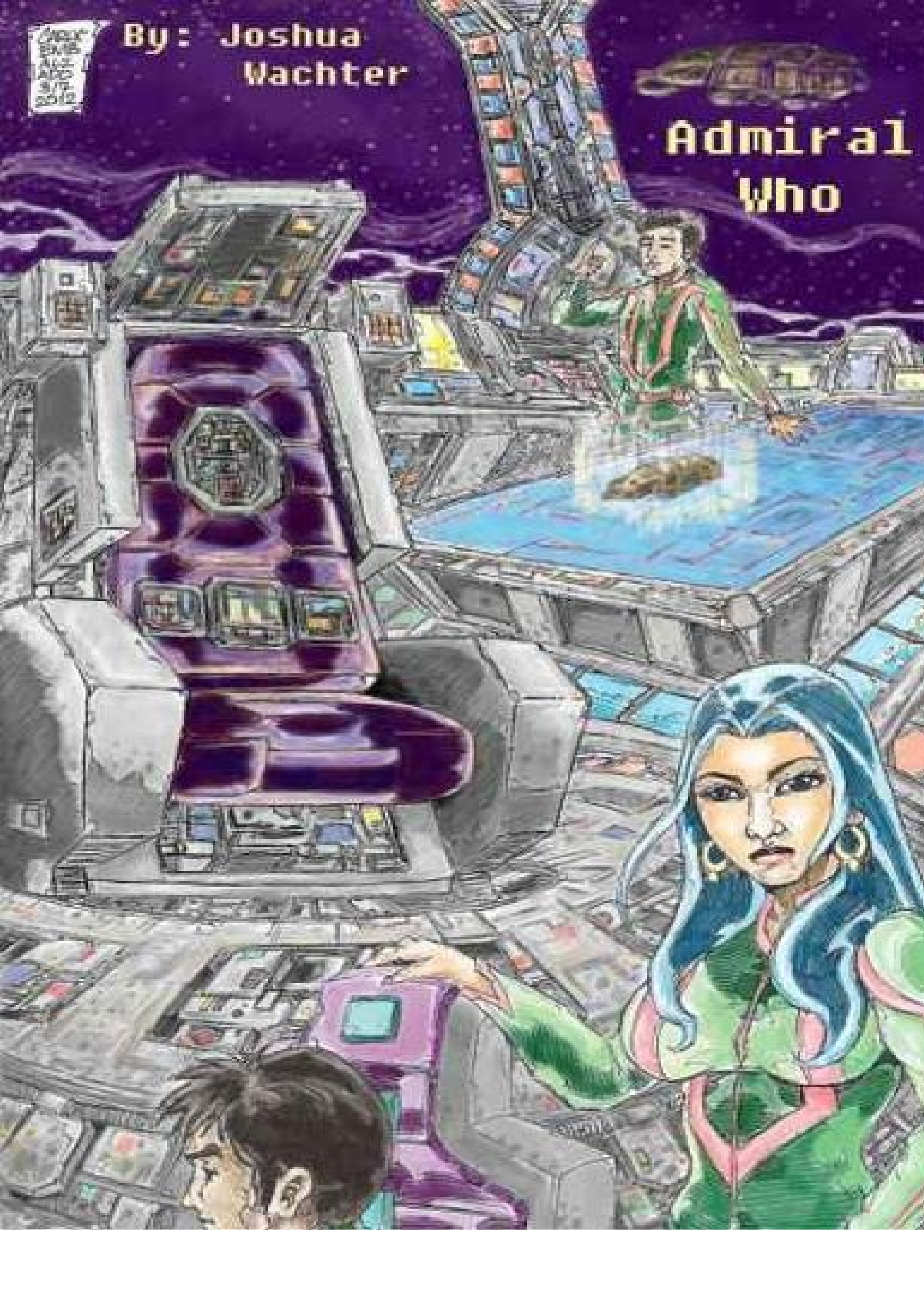


COVER  
ART BY  
ALICE  
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2012

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Wachter

# Admiral Who



# Table of Contents

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For my son, who always believes.

Second thanks go out to my brother without whom this book could have taken years to take a readable format and see amazon e-print. Thanks are also in order for Mira from the JB website and everyone at Baen's Bar who commented and helped make this story as good as it is. You've all been wonderful guys.

## Chapter 1: Changing of the Guard

My name is Jason Montagne Vekna, Governor of Planetary Body Harpoon, Vice Admiral in the Multi-Sector Patrol Fleet, a Prince-Cadet of House Montagne, and a sometimes-struggling college student. And this is the story of the craziest week of my life.

Being a member of Planetary Royalty has its perks, but it isn't all it's cracked up to be. The bright lights, flashing cameras and flashier titles usually just amount to nothing more than a glorified prison sentence. For instance, I had been granted the title and rank of Vice Admiral in the Multi-Sector Patrol Fleet. Sounds great, right? If you looked at the official chain of command, you would see that I was the commander of an entire Fleet sent out to guard the borders of the Confederated Empire. In reality, I commanded nothing at all, that was Imperial Rear Admiral Arnold Janeski's domain. And that was

fine by me.

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I usually spent the majority of my time aboard ship working on Tabulated Planetary Service/Statistics reports, otherwise known as TPS/S. Homework, in other words, for my distance learning program which applied toward my degree in colonial administration. It was my dream to renounce my citizenship and become an administrator in a new frontier colony. I was never actually involved in fleet operations. The 'fleet' such as it was consisted of fewer than 20 ships and was spread out over 7 parsecs of space. We controlled our section of the border by performing routine patrols at individual units or at most penny packets of two ships.

The only thing I controlled was the workstation and terminal in my stateroom. To make certain I understood my position in this fleet (as if I'd ever forget), the real Admiral had also stationed two Imperial Marine Jacks decked out in full power armor outside my door, as an honor guard. They escorted me wherever I went and were with me whenever I was outside my quarters. This was the only real place I had any privacy during the cruise.

I was sitting at my workstation, pounding away on a particularly tricky problem of resource allocation for a new colony in the early stages of settlement, when Admiral Janeski's voice sounded from the speakers in my cabin.

"Governor Montagne to the Flag Bridge. Governor Montagne to the Flag Bridge immediately. This is the Admiral." The speaker then cut off.

I dropped the cup of tea I had been sipping as I jumped out of my seat, having heard my name on the ship-wide intercom for the first time I could recall. This couldn't be good, I thought.

I was aboard the Lucky Clover as a face-saving piece of interstellar politics between the parliamentary government of my homeworld Capria and our good friends from the Empire. My plan was part of a vast Confederacy which had functionally merged with the Empire about fifty years ago to create the Confederated Empire. The Empire had 'asked' (a much gentler word than demanded) that the individual world states in our sector of the Confederacy second ships from our individual System Defense Fleets over to the Imperial Rim Fleet. We were supposed to help patrol the borders of the Confederated Empire while the regular units of the Imperial Fleet were siphoned away from Rim Fleets and assigned to a Battle Fleet on the other side of the Empire, where there was a real war raging with the Gorgon Alliance.

But a battleship, even an outdated one represents a significant financial investment (not to mention its symbolic value), so Capria insisted on maintaining some measure of official control over it, even if it was just on paper. This is where my Vice Admiralty comes in.

It might seem like it would be a prestigious position, but the ruling families of Capria disagreed. Since there was no real power or prestige to be found in such a role, there wasn't exactly a line forming around the corner with eager applicants.

The job was eventually given to the Montagne Branch of the Royal Family, who quickly assigned the position to someone they felt best represented the spirit of the post. Someone who was n

powerful enough to cause any real problems, yet high-profile enough to serve as a proper figurehead. Someone charismatic enough to step in front of the cameras when it was time for a press conference but too inexperienced to really understand what was going on without a script in front of him. In other words, they volunteered me for the job.

After gathering all of the bits and pieces of my ridiculous court attire, I bolted to the door and deactivated the locking mechanism. I planned to finish assembling and adjusting my wardrobe en route to the Flag Bridge. It was a poor idea to keep Admiral Janeski waiting.

As soon as I cleared the doorway, the two Jacks grabbed a hold on either arm and despite my bewildered protest that I could easily walk under my own power, frog marched me down the corridor.

My quarters were those of a former Flag Lieutenant's and were on the same level as the Flag Bridge. So in almost no time I was through the first pair of reinforced bulkheads leading inside. The first set of pressure doors closed behind us and the second opened as I was unceremoniously pushed onto the Flag Bridge.

Opening my mouth to protest this rough treatment, I took one look at the Admiral's tight lippered face and snapped my teeth together with an audible click. Glancing down, I started buttoning my formal jacket, embarrassed at the disheveled appearance I presented in front of this most formidable Imperial Officer.

"Governor Montagne," he said, acknowledging my presence with a nod. "It seems we have a bit of a situation."

Admiral Janeski insisted on referring to me by my gubernatorial title, probably because he felt best personified myself in his eyes. Sure, I was Governor of Planetary Body Harpoon. It's true. But the other truth about Harpoon is that it was nothing more than an irregular asteroid barely larger than the ship on an elliptical orbit. About a year ago, I discovered a pair of illegal miners operating there. After I went to the authorities, I couldn't even get a parliamentary court to rule that I should receive a portion of their profits (which would have then been used to offset the costs of my tuition), let alone evict them and their mining operation from the asteroid itself.

"What happens to be the problem, Admiral?" I asked, suppressing a desire to run a hand through my hair and gulp through sheer force of will. When combined with the iron clad media training every royal of my home world is taught from birth, I somehow managed to abstain from any other unseemly behaviors as well. Our training was rigorous because we didn't want to embarrass ourselves or the government in front of the public. Most especially the government that held our purse strings, but in this case my training did a good job of settling my flutters. I couldn't imagine what problem could exist that the admiral would need my assistance with but I was willing to do my figurehead best and help out however I could.

The Admiral ignored me and pulled out an official looking paper scroll covered with seals. Looking down at this he prepared to read.

Quickly I schooled my features. This at least was something with which I was familiar. Receiving

and listening to speeches from foreign dignitaries while maintaining an appropriately stoic and regal appearance had been one of the primary skills taught in royal finishing school. That and making one's own speeches in return of course. We weren't really taught that much about the policies, politics or inner workings of the planetary government, nor did we have much say in such matters. Instead we were taught both how to and how not to behave in formal state functions and also how to receive and entertain important galactic visitors. We were really nothing more than the glorified butlers of our parliamentary government.

“By order of Magnus Gaius Pontifex, Triumvere of the Empire, along with the advice and consent of the Imperial and Republican Senate, all ships, officers, personnel, and portable assets belonging to the Empire of Man, excepting only certain diplomatic envoys and delegations, are hereafter ordered to immediately withdraw from the Spine Ward Sectors of the Confederated Empire and redirected to those provinces along the Gorgon Alliance front as quickly as possible-”

I leaned back, eyes widening. “What!” I burst out, unable to restrain myself. And not incidentally cutting the Admiral off midsentence. “You’re stripping the Spine of all Imperial assets? What about the Rim Fleet?”

Fixing me with a thousand meter stare, and consequently freezing me in my tracks, he stopped the next words halfway up my throat. After a brief, but sufficiently reprimanding pause, the Admiral continued “This proclamation is not yet finished,” he grated between clenched teeth, his eyes boring holes through my skull as efficiently as any cutting torch.

Realizing how badly I'd broken protocol by cutting off an Imperial Admiral reading an official proclamation from the Triumvirate of Man, I nodded despite the thousand questions still bubbling up inside me.

The admiral cleared his throat and continued. “In addition all assets belonging to the Empire of Man, the Triumvirate and the Senate, which cannot be easily moved out of the indicated sectors but which represent a military or technological asset of importance are to be destroyed. Also,” he continued grimly, “all private Imperial citizens are urged, for their own protection, to abandon the Spine Ward sectors of Confederation Space. As Imperial fleet units and ground forces will no longer be able to offer an adequate level of protection from piracy and other acts of vandalism nor to provide any form of emergency service until further notice.”

So saying he rolled up the proclamation and placed it back inside an official looking engraved wooden box.

Swaying where I stood, I was completely stunned. This was a complete violation of the Union Treaty, which established the Confederated Empire, and permanently allied both the Confederation and the Empire for time and all eternity.

“What about the Union Treaty...? What about the rights of the Spine Ward Sectors to Confederated Empire protection?” I stumbled out. “Aren't we still a part of the Confederated Empire with the right to equal protection, under the United Space Sectors and Provinces Act?” I ground to halt, my mouth opening and closing as the potential implications of the Rim Fleet withdrawing from

this specific sector of space really started sinking in.

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The Admiral shook his head. “All of those are very interesting questions. Questions to which I’m sure you’ll eventually receive answers. But at this specific moment those are the wrong questions to be asking. What you should instead be asking, or at least considering, is what I’m going to do with all the imperial officers and personnel currently serving in this ad-hoc patrol fleet. And whether or not I am planning to turn the entire fleet toward Empire Space.”

I blinked. The thought hadn’t even occurred to me. He could certainly do it, not only did he have the personnel to man the ships but he also had enough Imperial Marines to seize the vessels by force if necessary.

“I can see you hadn’t thought about that yet.” Again he shook his head but this time his upper lip curled as well. “Taking control of this fleet and moving it to the Empire would be no problem at all. He snapped his fingers for emphasis and snorted, then shook his head in negation. “However I am not a pirate and even if I were, this outdated fleet is hardly worth the effort. The cost of upgrading this poor excuse for a star fleet to battle-ready condition would make it hardly worth the effort.”

“Fortunately for you, but unfortunately for this patrol fleet, that means that a short while from now you are going to be in full operational command of this fleet... such as it is.”

Overwhelmed I gasped in dismay. Feeling lightheaded, I carefully walked over to the nearest work station on the Flag Bridge and collapsed into its form fitting chair. “There’s no way I can actually take command of this battleship, let alone act as a real Admiral for the entire fleet.” I exclaimed verbalizing the first thing to enter my brain.

The Imperial Admiral shook his head dismissively. “You’ve no choice but to fulfill your duty. Political expediency may have placed you in ceremonial command of this patrol fleet, that’s true. Unskilled and unfit as you are, you’ll no doubt make a hash of it. However it is still your duty to carry out the stated will of this fleet’s collective governments and complete its mission and intended purpose before returning safely home.”

“Of course I’ll make a hash of it,” I muttered. “I have no actual training in space force operations.” Then another thought came to me and I jumped out of the chair. “I could be thrown in jail just for taking real command of the fleet. I might even be charged with treason against the planetary parliament!” I exclaimed, pacing back and forth. “They never actually meant for me to command this fleet. You’re supposed to do that.” I finished, unable to stop myself from glaring at the Imperial Admiral accusingly. “That is your job, Admiral.” I flared as only someone already facing the prospect of an unpleasant execution can.

Turning his back, the Imperial Admiral activated the forward view screen. “That was my job,” the Admiral corrected me with military precision. “I’ve since been reassigned by the Triumvere. You can either do your duty and take command of this fleet or else let someone else do it for you. Whatever happens to the fleet from the point I step out this ship’s airlock is no longer any of my concern.” He gestured to the main view screen and one of the many Imperial Technicians assigned to the flag ship shunted a sensor feed through to the screen. On it an Imperial Carrier appeared, and

according to the estimated course shown on the screen, the carrier was due to dock with our agribattleship within the hour.

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“The Imperial Command Carrier, Invictus Rising, will be docking with us shortly. At that time I will transfer both my flag and all Imperial personnel currently onboard this ship to Invictus Rising. Any other personnel who chose to sign on with the Empire of Man’s space fleet prior to undock will also transfer to Invictus Rising. After that this ship and its remaining personnel will be exclusively under your orders.”

Unable to think of any protest I could utter that would convince an Imperial Admiral to disobey the direct order of an Imperial Triumvere, I slumped back in my chair, overwhelmed by the enormity of what was happening. The entire Spine Ward sectors of confederate space were being abandoned in favor of protecting the Empire’s Provinces along the war front.

Careful to make no sudden motions which might upset the Imperial Jacks stationed in the room, I watched dully as the Imperial Command Carrier came closer and closer. My mind numb, all I could manage was to stare at the screen. Not only was the sector my planet was located in being stripped of protection, but on a more personal level I was in deep, deep trouble.

Fifty years ago members of my planet’s royal family, specifically those royal members belonging to the Montagne branch (of which I was a reluctant part) had temporarily seized power from the parliament in a bloody coup. A coup which months later was ultimately suppressed by elements of the Confederated Empire’s Rim Fleet. And by suppressed, I mean bombarded from high orbit until even the rubble was rendered unrecognizable.

The current parliamentary government had sent me out here knowing with total certainty that I would never have any hint of real authority within an Imperial Fleet. I was just here to look good on camera and show how important supporting the Empire was to our planet.

When they found out things were otherwise, heads would roll. Perhaps even literally, and it would be quickly sinking in that almost certainly one of those heads would be my own. I’d never be allowed to renounce my citizenship and leave for a new colony after this. I’d be carefully watched for the rest of my days and if I was very unlucky I could even be permanently assigned to the royal retreat, which wasn’t so very different from an actual prison sentence. Consumed with these thoughts, the hour until docking passed by like a dream.

When the Imperial Command Carrier actually docked with our ship I imagined I could feel the whole world shudder along with the ship. The next two hours also passed in a blur as Admiral Janes ordered the entire crew confined to quarters and then started transferring all our Imperial officers and personnel off ship, along with the equipment they’d brought with them. After that, he ordered the main Imperial database wiped and prepared to leave the Flag Bridge for the last time.

The captain of the Battleship, also an Imperial officer, soon arrived on the Flag Bridge. Together with the Captain and Admiral ceremonially cased the Admiral’s flag, which was a metal standard made of Duralloy and had been personally given to the Admiral by an Imperial Triumvere when he’d originally made Flag rank. Then they began to leave.



~~As they pivoted on their heels and took the first step towards the door, I wondered if this was~~ If they were just going to walk off and leave me with this terrible mess. Unsure if I was supposed to do anything other than just watch them leave the Flag Bridge I was suddenly reminded of the many holo-vids I'd watched back home, where the departing captain or admiral would ceremonially turn the command codes and keys for the ship over to the new officer about to take command of the ship. Finally seeing something I could do, my royal training kicked in and quickly I cleared my throat.

The Admiral glanced back in my direction.

Seeing him look at me, my courage went up a notch and I hopped out of the chair drawing myself up at full attention. I resolved to play this thing out just like I was a real Royal about to receive actual command of a space fleet. "Admiral Janeski, I am prepared to receive the command key and codes for both the flagship and patrol fleet at this time."

The Captain looked at Janeski, who in turn looked at me with narrowed eyes. Then, after taking two abrupt strides, the Admiral stopped in front of me and pulled out a clear crystal from a vest pocket on the front of his uniform. Slapping it in my hand he turned and without any further ceremony strode out of the Flag Bridge and off the ship. The Captain, with the corner of his lip pulled up in a sneer, drew out a similar crystal and tossed it at my feet before following the Admiral.

The Admiral was already gone but the sneering captain hadn't yet left when my mouth took over. It must have been the stress because my mouth just took over. "I wouldn't want to keep you from your date with the waste recycler, you Imperial coward," I said in my most polite tone and gave a slight bow. The Captain stopped in his tracks and whirled around on me.

"What did you say, boy," he barked and stomped across the deckplates toward me, stopping literally inches from my nose.

I did my best to keep defiance out of my voice and suppressed the urge to gulp. "It's an ancient Caprian saying, customarily offered when ancient sea vessels would cast off their lines and head off to war," I lied through my teeth.

The Captain narrowed his eyes, and for a moment I was afraid he had actually understood what I'd said. But after an uncomfortable moment or three, he slowly turned and proceeded down the corridor once again.

I breathed a sigh of relief. It's nice knowing a secret language almost nobody in the universe even knows exists, at least nobody outside of your immediate family. It allows all kinds of liberties at times like these. Like I said before, it's not like Royalty isn't without its perks but whatever was I thinking poking him with a verbal stick like that?

As quickly as that, I was the Master and Commander of an entire fleet of warships. At least briefly, I was in total control of my own fate and my destiny was entirely in my own hands. What could possibly go wrong?

He was the very model of an ancient, outdated Space Engineer.

Earlier:

Engineering Officer Terrence Spalding nodded his head dutifully and saluted to acknowledge the new orders from the Imperial Chief Engineer. He then turned with dignity and - without warning - leapt out of the room, slamming the door shut behind him, activating the manual locking mechanism. Glancing around wildly he caught sight of an Able Spacehand named Gants.

Pointing to the machinist shop he yelled, "Gants find me a plasma torch from the shop and bring it here on the double quick." When Gants looked at him with wide eyes, Spalding roared, "Move, lad!"

Gants scrambled to obey.

Turning back to the control panel, the Engineering officer initiated a class II chemical contamination lock down. He breathed a sigh of relief when the computer accepted the code and temporarily locked down the room.

Gants came running back with the torch and the Engineer immediately began welding the door shut. When he'd done enough to ensure the Imperial Officer was trapped inside, he turned to Gants. "Good lad, Gants," said the grey-bearded Engineer, clapping him on the shoulder and struggling to slow his breathing. "You may have just helped save the ship."

Gants eyes widened and his head reared back. "Sir?" He sounded shocked. "What's going on?"

"Never ye mind all that, lad. Never ye mind. Just rest assured, Engineer Spalding's got everything well in hand. Together we'll save this bloody ship yet," he said, a wild look in his eye as he indicated the door they'd just welded shut.

Gants nodded weakly and then uneasily glanced at the welded door. "If I can ask, sir?"

"No time. No time at all for that, Gants," the old engineer said decisively. "No. You just run along and hop into that old suit of powered armor I've been having the lads refurbish as a surprise for the little admiral." He winked, but Gants was visibly shaken. Irritated, Engineer Spalding barked, "Now run along, Able Spacehand! As soon as you're suited up, join the rest of us in Main Engineering. I'm putting out the summons for everyone not currently locked down to get over there for a meeting. We've got a bloody ship to save!"

Non-regulation length hair flaring out to either side of his head, he turned to activate the overhead comm system. "All Engineering personnel are to gather in Main Engineering. Repeat, all Engineering personnel are to gather in main engineering as soon as possible for an important

announcement.” The Engineer nodded fiercely to himself and headed for Main Engineering at a run, pausing only to grab a pry bar to complement his still smoking plasma torch.

When Spalding reached main engineering there were only a few Imperial space hands in sight, which was predictable since most of the engineering crew was Caprian born.

Ignoring the questions shooting at him from all sides, Spalding went to the largest open area of the engineering deck and then used the plasma torch to scorch a quick line down the middle of the floor. Pausing to look at the Engineering crew on the catwalk gazing down at him as if he were crazy, he shook his crowbar at them.

“Get down here,” barked to old grey bearded engineer, pointing with the crowbar at the line he just burned into the deck. “Everyone not doin’ something critical to ship operations, stop whatever you’re fiddlin’ with and get down here on the double,” he yelled, his eyebrows beetling fiercely.

When the current duty staff, as well as those few engineering crewmembers who’d started trickling in from outside main engineering reached the floor, he gave them a wild grin and motioned with his crowbar for everyone to go to one side of the line he’d just drawn. Then waving the plasma torch in the air to emphasize his points, he started speaking. “Every man who doesn’t love our finest ship Clover step across that line.” For a moment no one moved, and a few looked at him as if he’d just gone completely bonkers.

Furious, his glare swept the deck. “I said, every man who loves the finest ship the Space God saw fit to bestow on mankind, stay right where you blasted well are. The rest of you disloyal dogs let your mates know you’re plannin’ to jump ship and cross that bleepin’ line!” He activated the plasma torch and a great blue flame belched from the tip of the torch, obviously for effect. When still no one crossed the line (in fact, a few were actively backing away from both it and him as if the space between them were an active mine field) the Engineer gave a grunt of satisfaction.

Angrily he stomped up and down the line he’d just cut into the floor. “Looks like we’ll have to do this the hard way,” sighing he pointed to the Imperial crewmembers, “Lads, I don’t hold yer love for the empire against ye,” he said, forcefully indicating they were to cross the line, with his crowbar. When they hesitated in the face of the visibly angry engineer, he indicated they were to move across the line with the active, hissing plasma torch.

After they’d scurried across the line (if only to avoid the active plasma torch), the Engineer’s eyes lit on a couple of new arrivals trying to sneak into the back of the main group and he scowled. “Spacehands Brence and Castwell! How good of you to join us so promptly. Why don’t you two troublemakers go join our Imperial brethren on the other side of this here line.” The spacehands glanced at one another but in the face of the plasma torch wielding engineer didn’t hesitate for long before moving to comply.

“Alright,” said the engineer, his voice pitched to carry. “Anyone else who doesn’t love the Luck of Clover want to go join Brence and Castwell?”

Alarmed, Spacehand Brence began, “Sir, as the Maker is my witness I love this ship as much as

the next man. I'll just go join the rest of the crew, if that's alright with you." He started to move to the side with the other crewmembers from Capria.

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"Hold your lazy, slacking tongue and stay right where you are, you poor excuse for an engineering rating," snarled Spalding, pausing only to spit on the deck. "Of course you can say you love this ship as well as the next man because the man right next to you is that thieving, no good Castwell!"

"Sir, I never-" Castwell started indignantly.

"Murphy's first law, sonny: whatever can go wrong, will go wrong! And it seems plenty's going wrong for you right about now," he said with a scowl, shaking his crowbar at the pair of errand spacehands. "Don't think I'm a fool who doesn't know who it was that failed to reverse polarity on the aft beta node because he was too busy working on building himself a liquor still! Because it was the very same idjit what also tried to sell his fleet issued diagnostic tool to the crew of that poor shot up merchant ship them pirates mauled last month. All for a measly case of rot gut whiskey at that!"

Before he could continue extolling the various misdeeds of the whiskey seeking spacehand, the main set of blast doors leading into main engineering cycled open and a pair of Imperial Jacks marched into the room closely followed by the Imperial Chief Engineer. The Chief Engineer's lips were white and his face so red it was amazing steam wasn't shooting out both ears.

As soon as he saw Spalding he motioned to the Imperial Soldiers. "Jacks, clap that Officer's irons for falsely imprisoning a senior officer and disobeying a direct order!" He then swept the assembled engineering crew with an icy gaze. "The rest of you, I don't know what this officer has to say to you..."

Engineer Spalding cut him off, spittle flying from his mouth, "I never disobeyed your illegal orders, although by all the space gods I was sorely tempted to. Instead, as ordered, I went and asked which ones of this crew wanted to leave their comrades in the lurch during a time of war and join with the Imperial members of this crew in jumping ship!" He stamped his feet to punctuate the final two words. "And as far as false imprisonment, that's in no way worse than inciting the men and officers of this ship to abandon their posts, renounce their citizenship and go fight a war at the very moment the planet needs them the most!" Whatever else he'd been about to say was cut off as the Jacks seized him by the arms and picked him up off his feet, impotently flailing arms and all.

"Throw that senile old monkey, that poor, miserable excuse for an addled old space engineer out of the brig. I've heard more than enough of his blather. More than I'd ever care to experience again without seeking a blood drenched satisfaction," the Imperial Chief Engineer stated clearly and coldly and then waited until the still struggling engineer had been forcibly removed from the deck before continuing. He ignored the surprised exclamations coming from the engineering crew and the questions cut off when he turned to look at men gathered together on the deck.

"Now despite whatever that old relic had to say, I'm here to inform you that due to events outside of our control the Empire of Man needs every man willing to join battle fleet and help fight off the Gorgon menace. You can all rest assured that if they get through the Empire, they'll be coming here next. And everyone, including that old fool, will die."

~~There was some muttering among the spacehands at this information.~~

“In addition, any man who willingly signs on with the imperial fleet will automatically receive imperial citizenship, as soon as his tour of duty is completed. No one, I repeat no one, is being asked to give up their planetary citizenship at this time,” he said, shaking his head. “Finally all ranks will be equivilated without the usual two step downgrade in rank for a standard transfer from a system defense force to the Imperial fleet.” He paused and swept the crew with a confident gaze. “I’m here to enlist everyman willing. If you sign up with us you can do so knowing you’ll be getting yourself out of this ancient bucket of bolts and onto a proper ‘first class’ warship, fighting to protect you and yours.”

### Chapter 3: What to do?

When the last monitor showed itself clear of Imperial officers, crew and Marine Jacks, the last bulkhead and blast door between the two ships had been sealed and the Imperial Command Carrier finally undocked, I slumped back in my chair. It was real. This was really happening. An Imperial Admiral had abandoned the Flagship, turned command over to me, and was even now at this very moment departing in an Imperial Command Carrier for the other side of known space. The daze I had been in as my brain tried to process the new reality of things started to clear, and I really began to consider things larger than myself and my own private worries, no matter how terminal those worries might wind up being for me personally.

If - no, when - the Rim Fleet (which was composed almost entirely of Imperial warships) abandoned this region of space, the Spine would be all but completely unguarded. There was nothing I could do about the loss of the Imperial fleet. For that matter, there wasn't looking to be much I could do at all. But that didn't mean I was destined to just stand by and do nothing. I took a deep breath.

For now I just needed to forget about the sudden gigantic problem facing the various sectors of the Spine and focus on something more immediate, like the area of space the Flag Ship was currently patrolling.

Most of the worlds in this sector of space were defended by nothing stronger than a pair of system defense corvettes, able to take care of the occasional converted merchantman turned pirate. Normally anything bigger than a converted freighter that caused trouble was addressed by the more robust Rim Fleet. Following the Imperial withdrawal, however, the Rim Fleet was no longer going to be around to do any of that work. A few of the younger worlds near the border of known space, like my own Commonwealth of Capria, still had some older warships in service as system defense pickets. Sometimes a world managed to keep a few mothballed but never fully destroyed relics more or less patrol-ready. They often served as reminders of the chaotic times before signing the Articles of Confederation and coming under the protection of Rim Fleet.

For all I knew, the ships of this patrol fleet might be the last detachment on this edge of known space still on the lookout for pirates. I'd been told our orders were fairly standard, a basic commer-

protection and piracy suppression packet. Perhaps we could hold out here until a relief force was assembled, or we were called back home? Thankfully, our list of potential problems was limited to basic law enforcement-type issues, rather than facing real problems like an un-catalogued Bug swarm, a still-active AI core fragment or, potentially the biggest problem, the Gorgon threat which was located on the other side of known space.

I shook my head in a mixture of resignation and despair. There was no way this ship could continue to operate out here on the edge of space, at least not with me in actual command. Certainly not with both myself at the helm, and its currently reduced crew complement manning the ship. Our best bet was to find the most senior remaining officer, make sure he was at least remotely competent, and turn command of the ship over to him. I could also order the various individual fleet units to break up and return home where they could do the most good. That was certainly the best course of action.

Still, I don't know why I hesitated. Perhaps it was because up until this point in my life I'd never had the ability to actually make a difference. Maybe the temporary power I could wield was going to my head. I didn't know then, and I still don't. What I do know is that eventually I instructed the computer to connect me with the most senior officer still onboard ship. Unfortunately, instead of connecting me with the sort of space officer I'd imagined, our distributed computer system took its own sweet time connect me to the ship's newest Chief Engineer, one Terence Spalding.

Admiral Janeski had just wiped the Imperial database and removed all the upgraded computer hardware they could easily disconnect. The battleship still had its original Caprian database and distributed intelligence network, but the old network had nothing like the capability of the Imperial systems. A communications technician could have made things work much quicker, but there were no communication techs left on the Flag Bridge. Janeski had taken all of them with him when he left.

Several frustrating minutes after instructing the computer to connect me to the senior officer still on board ship, the distributed intelligence eventually made a connection.

"Finally," I muttered, straightening self-consciously. I was uneasily aware of the seat I was sitting in. Not only was it the Admiral's former chair, but its proportions were entirely too throne-like for me to find a remotely comfortable position. Visions of what parliamentary investigators could do with video footage of myself sitting in such a command chair flashed through my mind and suddenly the collar of this court outfit felt entirely too tight and I nervously tugged at it to relieve the discomfort.

After glancing down at the computer readout I wondered if I was connected to the right person. Short, squat, with a receding hairline and long grey hair that flared out to either side of his head and a wild look in the one eye that wasn't swollen shut, the aging man I saw on screen hardly looked like an officer in the Caprian SDF. It took the fleet's newest Admiral a moment of just staring at the disheveled figure to realize that the man was actually wearing an officer's uniform. Although the uniform had several large tears and grease stains up and down the arms and legs, and it had just as clearly lost any of the tightly pressed creases it might have once possessed, it was still a Caprian SDF uniform.

Perhaps worse than his unkempt appearance, the aging engineer also looked like he was coming up hard against mandatory retirement age. All such musings were shaken from my mind as the

Officer's eyes lost their wild look and lit up, focusing on the vid screen.

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Shaking my head roughly, I once again focused my attention back on the miniature screen s into the arm of the chair. To my dismay the same disheveled figure was still on screen.

Unfortunately I knew what the other man was seeing. A short and (thanks to the Royal family access to early life prolonging techniques) entirely too young looking a man, untested and unscarred by the rigors of life. Brown hair and brown eyes were placed in a symmetrical face. My features weren't striking but I shared the same basic good looks and features as the rest of the royal family excepting the nose. Personally, I thought my nose wasn't pointed enough. Entirely too flat, thanks to my mother's side of the family, if you asked me. Of course, mother hated her own nose with a passion and while she was much more pleased with the way mine looked, she still advocated plastic surgery for both of us when I was done with my schooling and could afford it of course. So it was possible some of her bias had rubbed off on me.

The officer on the screen did a double take. "Thank all the lucky stars!" Exclaimed the wild haired old man, "It's the little admiral!" he said, giving me a bug eyed stare.

I gritted my teeth and forced out a smile. I hated that nickname with a passion, and if it were up to me that particular nickname would never again be used aboard the flag ship. Ignoring the awful name I refocused on my current duty. "I was just checking the ship's roster and the ship's distributed intelligence indicated you are the senior officer still aboard ship. It seems everyone senior to you has signed on with the Imperials and left for the other side of known space."

"Bunch of blue-faced blighters," cursed the officer. "They came and raided the Engineering crew for personnel to man that shiny new command ship of theirs. The Maker only knows how many of our boys were wise enough to remain onboard. Those unlucky welchers who left us in the lurch are going to wind up dead fighting the Gorgons!" He waved his hands in the air and then snorted before muttering something inaudible under his breath.

My eyelids shot up at the tirade but I forced them back down again with effort. "I'm sure they..." I started, but decided it wasn't worth it and shook my head. "Anyway, I don't recall meeting you at any of the ship's formal dinners," I asked, sure I would have remembered a character like this officer if I had met him before.

The officer stopped muttering and cracked a smile. "Ah yes, well I don't normally have much time for such things. Formal dinners and all that. Manners, table etiquette and the like not exactly being my strong suit, if you know what I mean." He started to put out a hand to shake with before remembering we were talking through a vid-screen. The wild haired officer ran the hand through his beard instead.

"Oh," he exclaimed, with a look of sudden enlightenment. "Forgive me, my name is Engineering Officer Terrence Spalding, and I've had the good fortune of being continuously assigned to the best ship to ever come out of Caprian shipyards. I even took a cut in rank from Senior Lieutenant back to Junior Lieutenant just to stay on with the Clover for this one last voyage. You know, they offered me early retirement as a Lieutenant Commander just before the patrol started, but I turned 'em down flat. Why, I've been continuously assigned to the Lucky Clover ever since I was a wet behind the ear in the middle. Even when they put her in mothballs 30 years ago, I joined the boneyard crew just to stay near

the old girl." To say the engineer smiled as he spoke about his service with the ship wouldn't have done his countenance justice.

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I tried to swallow the hard knot which was quickly forming in my throat, but it only served to make it worse (I've since come to understand this particular discomfort to be related to an impending crushing responsibility). From his looks and the fruits of our conversation so far, this Engineering officer was destroying what little confidence I still had in turning the ship over to the senior remaining office.

"Officer Spalding. A current... a Junior Lieutenant who used to be a Senior Lieutenant." I said out loud and then nodded reluctantly. "Right. So what's your assessment of the Lucky Clover? I mean what's her current condition, and can she get us back to port without any serious trouble," I asked in my most well-composed tone, but all I could think about was how the ship would manage without the more experienced half of her crew.

The engineer looked offended. "The Clover, she's a fine vessel," he said stoutly. "A fine vessel indeed," he repeated, with cherry red blossoms erupting on his cheeks. "Why, with the right engineering crew onboard her and any halfway decent navigator, the ship will practically fly herself!"

"Lieutenant, let me be blunt," I said, still clinging to the fraying thread of hope that I might turn the ship over to a trained officer, "this vessel needs a captain. She can't function without one. An Admiral Janeski took the old one with him when he boarded that new Command Carrier of his."

Engineer Spalding looked surprised, and his face seemingly instantly returned to its previous color. "That's right, all those Imperials were the first ones to jump ship and the Captain was an Imperial Officer if ever I've seen one." He slammed one fist into his open palm. "Well, fortunately that's what we have you for, Admiral. I'm sure you'll do a fine job of captaining the ship, sir. A very fine job indeed." He said again, nodding sagely.

I blinked. "I'm afraid you misunderstand me Lieutenant Spalding. I'm in no way qualified to command a vessel of this size, or any other vessel for that matter. I wouldn't even trust myself with the command of a garbage scow!" I caught myself just short of completely losing my composure, realizing I had arrived rather abruptly at the end of my wits.

The engineering officer nodded slowly. "Well, if the young admiral thinks a captain other than himself is needed, I'm sure he'll find one. And of course you have my full support regarding whoever you select for command. As for me, I'll just stick to what I know best. I've got an engineering crew and a starship to put back to rights. It's a crying shame you know, the rough way those Imperials ran her engines, and then thieving off with so many of the crew."

I drew a deep breath, attempting to regain whatever measure of regal bearing I had remaining. "Officer Spalding, as the senior remaining officer on the Clover I had intended to place you in command of this ship." I raised a hand to forestall the coming protest. "It is your duty as an officer of the Caprian System Defense Force to carry out your new duties to the best of your abilities. I'm sorry but that's just the way it has to be." I said with finality.



“Aye aye, Admiral. Which is why I’m going to start in on my new duties as Chief of Engineering right away and delegate all that Captaining stuff to line officers such as yourself,” he paused ever so briefly, “as soon as I get out of this here brig, that is. Would you be good enough to send over one of my engineering ratings to bust me out of here? I’d be most appreciative, sir.” With that the ancient Engineering Lieutenant turned off the monitor and the screen went blank.

I sat back in my chair, completely stunned. My first act, an attempt to turn command of the battleship over to someone at least halfway competent, had just ended in complete and utter failure. I looked like I, Prince-Cadet Jason Montagne Vekna, Governor of Planetary Body Harpoon, Honorary Admiral in the Caprian System Defense Force and as of a few minutes ago, Admiral-in-actual command of the Spine’s Multi-Sector Patrol Fleet, was as utterly ineffective and powerless as ever.

I’d been a fool to think that now that I was in command, things would suddenly change and people would instantly start doing what I told them, just because I’d told them to do it.

For a moment I thought about giving up and going back to my stateroom until they all got home. It looked like once again I had responsibility but no real authority to go along with it. It seemed to be the story of my life.

Unfortunately it then occurred to me that as of right now there wasn’t even anyone present to pilot the ship, or at least point it in the right direction. Thanks to Imperial Rear Admiral Arnold Janeski and the Imperial Triumvirate of Man, I had no one competent left to tell me what to do. I didn’t even know if the ship had enough remaining crew to keep the engines running long enough to get us home.

A brief moment before a truly debilitating wave of despair crashed into the fragile remains of my psyche, I remembered Engineer Spalding. He seemed confident that he could put Engineering back together with enough warm bodies. Of course, Spalding also seemed more than a little unstable and certainly didn’t seem to fit in the mold of a typical naval officer. Still, there was a sliver of hope that the ship wouldn’t just fall apart before we got home, but that sliver depended on one of the most unusual people I’d ever had the occasion to meet.

What about the rest of it? Affairs I’d considered menial to this point, such as basic provisions like food, water and life support suddenly rose to the forefront of my thoughts, creating a second knot in my throat. Then there were concerns like crew shift schedules, ship security and organizing some sort of temporary chain of command until we could get home. I had to be honest with myself, right at that moment, I didn’t know how to deal with any of it. No one else knew how to do this, and no one onboard even thought they knew, with the possible exception of one very senior, and obviously eccentric engineering character.

I admit that I thought maybe I should walk away. Just leave the bridge, walk back to my quarters and wait until things sorted themselves out. What was the worst that could happen? These things always seemed to work themselves out before, right?

Sure it might take a while for the remaining officers and crew to sort things out among themselves. But ultimately no one wanted to be stuck in deep space. Not when we were in a perfect

good ship that could take us home. What did they expect me to do? I was a Montagne and by Saint Murphy's wretched wrench, they never trained me to be a leader of men or an admiral of fleets. I was good at smiling, looking good for the cameras and delivering speeches in an appropriately aristocratic fashion.

Then I had a horrible thought. What if things did go wrong because no one was in charge of the Lucky Clover? The crew might well blame me, the Montagne Admiral who was supposedly in command. A cold sweat broke out on my forehead. Throughout recent history my family had made decent scapegoats for all sorts of disasters. In point of fact, now that I was thinking about it, I remembered reading about a Montagne ship captain, one Jean-luc Montagne who'd been lynched by his own crew right after the Imperial Fleet bombarded our world. He hadn't been responsible for either the royal coup to seize Capria or the orbital bombardment. As I recalled it, he'd even selflessly sheltered the officers and crew from the various purges initiated by the Montagne's in the Palace. For all the good it did him. The crew had still thrown him, kicking and screaming into the waste recycler without any regard for his culpability or lack of it. They'd even gone so far as to broadcast the image via live satellite. The uninvited image of my own face imposed over his during those final moments made my head spin.

I still didn't know what to do about this whole mess, but after remembering Jean-Luc I now knew one thing for certain. I had to do something fast, if only to make sure I didn't end up like poor Jean-luc.

First things first, I decided. I used the distributed intelligence system to contact someone down in engineering and instructed them to send a rating over to the brig to release my new Chief Engineer. That was a logical, necessary first step in keeping the ship in condition to get them back to civilized space.

Visions of being thrown into the waste recycler still dancing in my head, I was suddenly grateful the crew had been confined to quarters. I wasn't sure how long that would last, but hopefully they would stay shut in long enough for me to get a few things done first. Using a handheld from one of the work stations on the Flag Bridge, it took me several minutes to download the information I needed from the ship's original distributed intelligence system.

After I'd transferred the data I'd found, I left the bridge and returned to my quarters to change. It was time to get out of the monkey suit. The pants were incredibly tight and restrictive, besides which I'd be easily recognizable for as long as I was parading around in them. So instead of court attire I changed into my gym workout suit. It was the closest thing I had to normal ships attire, and was blessedly far more comfortable than the ridiculous uniform my office required.

Following the directions I'd downloaded onto my handheld screen, I walked as fast as I could to the ship's armory. Regardless of whether I stayed in command of the ship and fleet or bailed at the first opportunity, no one, not an angry mob, an ambitious officer, or a secret parliamentary hit squad (if such a thing even existed) was going to throw me into a waste recycler! Not while I was still alive anyway. They'd have to kill me first. After that, I figured I wouldn't care too much about anything.

Many twists and turns and the use of several stairwells (necessary due to the nonfunctional nature of the lift systems, apparently a parting gift from Admiral Janeski and the other Imperials)

change decks later, I eventually reached the armory. It felt like I'd marched all over the ship. A six hundred meter long ship had a lot of deck plating to cover, as I'd breathlessly discovered. I gave myself a quick pat on the back for choosing attire appropriate to the task. At least I'd made one good decision today, I thought.

I was somewhat surprised to find that I'd arrived at my destination without encountering any trouble along the way. Not seeing anyone standing guard outside blast doors or lurking around nearby, I pulled out the command crystal the Imperial Captain had ever so graciously lobbed at my feet. I shook my head and quirked a lip. I might have tossed the crystal at my feet too, if I'd been a real military professional like the Imperial Captain.

Another quick look down both sides of the corridor and I plugged the crystal into the emergency override slot on the panel. After several beeps and an unnerving whirring sound the door slowly slid open.

After stepping inside, the first thing I heard was the click of a weapon unlocking and the whine of its energy capacitor rapidly charging up. I immediately froze in place, some twisted version of the fight or flight response more suited to rabbits than planetary royalty, taking hold.

“What are you doing in here,” demanded a gruff voice to my right.

My head slowly turned so I could look at the source of the voice. I readily admit that my head nearly stopped at the sight of a man in a suit of power armor crouching down with a heavy sonic rifle pointed directly at what appeared to be every inch of my body.

“Umm... Uh...” I stammered. I'm so dead, I thought. So much for a career as a mighty Fleet Admiral. This end would rate right up there with Jean Luc's infamy. I wondered momentarily how that particular scene would play out on my headstone. Perhaps 'Shot in the armory of his own ship minutes after assuming command?'

How did the crew get here before me anyway? They were all supposed to be in their quarters.

“This is a restricted area,” Said the man in power armor, rousing me from my momentary stupor.

I gulped hard, then decided to brazen it out. If I was already caught, at least I'd go out with style. I took a deep breath to steady my understandably shaky nerves.

“I'm here to check out a suit of powered armor. I'm in command of the fleet, now that the Imperials have left,” I said, trying to disguise the quiver in my voice and project an aura of confidence instead. “Admiral Jason Montagne Vekna, Prince-Cadet of the Realm, Governor of Planetary Body Harpoon, Commander of the Lucky Clover at your service,” media training came back to save me again. I clicked my heels together before performing an arm waving courtly bow. Hoping against hope I was successful at hiding just how very fearful I was at that exact moment.

It was hard to read the expression of the man inside the powered armor because the faceplate wasn't entirely made out of a clear substance, but the way the sonic rifle wavered for a split second before steadying again, didn't do anything to help my confidence.

Then the power armored figure pointed the rifle up in the air and popped open his face plate.

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Under the weight of the crewman's suspicious gaze, the fleet's newest and as far as I was concerned least competent Admiral, nearly wilted. Nearly but not quite. As it was, I struggled to maintain a stoic face as sweat beaded on my forehead.

Then suspicion turned to recognition and a dawning surprise. "Why if it isn't the little admiral himself!" Exclaimed the armored figure. "I never thought I'd get to see you in person. Unless I was assigned KP duty in the officers mess," the crewman said with a smile.

"Yes. I suppose that would have been the most predictable forum for our meeting," I said, trying to hide the puzzlement in my voice. This wasn't going quite how I'd thought things would go when I had originally planned this trip to the armory. "So what brings you here to the main armory Crewman...?" I asked in my most level voice.

A look of horror crossed the face of the crewman in the power armor and the man quickly set down the heavy sonic rifle and leaned it against the wall. "Sir! Crewman Gants, Sir! I'm an Able Spacer in engineering," he said, verbally stumbling all over himself. "Sorry I didn't recognize you as soon as you came in," he bit his lip, but seemed not to notice as he continued his apologies, "I hope I'm not in trouble for not Sir-ing you right away, as soon as you came in the armory Prince... Um... your Highness... I mean Admiral, Sir."

It took a moment for the impact of what the crewman had said to sink in and when it did, the breath I'd been unconsciously holding whooshed out. Along with it went the nearly paranoid fear that the entire remaining crew was out to get me. Seeing the semi-horrified look stealing across Gant's face, I couldn't help it and burst out laughing in relief.

When I could control myself again, I hastened to reassure the crewman. "It's okay, Gant. Completely understandable. Sorry I laughed there, it's just been a stressful day. I think I needed a good laugh to release some of the tension."

Gants appeared puzzled for a moment. "Of course, sir," he said, obviously confused. "Completely understandable."

I couldn't help a small smile. Things might not have been as bleak as they'd seemed at first.

"So, Gants... about that power armor I was looking for," I said.

Crewman Gants immediately began stripping off the powered armor he was wearing. "Engineering Spalding sent you over for the battle suit he's been working on, didn't he?" He paused and looked earnestly at me. "I know he told me to come to Engineering right away as soon as I had it on, but there were just so many Marine Jacks running around the ship I figured they'd shoot me for sure and certainly if they saw me running around outside my quarters in this battle suit," he said, his speech returning to a frantic rush of words.

"I'm sure you made the right choice," I answered, not quite sure what the other guy was talking about. "Just so we're on the same page. Spalding's been working on a suit of power armor and sent you to the main armory to get it for him?"

~~“Aye, aye, Sir. After he locked the Chief Engineer in his office, he sent me over here to get the~~  
battle suit. The one I’m taking off right now, he’s been working on it for months. It’s supposed to be  
surprise. We’ve been fixing it up special just for you, your Admiralship.” Gants was positively  
beaming now.

My eyebrows shot nearly through the roof.

“Well, I have to admit that I've never had a custom-tailored suit of power armor, Gants,” I said  
trying to find the right words to convey my feelings without looking like a fool. I was genuinely  
surprised that anyone would secretly make me a custom suit of power armor, and of all the people who  
might have undertaken such a task, it turned out to be Spalding. It seemed a man I’d never even met  
before today had apparently spent a lot of time on it. I never would have guessed it from my first  
impression of the old engineering officer.

“But this isn’t the main armory, Sir,” Gants said.

My heart sank. “It’s not? My handheld it said it was and led me right here.”

“Oh, you must be using the old internal ship’s map. This used to be the main armory back before  
the Imperials came onboard for the patrol cruise. You see, they built a brand new armory on the other  
side of the ship and put all their shiny battle suits and personal weapons in it. This here is the original  
main armory,” Gants said.

“Ah, of course. I must have downloaded the wrong map,” was all I could think to say in response.  
The Imperials had already left and by order of the Triumvere they were supposed to take all of the  
equipment with them. In a way it was fortunate I’d come to this armory instead of the one on the new  
maps. On the other hand, Gants’ clarification was almost completely irrelevant. This used to be an  
with the departure of the Imperials, once again was the main armory. I made a mental note of this. The  
Imperial Admiral had whipped the new database, which apparently included the ship’s internal maps,  
so at some point the crew would need to update the old ship’s map.

Unnecessary clarifications aside, Gants provided a helpful set of hands, assisting me in donning  
the suit after the crewman had finished taking the armor off his own person first. In no time at all  
I was strapped, clamped, latched and buttoned up inside a suit of recently upgraded powered armor.

Gants stepped back to take a look at his handiwork. “You look a fine sight, sir,” he said, pride in  
his workmanship evident in the tone of his voice. “The armor looks good on you, if I do say so  
myself.”

“Thanks, Gants. I appreciate the work you’ve done on it,” I said awkwardly. I’d come down to  
steal or appropriate (take your pick) a suit of powered armor, and instead wound up getting an earful  
gift instead. I couldn’t really appreciate the work the two (or however many it might have been)  
members of the engineering department had done on the armor. I’d never done anything remotely like  
this kind of work myself, so I had no real frame of reference. But I could appreciate the time they  
spent on it and the massive benefit it provided to me now, even if it was only a few hours of work here  
and there. That kind of time added up and for all I knew they’d been working on it for months.

~~I looked around the main lobby of the armory, and the servos in the neck of the suit whirred~~ response to the movement. There were rooms and more rooms further in that I hadn't opened explored yet but was certain there must be lots more weapons in here than what could be seen in the one, mostly empty, room.

"Gants. Do you have any friends in the crew you can trust to back you up, if push comes shove?" Maybe it was the power armor, or maybe it was Gants' welcoming demeanor, but I found myself suddenly more decisive and confident.

He eyed me and then nodded slowly.

"I need to head back to the bridge for now, but I'd like it if you would call over a few of your mates and lock down Armory. Nobody in or out without my express permission. At least until things settle down and the ship gets reorganized," I said, leveling my best piercing stare straight in Gants' eyes.

Gants hesitated, "Okay, I guess I can do that, Admiral," he said. He visibly started and then corrected himself "Yes sir, Admiral sir! I won't let you down."

"Thank you, spacehand. I won't forget this." With that, I turned and made my way back to the Flag Bridge.

## Second Section to Work On

### Chapter 4: Meetings, warrants and warrant officers

Having arrived back on the Flag Bridge, I listened to the servos of the power suit whine as I paced back and forth on the duralloy deckplates. I couldn't keep the crew in their quarters forever. Not only were they needed to run the ship, but I was fairly certain they wouldn't sit in their bunks indefinitely, no matter what I said, or how well I said it.

I needed to let them out before they decided to wander out on their own and blamed their new Admiral for keeping them penned up too long.

There was no way I could do this all by myself. I thought back to the tables of organization I had to study as part of the midshipman's courses I'd taken. My brow furrowed as I desperately tried to remember, but I couldn't remember enough to be helpful.

For the moment I had to be both the Admiral and the Captain of this ship, and I could do neither. I came to the realization that I needed help. I did recall that the ship's crew was broken up into departments, with assigned department heads. I realized that I could just tell the ship's computer, the distributed intelligence network, to send a message to the senior remaining member of each department informing them they were needed for a meeting on the Flag Bridge.

~~After that, it seemed like I was still missing something important, but exactly what it was eluded me. Then, I snapped my fingers in realization. A bridge crew, that was it. I'd tell the computer to send a message any remaining bridge crew, informing them they were needed on the Flag Bridge. I would spend the time for that right after the meeting with the department heads.~~

Plan made, I turned to the communications console with a feeling of great satisfaction at my budding organizational talents. Things were starting to come together, at last. A great sense of serenity was beginning to form around me, like a warm blanket on a cold night.

A half hour later, I was positively fuming. To say that the ship's old distributed network was clunky and infuriating to work with was something of an understatement. Sometimes it seemed to have trouble work at finding the people I needed and then, for some unknown reason there would be music playing something that had nothing at all to do with a personnel search or messaging, blaring out of the speakers and random search results scrolled over the main console screen. Shortly after that was when the first group of messages meant for the department heads were confirmed as having been delivered to members of the bridge crew, and vice versa.

So it looked like instead of having one group show up for the department head meeting and another for the bridge crew one, I might have a mix and match. I sighed, feeling absolutely pathetic. There was no helping it now. I would have to stick to the original plan and meet with the department heads first and the bridge crew would just have to wait until that meeting was finished.

As it was no one wanted to wait to find out what was going on with the ship they all lived inside. So as soon as they received any sort of permission to leave their quarters, they all bolted straight for the Flag Bridge.

The first one through the door was a crusty middle aged senior chief from environmental. "Who has been monitoring the air scrubbers and oxygen recyclers," she demanded, sniffing the air. "Something smells off."

She was interrupted as another senior chief - this one from supply - came in and nearly bumped into her. "We've been robbed," exclaimed the senior chief from supply. "All the new equipment we loaded after we left Capria has disappeared from the ship's inventory!"

Realizing there was no one in the Flag Bridge but the fleet's ceremonial Admiral - who was not clad in power armor - they stopped talking, their mouths dropping open instead.

While they were still gaping at the improbable sight, a junior lieutenant with gunmetal grey hair pushed between them and forced his way onto the Flag Bridge. Behind him came two junior ratings. All three of these latest arrivals sported the black hats of ship security and while the officer had a sidearm strapped to his waist, the two ratings carried sonic rifles slung to their backs.

"Jason Montagne, on suspicion of high treason against the the Caprian nation, I hereby place you under arrest," stated the solidly built lieutenant before getting a good look at my newly powered armored form.

As soon as he realized I was in a battle suit, the officer started clawing for the sidearm in his holster.

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The two senior chiefs gasped and the supply officer dived off to the side, while the petty officer from environmental stood flat footed in dumbfounded surprise.

For my part, I was taken aback, shocked that I was about to be arrested. I had been afraid something like this might happen but while I thought there was a strong possibility of it occurring some point during the trip home, I never really internalized the idea that the government would arrest me for something I hadn't even done yet, and so soon! Up to this point everything had all seemed very much like a game.

"Where is your warrant, lieutenant," I managed to stammer amid the flood of anxiety.

The lieutenant sneered, "Warrant? They don't issue warrants for the arrest of a Montagne, they give medals! I might just end up with my own command out of this. So if you intend to survive long enough to stand trial, I suggest you don't make any sudden moves."

I also realized something at that moment. I may have picked up a suit of power armor, and I may have tried to lock down the armory, but at the moment of truth I realized I wasn't going to actually fight parliamentary forces. The good fight was always rewarded in the holo-vids with wealth, fame, and improbable companionship, but in reality such principled stands usually resulted in little more than extra work for the clean-up crew who had to remove the valiant crusader's earthly remains.

Decision made, I decided to raise my hands above my head in the universal sign of surrender. I didn't want anyone to get hurt, and an unexpected sense of relief swept over me. Maybe things wouldn't be so bad upon return to Capria. They might even deem exile to Planetary Body Harpoon an acceptable outcome for me. Ultimately it wasn't all bad, being on a nearly deserted asteroid. I actually thought it might be nice to retire there, with visions of tending an algae farm and perusing hijacked vid-signals for entertainment filling my head.

Unfortunately for those fleeting dreams, it had been a few years since I had last practiced with power armor, and in this tense situation I didn't have quite as light and deliberate of a touch as when I was completely calm. Instead of raising my arms at a normal, controlled speed, the power assisted servos of the suit gave a high pitched whine and whipped my arms up over my head.

The officer was taken by surprise at the blur of arm movement in front of him, and knowing I faced a potential opponent in a battle suit that was both stronger and faster than a normal human body reacted instinctively and fired his weapon. The un-aimed blast tore a divot in the metal decking between us.

The two ratings behind the security officer were barely able to level their weapons between the time the officer first pulled out his weapon and when he fired.

Eyes widening, I took a step back, careful not to make any more sudden gestures.

"He's trying to escape!" Exclaimed one of the young security ratings behind the lieutenant.



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