow it out? I don’t know,) and then they merely continue to hold it. I see a line of red wax begin to melt over the side of their clenched fingers. Master Amdi goes on, “So, you did all of what you did, because Vaquero likes butter.”

“Vaquero is a hero,” I go on. “October 27th, 2209. The Craigen experienced catastrophic failure on reentry into Earth’s atmosphere. Before being drafted, I specialized in search and rescue work, with my partner, Vaquero. The Craigen Mislanding was not far off the coast from where we lived. I flew us out and we participated in the rescue efforts. He saved seven hundred and nineteen lives.”

“Did he.”

“A sheep dog can guide many sheep; Vaquero guided many sheep that day. He is a hero. He is a vastly valuable asset to Earthlings, and Commander Neemen was going to let him be

killed and dissected by the enemy because she failed to appreciate his worth.”

“She was your superior.”

“She was not superior to him.”

Master Amdi leans back in their chair. The red candle, which they had still been holding in their hands, they set down on its side on the table, pressing out the flame with their thumb and pointer before laying it down.

Master Amdi continues. “So, then. What happens next. You, Commander Neemen, and Specialist Lim are reviewing the intelligence, the mission objective, and are planning your itinerary.”

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Commander Neeman places two sewing pins into the map out on the table. “Our recon points will be here, and here.”

Chief Boston glances up from the intelligence papers, nods, and looks back down to the papers.

Specialist Lim comments, “I can *almost* bring each of you down at exactly those locations. Commander Neemen, you will be, five feet off, I can bring you in behind this boulder here.” He points to the boulder on a photograph of the location that is laid out on the table.

Commander Neeman looks at the photograph, and says, “That works.”

“Chief Boston, you will have to go a bit farther, but, not much. I could bring you in ahead of the exact location, but, there’s no cover, you would be appearing in the open and then having to retreat, if I do it that way. Instead, if I bring you in thirty yards back, it’s a little bit of a walk, but through *this* path, you’ll have cover the entire time.”

Chief Boston continues to stare at the papers.

Commander Neeman prompts, “Chief Boston?”

Chief Boston says, without looking up from the papers, “Thirty yards is fine.”

Specialist Lim mentions, “Chief Boston, if I can get you to look at the route that I mean, there is this one important part here, you’ll have to walk low, to keep your cover.”

Chief Boston glances up and assesses where Specialist Lim is pointing to in a photograph. “Noted,” he says, and again looks down at the papers.

Commander Neeman goes on. “With both of us able to pick up the ricochet encryptions from either side, we should have an unscrambled feed pretty instantaneously, and be ready to go back up within five minutes, give or take depending on what part of the comms cycle we catch them in.”

Chief Boston looks up from the papers to Commander Neeman. “Go down, observe, and return, is the entirety of our mission? We’re not actually setting foot inside the factory at any point?”

“No we are not. No need.”

“You’ve reviewed this intelligence as well?”

“Yes, why?”

“All of it?”

“Yes,” Commander Neeman says again, “Why do you ask?”

“Just wanting to make sure that if any hazards stood out to you, I wouldn’t miss them.”

“No, nothing of the sort if we exercise CARE, and CAUTION. Stick to the plan. Stick to the routes. And we’ll be down and back before lunch, and Earthlings will never have to think about this exoplanet again.”

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Vaquero and I bounce around the air above the sea, nearby an oil rig, in the Gulf of Mexico. Three dimensional fetch: we love it. I bounce with my grav-pack and hurl the stick we brought, throwing it towards the distant shore of Texas. Vaquero darts after it, hitting the grav pulses again and again back to back, and snatches the stick out of the air with his teeth. He then pivots and soars up into the air above me, and drops the stick, sending it falling to me. I catch it out of the air. He soars out away from me, and then turns back and looks at me, coming forward now as slowly as the grav-pack’s propulsions will allow him, wagging, waiting for me to throw the stick again. I throw it, this time towards Mexico.

That night in our guest quarters on the oil rig, I am in bed reading a Sherlock Holmes adaptation, a romance novel where Holmes and Watson are together. Vaquero has laid down with his tail end near my head. He passed gas a little earlier, I heard the little ptht and glanced over to see his tailhole pulse. And I'd be lying if I said the smell of my partner didn't endear me to him, make my affectionate feelings for him all come to the front of my mind, be it the smell of his breath, the smell of his fur, or, sure, the smell of his gas. The romance novel gets steamy. I set it down, tilt my head over to Vaquero's tailhole, and give my pal's butt some licks and smooches. Vaquero's tail wags; I can feel the base of it rubbing against the side of my head.

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"They must have changed the schema," Chief Boston says through the comms. He keys his outgoing comms off after saying it, not wanting to gum them up with his chattering teeth.

Commander Neeman asks once again, her voice impacted by shivering, "You have the receptor dialed in to six, subbearing eighty one, key A 4 4 A F O 2 A 2 5?"

Chief Boston keys back on his outgoing comms and repeats the information back, and says, "Yes. The blockage opacity goes down to... ninety nine dot nine eight seven nine one, if I toss a receptor over the boulder, closer to the factory, but to actually go out there and get even that much, I would need to go into open view."

There is silence on the comms for a moment.

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I have flown us back out, after we have dropped off the large portion of the passengers that we were able to get aboard initially. I keep our craft going in a slow, lazy circle above the Craigen wreckage. Every few minutes, Vaquero carries another passenger up to me in his six robotic prehensile legs, drops them off, and then dives back down to see if he can go fetch another. I spend most of my time in the cargo hatch (now functioning as an infirmary) and I tend to broken bones and burns, keeping

one eye on the data feed in the side of my goggles, that shows me a video feed of what Vaquero sees, and allows me to butt in on his radar readings. Through my mouthpiece that is connected to his earpiece, I can let him know, "Heat signature, right, forty yards." And then he turns right, and proceeds through the wreckage, nose sniffing for the next one to fetch up.

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Chief Boston and Commander Neeman both arrive at a small access door into the arms factory. Both are breathing heavily, and have opened the outer layers of their cold-weather clothing.

Commander Neeman says, "This should be MORE than close enough. I'll stay here. You get around to the other side. And then we'll get out of here. If you encounter ANY trouble along the way, inject yourself, have Lim bring you back, and we'll try again another time."

Chief Boston looks down at one of his radar instruments, points it at Commander Neeman, and depresses a trigger on it.

Commander Neeman's comms cease to work, incoming or outgoing.

Commander Neeman goes on, "You get the plan?"

Chief Boston nods, walks past Commander Neeman as though to begin going around the arms factory, and then as he passes her he takes the marking injector from her jacket pocket, and instead of continuing around the building he enters the small access door, and locks it from inside.

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I have woken up in the middle of the night, mouth and throat dry, and no dog in my bed. I shamle out of bed and go down the stairs, avoiding the parts of the stairs that creak, not wanting to wake Vaquero, if he's gone down to fall asleep by himself on the couch, for some odd reason (he and I almost always share a bed, but once in a while he prefers the floor beside the bed, and so him sleeping down on the couch is imaginable)

As I get to the bottom of the stairs, I can see, by the glowing light of the oven and microwave clocks, that Vaquero is in the

kitchen, his front paws up on the counter, and he is licking the stick of butter that I leave out for cooking, and he is intensely happy to be doing so, savoring the flavor, loving it.

Later as the sun is rising we play fetch in the back yard, and then when we come in, he uses his grav-pack to get up to my head and start humping the back of my hair midair. I laugh, and let myself fall down onto the ground, and there on the ground I drop my drawers and let him grab me and breed me and form his tie with me.

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Chief Boston attempts to wipe the purple blood off of his left eye as he makes it into the laboratory. A canid in the room begins barking very loudly. Chief Boston looks around, spots the canid in a cage, and runs forward towards the cage. On the way, Chief Boston retrieves one of the marking injections from his jacket pocket and removes the cap. At the cage, he reaches through the bars of the cage with the injection, and injects the canid. Then, using the other injection, he injects himself.

Chief Boston shouts through his comms, “EXTRACTION, BOTH MARKS.”

In short order, the canid and Chief Boston vanish from the Draather laboratory, and are then on the orbiting vessel Chief Boston had come from.

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“Draather,” Master Amdi goes on, “after all of this disturbance, do notice the orbiting vessel, and send a ship to recapture Vaquero from you. Using the orbiting vessel’s weaponry, you and Lim eliminate the Draather crew from a distance.”

“Easily.”

“And then you see it fit not only to board this Draather vessel, but in fact pilot it, directly, back to the holiest of holies, Earth itself.”

“I did a comprehensive sweep of the Draather vessel. There were no unknowns.”

“There were no unknowns *that you found*,” Master Amdi emphasizes.

I ask them, “Was anything present in the simulated ship that I missed?”

They hold a scornful look on me, and then they answer, “No.”

I say again, “I did a comprehensive sweep of the Draather vessel. There were no unknowns.”

“So at the end of this all, you do not accomplish the mission objective. You have stranded your superior on a hostile planet, almost certainly to die. And you have deserted.”

I lean down to one of the red candles on the table, and chomp out the flame with my teeth.

Master Amdi seems impressed.

I give them a real evil look, and I say to them, “We fight these wars for our loved ones. You brought in the loved one, made yourself an enemy against him, and now you act astonished that I fought for him.”

“You regret nothing.”

“Not a single thing.”

Master Amdi gestures for one of their personnel to come over, and then takes an item from him. Master Amdi holds up, over the table between us, the key to my handcuffs. The metal of it glimmers in the light of all the candles.

Master Amdi says to me, “I think that a different assignment calls to you, Chief Boston. You were indeed drafted for your skills as a pilot, as we were in dire need of pilots. But you appreciate a bigger picture. You cut to the bone and do not apologize. You are heroic and sinister. And I think that you have many stories to tell. I would very much like to have you as a member of my council. You would be thirteenth councilperson.”

I ignore the glimmering key that Master Amdi holds, and glare at them, eye to eye, as though trying to mentally shoot a killing laser into their head.

Master Amdi adds, “I would arrange for Vaquero to be brought here, to cohabitate with you.”

I continue to glare.

Master Amdi adds further, “He would see no combat at all.”

There it is. Excellent.

I hold out my right hand over the table (I had already removed both of my hands from the handcuffs, and was holding the handcuffs under the table in my left hand.)

Master Amdi's officers all shuffle in place on their feet, obviously perturbed by my magic trick.

Master Amdi is perplexed as well, but then sets down the handcuff key, and reaches out and shakes my hand.