

1 – The Briefing

They'd started without her, the maggoty cockroaches.

Tompa Lee tried the door handle again. Locked. Clenching her fists, she glared at the sign on the door of the K Deck mess hall: Briefing in Progress Do Not Enter. How dare they flickin' shut her out!

After a moment, though, she slowly stuffed her anger into hiding. Sailors in the Commerce Space Navy didn't get angry.

But it wasn't her roach-damned fault she was late. No one had told her about the briefing.

The shore leave was supposed to include her. Two days ago, when the announcement was made that her shift had been selected for the first shore leave ever on the planet Zee-Shode, after three boring months in orbit, she'd asked her boss if that meant her, too. His expression went vague and his throat bobbed as he subvocalized on his mumblers, checking with his boss—or somebody. It made her flesh crawl that you never knew who they were talking to or what they were saying about you when they mumbled.

Yes, he'd replied. Ship's Wards, too.

Damned mumblers. They'd undoubtedly sent the message about the briefing over the mumblers, not caring that Ship's Wards didn't have the implants. Well, there was no way she'd miss her first chance to meet aliens. Think, girl, think.

Hmm. When the Vance left earth five months ago, she'd worked briefly in Mess Prep for Deck C. That deck's mess hall had a rear service entrance. Maybe this one did, too. She turned down a cross corridor, walking nonchalantly as a group of six sailors from Logistics passed her. Up ahead, a narrow passageway branched toward what must be the rear entrance of the mess hall.

When she reached the passageway, however, she jerked back out of sight. Ratshit! Jim Zhang, wearing red coveralls like hers, was sitting on the floor by the rear door. Of all the people on the Vance, it had to be him. A week after the cruiser left Earth, she'd gotten in trouble because he made a crude pass at her. Her mouth went dry at the memory of how close she'd come to losing everything she'd dreamed of and schemed for.

This isn't Manhattan, the supervisor of the Ship's Ward program had reprimanded her after that incident. There'd been contempt in his voice, either for Manhattan or Tompa—or both. With difficulty, she'd kept her eyes down, fighting back a switchblade of anger. In the Navy, we don't live by survival of the meanest. We have laws, procedures, and punishments. You tell me

you want to make full Navy. He'd raised a bushy eyebrow skeptically. Well, if you overreact and take matters into your own hands one more time, you're out.

The lecture had continued on and on. Gradually, though, she realized that her supervisor really was saying something important. Every place had unwritten rules you didn't dare break, rules that were taken so much for granted that they were never explained to outsiders like her. Half the battle to survive was figuring out these rules. Walking out of her supervisor's office, Tompa was smiling because she'd discovered one of the Navy's unwritten rules, for someone in her lowly position, at least.

Don't be tough, be invisible.

Ever since then, she'd learned her job as well as possible, kept to herself, and tried not to be noticed. She'd also avoided Jim Zhang. This time, however, he couldn't be avoided. Well, she could handle him—without breaking any bones, either. Taking a deep breath, she imagined herself in an all-white dress uniform as she marched down the passageway toward him.

“Well, hello, beautiful young thing,” Zhang said. Then, “Oh. It's you.”

Tompa ignored him and reached for the door.

“I wouldn't do that, if I were you.”

She glanced at him.

“On second thought, go ahead.” He held up his beefy forearm, which was in better condition now than when she last left him. “I was in heal-sleep for a whole day, you maggot. On top of that, as soon as we get back to Earth, I'm going to be kicked out of the Ship's Ward program. For nothing! All you had to do was say you didn't do it for money.”

But she had told him that. Surely she had.

“I figured you had to be a hooker,” Zhang said. “Navy lottery tickets are damned expensive, and I heard a rumor you bought a hundred of them.”

“Eighty-nine.”

“See! If you weren't a hooker, how could you afford even one ticket, let alone eighty-nine? You're just street meat, for chrissake. And when I grabbed you, it was foreplay. Chicks always say they want foreplay, but when you do it—whammo! Seriously, do I look like the kind of guy who has to force women into bed with me?”

Zhang sucked in his belly and stared at her, probably expecting her to snarl her disbelief like an animal, the way street meat did in shows—and she was tempted. But she smiled, instead.

“Sorry about that, Jim.”

He grunted and rubbed his arm. She knew his type: all balls, no brain. She kept smiling as she leaned against the wall. As though scratching, she ran a hand slowly down her thigh, just to remind him she was female. Sure enough, he was such a poco brain that within seconds he was staring and grinning.

“Guess it’s okay.” Zhang sounded as though he was forgiving her. The idiot. “The Navy wants too much work, you know? When I won the lottery I thought it’d be like taking a cruise around the galaxy.” He sighed, then scowled at the closed door. “I’m part of shift four, so I’m going whether they like it or not. I can’t wait to see some real live aliens.”

“Yeah,” Tompa said in a breathy sigh. To be one of the first humans ever to walk on a planet . . . wow. They’d probably create a show-surround about this. Back in Manhattan, people never got tired of shows about the bigger-than-life heroes of the Space Navy. The theaters near the food lines and police forts were always full. They ran other shows too, of course, but ones about the Space Navy were Tompa’s—and everyone else’s—favorites.

A burst of cheering drew her gaze back to the mess-hall door. She’d never imagined that earnest Navy types would cheer like that. She had to get into the briefing. “Why can’t we go in?”

“When I tried to open the door, some guys ordered me to go away.”

Tompa palmed the handle and pushed, but someone inside was leaning against the door. She turned back to Zhang. “So you’re just going to sit there and miss your chance to visit an alien planet? A big guy like you?”

“What can I do? They’re Navy.”

“But you’re so big and strong.” She let her gaze wander over his thick biceps and then, because guys went brainless for that sort of stupid ratshit, over his crotch. “Surely a man as huge and powerful as you can open a little door.”

His mouth hung open. He didn’t close it as he stared at her and nodded. After a few seconds, he remembered how to speak. What a ball-brained idiot. “Yeah,” he said, “I probably can.” He

rose to his feet and grinned down at her. “Sure thing, little lady. Just watch me.” He took a deep breath and hunched as though to use his shoulder as a battering ram.

“Not that way.” Tompa shook her head, smiling. Only one of ten ship’s wards completed the three-year probation and made full Navy. If this poco brain was one of her ten, her odds had just improved. “You’d disrupt the briefing and get us in trouble. Push slow and steady. Yeah, that’s right. Put all your weight into it.”

The door opened little by little, then suddenly gave way. Zhang stumbled into the half-dark mess hall, only to be met by several sailors who turned to glare. One of them blocked his way and said in a fierce whisper, “Zhang, I told you, you aren’t going on shore leave unless you finish your backlog of tasks. Now back to work—and that’s an order.”

“Aw,” Zhang replied in a loud voice, “I wanna see the aliens.”

While this exchange was going on, Tompa waited for the slightest opening. When she saw one, she squeezed between Zhang and the doorframe and tried to get lost in the crowd. That turned out to be easy, because when people saw who she was, they backed away. This was the first time the crew’s prejudice against street meat had ever worked to her advantage. Most luck was bad, of course, but both good and bad luck came in bunches—like grapes, Sister Lakeisha used to say—so this was a good omen. A tingle of anticipation scurried up Tompa’s spine.

At the front of the mess hall, a woman was spouting some confusing garbage about the Shon-Wod-Zee governing themselves via ochlocracy. Whatever that was. The woman’s voice had the easy authority Tompa instinctively distrusted. When she was well away from the noise of Zhang’s futile efforts to get into the room, Tompa leaned against the wall and started paying more attention to the speaker.

“As you can imagine,” the woman said, “government by the herd, along with language complications, has made negotiating with the Shon-Wod-Zee unexpectedly difficult. Otherwise, I assure you I’d already have a trade agreement signed and you’d be headed home.”

The woman must be the ambassador that Consortium Earth, the owners of the Space Navy, had appointed to arrange a treaty with Zee-Shode. Tompa went to her tiptoes—she’d never seen an ambassador before—but saw only a flash of dark hair through the throng of sailors, every one of whom was taller than her. It was a really big deal if this mission succeeded, though Tompa

only vaguely understood why. She'd heard, of course, that an exclusive trade agreement with a planet-bound race would finally earn humans the respect of the galactic trading community, but to her that wasn't as important as stealing the planet away from the Klicks. Everybody who'd ever seen a Space Navy show hated Klicks.

"This mission was projected to last six weeks," the ambassador continued, "but instead it's lasted three months. We've been lucky so far that the Kalikinikis, who are, of course, protective of their trade agreement with the Shon-Wod-Zee, haven't yet shown up in their battle cruisers."

There was a chance of a space battle with the Klicks? Wow. Tompa had no doubts the Space Navy could knock the tails off the greasy lizards. She was so engrossed in imagining her own role in the show, saving the Vance by crawling over fallen bodies to fire a torpedo despite terrible wounds, that she missed some of the ambassador's words.

". . . the extraordinary step of sending you ladies and gentlemen down to the planet. If enough Shons see enough humans on their best behavior, maybe public opinion will turn in our favor. This is not, repeat not, an ordinary shore leave."

"It's still shore leave," shouted a voice at the side of the room.

The shout was met by laughter, whistles, and howls—startling behavior from space sailors. A woman to Tompa's right added to the din by repeating, "Shore leave!" The woman's face shone, instead of having the usual subdued, Navy-issue seriousness. "Shore leave!"

Un-flickin'-believable. Tompa felt a smile creep across her face.

The ambassador shouted for silence, and when she got it she said, "I will not tolerate another outburst. I repeat, this is not ordinary shore leave. You are to consider yourselves on duty, and you will behave with decorum, grace, and impeccable good sense. The Shons aren't eager for contact with a second space-faring people. Remember, Zee-Shode is an unsophisticated backwater that has an early industrial civilization spiced with a few high-tech gadgets bought from the Klicks. Because of the trade exclusivity, other races don't dare land on the planet, meaning that most Shon-Wod-Zee have neither seen a Klick nor heard of human beings. So, while to you the Shons may be interesting curiosities, to them you're unknown monsters from outer space, trying to stir up trouble."

"They're right," called the same voice from the far side of the room.

The ambassador's voice went hard. "Mister Roussel, have your men escort that person out of the room. Do the same for anyone else who is disruptive."

Tompa felt the crowd's exuberant cheerfulness dissipate like a bucket of pee emptied out a broken window atop the Empire State Building. The woman on her right was craning to see who the ship's cops were taking away. She was no longer smiling.

"You are goodwill ambassadors to the planet Zee-Shode," the ambassador said. "I trust that is understood."

The sailors now stood straighter, more formally. Too bad. It had been fun seeing them act like human beings.

"Good. I'll now turn the briefing over to Director Gahindru of Logistics."

After a moment, a man's voice said, "Thank you, Ambassador Schneider. When the briefing is over, you will break into groups of between six and twelve, thirty-five groups in all. You can choose your own groups, though we'll make adjustments as necessary."

Tompa grimaced. Which group would want her?

"The shuttles will begin ferrying groups down to Zee-Shode at exactly ten-hundred hours. Each light-craft will land near a different Shon city so as to maximize your exposure to the populace. A native guide will show you suitable sights for your twenty-hour stay. The guide and one member of your group will have translators using the latest algorithms devised for Ambassador Schneider and her negotiating team. The Shons are cranking out more translators as we speak and so later shore leaves will have enough for each sailor, but for now if you lose or break your translator, you're out of luck. Treat it as carefully as a raw egg."

Tompa shifted, and her boot grazed something that made a tinny, metallic sound. A ventilation grate. The top of the grate made a narrow ledge that she could stand on if she had something to hold onto—like that light fixture behind the woman on the right. It would raise her more than a foot so she could see. She'd have to be careful not to bump into the woman, but with every one facing away from her and the speaker so far away, no one would likely notice her.

While the speaker went on about which shuttle was headed where, Tompa put her heel on the ledge. After testing that the ledge would hold her weight, she stepped up and grabbed the casing that directed light downward. Her momentum almost carried her off the ledge, but she clamped

her fingers onto the casing, determined to avoid an embarrassing collision. The woman glanced back and gave a small start. After a moment she crowded closer to the sailor in front of her, giving Tompa a wider berth.

“You should be comfortable down there,” Gahindru continued. “Gravity, atmosphere, and climate are all within two percent of standard habitability norms, while day length and life-form variability are both within four percent. We’ve tentatively rated the biochemistry aleph One B, with strong indications that further study will give it One A.” The sailors greeted this remark with an approving murmur. When Gahindru added, “If you stick to the food and beverages that your guide eats, you probably won’t die,” they laughed.

Tompa got her other heel onto the ledge and clung there, enjoying being able to see so far. She’d been on the Vance long enough that any space bigger than a closet felt huge. Gazing over a sea of heads, she almost felt as though she belonged. The glow-bar light gave off its characteristic fresh-air smell, adding to Tompa’s sense of well being. Life in the Navy was going to be good.

“Do not allow yourself to be separated from your guide,” the lecturer said. “Shons without translators won’t be able to help you if you get lost, and this planet is too primitive to have a global positioning system. At all times, keep within mumblers range of each other.”

Tompa frowned. Damned mumbler.

In mid-frown, she realized that a big, rugged-looking man with streaks of grey in his hair and the cream-colored tunic of a VP-grade officer was staring at her from the side of the room. On his shoulder was a jail-bar insignia. She froze—except for her heart, which lurched. After helplessly meeting his gaze for a couple of terrifying seconds, she stumbled down from her perch. Oh, God. A cop was watching her. And not just any cop. The head roach himself.

“Unless there are any questions,” Gahindru said, “you can form your groups and proceed to the nearest exit, where you will be directed to a staging area.”

A few people asked questions, but Tompa was too upset to pay attention. By the time the lights in the room went up, though, her heart rate was approaching normal. She watched as people started milling around, calling to each other and chatting. Their mood was light again,

almost festive. Tompa took a few tentative steps toward some women she knew slightly from working in Mess Prep, but they walked past as though she didn't exist.

There he was again, that vice president from Military Discipline, talking with half-a-dozen men near the door. He pointed toward her. Was he instructing them to scoop her up because she couldn't be trusted off the ship?

The mess hall emptied quickly. Tompa was trying to keep some stragglers between her and the policeman when one of the men broke from the group and headed toward her. When she saw that his face was covered with tattoos, she let out a long breath. Facial tattoos were popular amongst new-sect Christians, but no one had as many as the boss of her light-craft maintenance team, Paolo McShallin. Nestled against tattoos of jungle greenery from his native Brazil, the Virgin Mary adorned one cheek and baby Jesus the other. An elaborate cross ran from his pointed chin up his nose to his forehead; when he frowned, the cross came alive as though writhing with the pain of crucifixion.

McShallin was pretty much okay, as far as she knew. They weren't friends, of course, but he was patient and a good teacher. He kept his feelings so sternly under control that she wondered if he feared distorting his tattoos. The only time she'd seen him show emotion was when talking about his wife and three young children. Then, a grin wrinkled the tattoos almost beyond recognition.

"Ship's Ward Lee." He bowed slightly as he spoke.

"Senior Technician McShallin." His conversations always started formally.

"Are you in a group yet, Ship's Ward?" He asked the question slowly, almost reluctantly.

What was going on here? She glanced toward the policeman, but he was gone. "No," she replied.

"I see." He, too, glanced toward where the policeman had been. After a moment's hesitation, he added, "Join us, then."

His words took a moment to sink in. She stared at him, unsure she'd heard correctly.

When she didn't respond, McShallin said, "You'll be safe with us, truly. We're all fervent Episcotism Christians of the Second Delineation."

"Uh, sure. Definitely, I'll join you." She laughed. "I'm just surprised you want me along."

Her laughter died. Although his expression didn't change much, he nonetheless had the look of a man asking the town whore to church, knowing his wife and mother already knelt in a pew. As her boss, she realized suddenly, it had been his responsibility to tell her about the briefing. Had he been so worried he'd get stuck with her like this that he'd 'forgotten'?

"In truth, I do have misgivings," he said. "To function as goodwill ambassadors, we'll need to work as team. If you'll excuse my bluntness, Ship's Ward, despite your admirable willingness to learn, I fear that life has rendered you unpredictable and too much of a loner to have any idea what being part of a team entails."

She felt her face grow warm. "Then why the . . . why are you asking me along?"

"Because Associate Vice President Roussel insisted."

The head roach? She glanced around, but the big VP was nowhere to be seen. "I get it. He picked the strictest bunch of holy howlers he could find to chaperone me."

McShallin gave a brief smile, making baby Jesus twitch as though tickled. "As I've stated in my reports, your native intelligence is keen."

But you're a lousy team player. The whole flickin' Navy was one big team, standing up for each other, protecting each other. How the ratshit was she supposed to make full Navy with crap like that on her record? Pretending to think, Tompa hugged her arms over her chest and turned away until she was sure no tears shone in her eyes. Then she faced him again. "No matter what, I want to see the aliens. I'll go with you."

He nodded solemnly. "Forgive me, Ship's Ward, but I must ask for a promise that you will contain your animal desires—"

"But I don't have any animal desires!"

"—and conduct yourself like a lady."

She clamped down on her anger. Before answering, she made sure that her 'Navy face' was securely in place. "No problem, sir." Except, perhaps, with the 'lady' part. Still, she'd read enough gordo novels to have some idea what he meant.

"Furthermore," McShallin said, "you must promise not to precipitate any kind of incident or cause trouble while we are on Zee-Shode."

Tompa took a deep breath. “I’m not a troublemaker.” When his expression didn’t change, her voice took on a pleading note that she hated but was helpless to change. “Look, most of us stuck in Manhattan are victims, not criminals. All I want is to blend into the walls and make full Navy. I’ve been working with you for three months—don’t you know me by now?”

Slowly, staring into her eyes, he shook his head. “I don’t know you at all, Ship’s Ward. You make very sure no one does. And that’s part of the problem.”