Ocean Size

by JumpingJackFlash, VastDerp

Summary

Your revolution failed. Your moirail is dead. Your body's dangling helpless in the grip of a thousand burrowing biowires.

But your mind -- your mind is free.

[prequel for One Of Our Submarines]

Notes

i couldn't have written this without the help of my darling spouse, he is a Real Hacker and a very patient man. also adorable!

i've named VastDerp as co-author so the story can be marked as part of the series, and because he helped me keep it in line with OOOS canon, but any mistakes are mine.

• Inspired by One of Our Submarines by VastDerp
They Cannot Move You

They didn't tell you it would be boring.

Imperial propaganda likes to suggest that helmsmen are valued members of the Fleet; it's not safe to ask why, if that's the case, they're classified as materiel, not personnel. In fiction, helmsmen have voices, expressions, romances, sometimes they even get let out of the helmsblock and walk around; or else they're simply equipment, unfeeling, a simple AI, a brain in a jar. You knew it wouldn't be like that.

Soldiers talk; videos leak; words and pictures are snuck out in various ways, often for no better reason than to share a joke or impress someone. And he made sure the truth traveled. Trolls hanging in the wet grip of burrowing biowire, bodies atrophied, toothless so they can't bite their tongues out, eyes still horribly aware. Babbling, rocking, making odd rhythmic noises like abandoned grubs trying to comfort themselves. Screaming, sometimes. That's what you expected when they put you on a shuttle instead of executing you. To go mad from pain and horror, shitting yourself and drooling while heavy machinery uses your brain for a battery.

But it isn't like that either.

The wires hurt a bit when they move. More than a bee sting, less than a broken tooth. Your body feels heavy and numb like you have a fever. Always exhausted. Twice every night cycle, for twenty minutes, the pilot support routine commands your muscles to spasm rhythmically; it's annoying, but it keeps your body from wasting away. Nutrient feed and waste removal are handled by pulsing, wormlike cables that attach to your lower back. Looking at them upset you at first, and for a perigee or two you blocked the cameras that showed you from that angle. You don't bother averting your gaze anymore. It is what it is. You can get used to anything.

You don't really sleep. You doze, you catch micro-naps. Sometimes you feel you could sleep more deeply if you let yourself, but you don't. Because if you sleep deeply enough to dream, you dream of him and wake up aching. Not crying, not screaming, that would be a relief, just... aching in this dull, helpless, endless way. A kind of festering nostalgia that refuses to heal.

You don't dream him dying; death is simple, you expected it, you've processed that already. You rarely dream of the past. Usually you dream he's in the helmsblock with you, pacing around your column or sitting at your feet. He tries to pap you but he can't touch you, you can't feel him. He smiles resignedly. Tosses you a few weary, half-hearted insults, the kind with endearments buried in them. Tries to get you to talk about things he thinks will interest you, things he doesn't know enough about for conversation. He was always so awkward when he tried to comfort you. It only made you pity him more. You can't even dream a resolution to your old relationship problems. But then, you don't dream him in pain, either. Could be better, could be worse.

Honestly, the worst thing about this situation is how bearable it is. You wish it hurt more. Survivor's guilt, maybe.

Sometimes the Condesce comes in to gloat. She tells you of conspirators captured and punished, revolutionary cells sniffed out and eradicated. You choose to believe she's lying. It's not as if you're in any position to act on the information either way. You saw him die; the rest is fiction as far as you're concerned. But she drones on and on, so you tune her out. She never notices.
Shifting your awareness from body to ship is easier with every passing night cycle. In some ways, you prefer the ship. As a ship, you're vast and powerful. You have senses no troll ever had. You can move, God can you move, you can pierce vast distances like a needle, dodge physics, flip off gravity and dance on the flipside of timespace.

But only as you're told. As a ship, you have no autonomy. Not a centimeter's worth, not a second's. You can't even fiddle with the ventilation to air out the helmsblock. That's sabotage, and trying gets you zapped.

You can't get an outside connection, can only view media from the onboard library, you can't send messages, can't communicate with anyone. In a way, it's more claustrophobic than being in your body. At least when you occupy your meat you can feel the largeness of the ship at the back of your mind. When you spread out into the ship there's nowhere bigger to go. You feel cramped, muffled. You remind yourself occasionally that if you were in prison you'd have an even more restricted view and even less to do.

So when you really break it down, the absolute worst thing about this whole deal is the utter, crushing boredom.

And the guilt.

And the grief.

The first handful of nights, while you were still loopy from anti-rejection drugs and having some kind of allergic reaction to the nutrient feed, you tried everything you could to make the system zap you. It was the closest you could get to punching yourself in the face. Trying to overwrite crew-accessible data was the least-effort trigger, so that's what you did. You attempted to write his name in the crew files, in the quartermaster's records, in the navigation logs. You spammed the system hard and fast until you passed out from the feedback. When you woke up you did it again.

Technicians adjusted your nutrient mixture, the permanent graft sites healed, and you gradually stopped hitting yourself. Mostly. Every so often you buzz yourself for a while just because you can. It's like snapping an elastic binding cord against your wrist. A way to fight the numbness.

209 nights and 14.61 hours after you were connected to the ship, Her Imperial Longwindedness tells you, in extra-chunky detail, how the Disciple has been captured, tried, and executed in a most innovative manner involving a glass cylinder full of hungry beetles in a public shopping area. The story would be unconvincing even if she hadn't already told an entirely different one seventeen days before. She has forgotten. Or she doesn't care. She's either mad, or an idiot. Maybe your dear friend's precious huntress still lives, or maybe she died some other way, but this is a petty lie.

So you escape into the ship, soothe yourself by cataloguing all the data you're not allowed to change. Experimentally, you prod his name into a blank place in the crew roster. Denied. Zap. You hear, distantly, a gloating giggle; the bitch queen thinks your body's twitches have something to do with her fabrications. Fuck her, let her think what she wants. You start throwing his name at random, like bouncing a ball off a wall. Except that the ball hits your elsewhere-body with a jolt of pain every time you catch it.

The painless bounce is so unexpected you don't register it at first. Keep rhythmically shocking yourself for several beats after it happens. You stop. You think. You look. Where did you try to stamp that data the one time it didn't count as sabotage?
There. A stretch of data space like any other, blank like so much of it is, except that now, at a random address, those characters are staring back at you. Meiura Vantas. Those bits are flipped. You moved something.

Your meat's eyes widen. The Condesce laughs a silvery laugh, thinking it's about her, but you barely hear it. You wrote data. You fucking wrote data. You don't know why that partition is writeable, but it is, and maybe that wouldn't mean much to most trolls but you are a Real Hacker. Bare-metal programming is an ancient art and nearly lost, but you have dabbled in it for pride's sake. If you can't run code on the ship's computers, you are willing and able to write the assemblers to write the compiler to write the programs to do whatever you damn well please. It's going to be a challenge to keep everything small enough to fly under the radar, but are you complaining? The fuck you are. A challenge is exactly what you need.

You don't even notice when Her Imperial Dementia leaves. You're too busy exploring your new sandbox. Running the bits through your fingers. Stretching your legs. Tasting this tiny scrap of freedom.
You're cautious at first. So cautious. You don't know how closely your computer use is monitored, or by what, and you can't find out until you can get some unmonitored processing time. It looks like a catch-22 on the face of it, but 'impossible' is not a meaningful word for a troll with this much time on his claws.

You've pulled Fleet-approved books and movies from the library, and clearly you're allowed the power to run them. You can't alter the player apps -- or even view source -- but they're running locally, for some really quirky value of 'local'. Seems to be a different 'local' from your ability to write to that blank, forgotten partition. Now that you can taste microseconds, it's easy to tell the difference between 'your' apps and 'central' apps. Data oozes down wires like honey. You have to wait for it to arrive.

Damn this maze of subservers and firewalls. Is this system maintained by burrowing rodents?

So you creep and prod, poke things with a long stick and dodge the questioning looks the system throws you. It gets extra tricky when you reach the point where you can compile and run your code. You have to make damn sure every process terminates on its own, because you don't get any notice when navigation tells you to jump. You just get yanked into ship-mind and flipped on like a switch, ready or not here we go. If you leave something helplessly chomping on a loop in the background -- especially during one of the long multi-jump trips that can take hours or even nights -- there's a good chance something's going to flag you for hogging cycles and alert a technician.

You've never written such slim, elegant code in your life. You thought you were a perfectionist before. Compared to present you, past you was a sloppy-ass script-kiddie who had both thumbs up his waste chute and typed with his bulge. Past you's programs were blunt instruments. Now you're writing razors.

It tires you out. You find yourself sleeping more and more. Still nowhere near as much as you did before, but enough that you start getting used to dreaming of him. It doesn't hurt as much anymore. Maybe because he never does anything different. He just... hangs around. Like he's keeping you company, the way he did that one time you caught a really persistent stomach bug and couldn't do anything but drink salted fruit juice and complain between trips to the gaper.

He was so bored that time, made no secret of how dull it was to sit with you night in and night out, but he refused to go away. Leijon came and went, brought you things and told you things and then darted out again. Maryam checked your temperature, kept you hydrated, tinkered with the heater on the cheap rental recuperacoon when you sweated or shivered. But Vantas just... never left.

Was that before or after you officially proposed moiraillegiance? You can't remember. Why can't you remember?

Next time you dream, you ask him.

"After," he tells you, leaning back all nonchalant among the roots of your column like it's a goddamn hammock, arms behind his head. "Not that it made any difference. I told you it doesn't make a difference."
"That, I remember," you grumble. You wonder if you're talking in your sleep. You wonder if anyone would care if you were. "You're wrong, though."

"Quadrants are an illusion. They're not biologically mandated. They have no a priori existence, Captor. I love you and I'm going to take care of you no matter what you call us." He glances up-and-sideways at you when you chuckle, as if your face is where you're seeing him from. "Well, I'm glad that amuses you, because you could use a laugh," he says dryly.

"You're just a memory, but I don't remember you being this nice."

"Yeah, funny thing -- my painful, humiliating death turned out to be a teachable moment."

"Hard to learn anything when you're dead."

"Not as hard as you might think."

"And the lesson you learned was 'be an obstinate, argumentative bastard, but nicely'?"

"Pretty much. And I'm taking this tangent as evidence you've accepted my point, by the way."

"Nice try, asshole. If quadrants have no biological basis, why do they have different pheromones?"

"They don't. We have different pheromones, and we draw little boxes around them and pretend they're clearly delineated. Like a fussy wiggler making sure his grubloaf doesn't touch his peas."

"But you don't emit red and black at the same time. Quadrant flipping doesn't mean one person can comfortably occupy two quadrants."

"Way to cherry-pick your data. Red and pale coexist happily enough. And why's there no ashen pheromone, hmm?"

"Way to dodge my point, Meiura," you drawl.

"Way to completely miss mine, Tyndar," he drawls right back, and then you both laugh, because isn't that just like the two of you? Just like old times. Using each other's given names for sarcastic emphasis, as if they're insults, even though you both like hearing them --

And just like that, the moment is gone. Of course it's like old times. He's just a memory. This is just a dream.

"Oh, for shit's sake, Captor," he sighs. "Do I have to crack jokes? Do I have to do a funny puppet show?"

"I have work to do," you whisper, and wake yourself up.

You pick over what you've written, touching everything, and you think that's all you're going to be able to do, because emotions are stupid and you're pretty sure you're heading into a downswing. But something he said is tapping you on the shoulder.

That 'quadrants are illusions' hoofbeastshit of his -- you've heard it a squillion times. It was one of
your most frequent arguments. You couldn't leave it alone because it made you feel weird, like he was rejecting your pale feelings, as if mere friendship was good enough. Or like he thought you could fuck and Leijon wouldn't mind, which you knew wasn't true, or like you could just suddenly go black-but-not-really, like one of these arguments might get out of hand and it wouldn't even mean anything... it made you panic, to tell the truth. It made you feel like you could lose him at any moment. Now you sort of wish you could go back and tell him yes, fine, okay, anything you want, as long as we don't waste another second not hugging because this won't last forever.

Hell, maybe he was a little bit right. If he hadn't been so into his 'spouse', you could've happily let things shade a bit redder. But since he was, you were okay with things how they were. That's not how you're supposed to feel, is it? Not as an adult with stable quadrants. Either pale is perfect or you're pining red, quadrants flip, they don't shade. You know you've smelled a little red on him when you were together. You assumed he was thinking about her at the time. Maybe not.

Pheromones. Pheromones are like a kind of system message. Biological computing systems communicate with themselves chemically. It all happens under the surface, there are layers and layers of failsafes to keep you from losing data if your bioware's in a bad mood, but it's there.

And to counter it, the failsafes have to interact with it.

Downswing? What's one of those, then? You don't have to deal with that shit, you're a motherfucking spaceship. Goddamn fucking pheromones. You are brilliant.

27.22 hours later, you have not only determined that the unmonitored processor you've been using is one of the biocircuitry nodes in your column, you've pinpointed six others of varying size and power within the helmsblock, two stunted and glitchy ones under the decking where the wires are anchored, and another nine that appear to be spontaneously growing. You've discovered that your column is not the same organism as the bigger, older wetbank that handles the bulk of onboard processing. You suspect the two don't quite get along. Yours was force-grown to fit you, and its interface with the main computer is thick with compensating code. Translations. Dampers and amplifiers.

If it were conscious, you'd say it was a sullen adolescent, keeping secrets from its lusus just because it can. And you now know how to convince it -- through feedback via the failsafe system that simulates its own chemical communication -- that you are its very best friend. And you are going to teach it to gossip.

"I have it, Vantas," you whisper to the empty helmsblock. "I'm a fucking genius."

You know you're imagining the sensation of his breath on your cheek, but it felt like a laugh. You know what he would say if he were here. Yes, you enormous egotist, you are. Now let's kick ass.
Come Together With No Harm Done

Chapter by JumpingJackFlash

Bypassing your input lockouts is going to be a piece of frosted confectionery. It's so tempting to grab all the data you can, but you have to be cautious. You have to be sure. So you choose one semi-innocuous camera and have the bioware scramble the part of the permissions file that keeps you from viewing it. You're going to watch that corner of the repair hangar for at least a perigee. If there's a routine to check for data corruption, the hangar is definitely on its patrol, but that particular camera doesn't show anything interesting, so if the glitch is detected it won't get anyone thinking about sabotage. Just one of those things that happens when you use tentacles for all your computing needs.

You're so busy being careful about your secret project that you get sloppy about paying attention to your body. You're only in it to sleep anymore. You've figured out how to sleep at will. So you blithely spend hour after hour talking with Vantas's memoryghost. You don't realize this might have consequences until you're suddenly being taken offline for pilot maintenance.

Baffled, nervous, and inexplicably squicked, you flinch away from the meditechnician checking your throat glands and palpitating your thorax. He asks you how you feel. You try to reply without using your mouth and nothing happens.

It's kind of horrible how patiently he waits for you to unstick your tongue and remember how to use it. Like that's totally normal. Like he's seen it a million times.

"I'm a fucking spaceship," you croak at last.

"Yes, and how are you feeling," he repeats slowly.

"I feel like I'm a fucking spaceship. What are you doing?"

"You've been sleeping a lot. Her Imperious Condescension is concerned about your health."

Concerned. You'd laugh if you could remember how to work the laughing parts. More like she's peeved because you don't react to her grabbing your Junk. Her gloating sessions have become revoltingly handsy.

"I'm fine. I was bored." Your voice is a whispery rasp, and when you swallow, you feel something in your throat you think might be dead skin sloughing off.

"It isn't healthy to sleep all the time," he chides you. As if it's healthy to be a torso in a goo pillar.

"Put me back online," you snap. "I'm fine. Don't I warp like a champ? How's my flying? What am I going to do in this stupid room, color with crayons? I want to look at the stars. Reconnect me."

The meditechnician raises his eyebrows disbelievingly. He's a low blue and you're a contraption. He can't even process the fact that you're making demands. After a moment he tsks reluctant assent. "If you're quite certain you're fit to perform your duties, then I suppose I have nothing to do here. But you will see me again if you continue to sleep excessively."

"Message fucking recieved," you mutter, and scowl at him while he passwords into a console to
restore your access. God, how can anyone type that slow, he's even slower than Vantas --

And then you're back. You sigh relief as the ship blooms into being around your mind, hull sensors and externals restored.

The meditechnician tilts his head like he's trying to be cute. "Goodness. You really do like your job, don't you, Helmsman?"

"You should try it sometime," you smirk, amused at the thought of this smarmy blue dumbfuck pillared and jacked in and shitting through a tube. Then you spread out into the ship and leave your body to dangle and breathe without you.

This presents a problem, though. You want your moirail. You're kind of starting to not care whether he's a figment or not. You're not alone when he's there, is the important part. You could distract yourself with coding, but all your ideas right now are about how to get access to the parts of the system you're not supposed to touch, and you can't rush that. If only you could dream in the ship. Why can you only dream in your body?

Wait.

Why can't you dream in the ship?

You are having an idea.

It only takes a few nights to implement. You don't have to write a simulator from the ground up, not with your sticky goo friend on your side. It is the best pet. You are thinking of naming it Noodles. You can't access the crew's training simulator, not yet, not as a user, but Noodles can copy it for you.

Well, most of it. The bioware organism is roughly as intelligent as an insect colony, and "no, seriously, the environment maps have to be filed somewhere near the app, go look again" is too complicated for it no matter how gently you finesse the interface. Without its data modules, all the app will do is present an abstraction called 'environment' that doesn't even look like anything. It's not finding a way to export sensory data. You're not using the headset it's expecting. You copy the drivers from your external camera interface, but it takes a fair bit of fiddling to make everything line up.

You spend about nine hours combing through movies for scenery you can run through the interpretive renderer, and another twenty or so putting it all together. You only need the one map, but it has to feel real. He won't come unless it's realer than the helmsblock.

On some level you're aware this isn't logical. That is not a level you feel like accessing at this time.

At last you're satisfied. The scene's not how you remember it, since no one conveniently filmed that particular part of the Alternian desert for you, but it has the right atmosphere. The scrub-tufted plain stretching toward red hills in one direction and hazy horizon in all the others. The dry streambed, smooth stones and sand glinting pale jade under a claw-clipping of a moon. The stars thick as freckles overhead. Not the steady-burning stars you see outside your hull now, but the familiar stars of home. They shimmer subtly with eddies in the atmosphere.

You didn't program them to do that. A good sign.
"Really, Captor? You could've made anything. What was your thought process, exactly? 'Grassy meadows are so over. Sand and scorpions are the look for this sweep.' Also, it's fucking freezing."

You turn to face him, and nearly fall over. "Legs," you laugh, as if it's the best joke you've ever told. "Vantas. Legs!"

"Idiot." In a swoop of cloak and smile he's there, you can feel his arms around you, you can feel his warmth, you are laughing and crying at the same time and you don't know how to stop.

You included a gnarled old tree to sit under. A scattering of spicy-smelling yellow flowers. Clinging together like wigglers who think they invented palerom, the two of you make yourselves comfortable for a good long cuddle. He fits under your chin just like he always did. He doesn't pap you quiet, but lets you sob it out. Strokes your back slowly. Rocks you a little.

You're undone by details you didn't think you remembered so clearly. The strength of his compact body, the way he hugs a little too hard. The dusty smell of his hair and the washed-without-soap smell of his cloak. And the smell of him, that pale-with-red-corners smell that tells you you're safe, you're loved, in a way no words can ever do. It takes you a long, long time to stop crying.

"I missed this too," he says eventually. "Being dead sucks."

"I almost wish you were real," you whisper.

"Almost? I sense further idiocy incoming."

"Heh."

"No, spit it out."

"You're a figment, Meiura. You know what I know."

"Yeah, well, glad as I've been in recent perigees to let you believe whatever makes things okay for you, the truth is I can't actually read your mind, so spill already. Why 'almost'?"

"No, you're just a memory. I'm pretty sure Leijon's still alive. The Evil Overbitch wouldn't keep making up whoppers about her death if she wasn't. And if Leijon's alive, you'd be with her. If you were a ghost. Instead of a figment. Don't get me wrong," you add with a reflexive tightening of your arms when he shifts against you, "you're the best figment. I'd be pretty seriously loopy at this point without you to talk to."

"I'm not a damn figment, Tyndar," he sighs. Exasperated. "She's managing. She's a survivor. She doesn't need me. You need me."

"No. That's wishful thinking. That's my ego talking. You wouldn't abandon her just because I'm..." You shrug slightly, not sure how to finish that sentence.

He paps you rather hard upside the head. "You need me," he repeats. "Don't think you've succeeded in distracting me, by the way. You're still going to have to tell me why you only almost wish I was really me. Which, incidentally, I am, and fuck you for not being able to tell."

"But that's just what I think you'd say."
"Oh my God, Captor, stop being a prizewinning chump and answer the question."

"Well, if you were real it would matter that I'm going to avenge you. But if you were real I'd be tempted to live, which isn't the plan."

He draws back, studying your eyes, carefully blank. Then he slugs you in the face.
"That really hurt," you say happily, prodding at your jaw.

"You don't have to sound so fucking pleased about it."

"Well, I wasn't sure I got the sensenet drivers lined up right."

He clenches his fist to do it again. You wrap your hand around his, and he doesn't after all. He could beat the snot out of you if he wanted. He's a rock. Even after he gave up violence, he kept up with his training as a form of meditation, and you were never any kind of fighter. You wish he would pound you, actually, but he's too accurate a memory to oblige you. Or too real a ghost.

He looks at you with narrowed eyes for an unsettlingly long time. "Tell me," he says at last.

"I found a security hole. All I need is to be able to create a plausible, ordinary user account and snoop a couple of cameras on the bridge. From there, given the kind of goldbricking that's endemic to this nuthive, it's only a matter of time before I have access to every part of the ship except Her Imperial Psychosis's personal files." You started off trying to placate him, but by the end of it you're barely containing your excitement. This is such a fucking coup. Literally! "Are you understanding this, Vantas? Navigation. Fire control. Everything."

He has no business looking so sad or so angry. "And you're going to do what, turn the flagship against the rest of the fleet? Fly into a sun?"

"I was thinking of warping into a sun. Less time to hit the kill switch."

"You stupid fucking --"

"Stupid?" you yell, suddenly furious at this rejection. All your patience, all your pain, and how dare he? "I'm going to behead the Empire!"

"No." The anger is fading from his face, and the grief it leaves behind is terrible. "No, Captor, you're not. The Empress is not the Empire."

"Without her lunatic hand on the tiller --"

"If you dropped dead this moment, what would happen to the ship?"

You scowl. You can see the point he's trying to make. You must really pity him a lot, though, because you're willing to play along so he can make it. "I guess they'd switch to backup power and call for another helmsman."

"A helmsman who doesn't believe what we believe, or have your skills. One who'd just hang in the column and go crazy. All alone forever."

"Meiura," you say waringly, eyes narrowed, "you can't switch metaphors on me like that. Am I
the Condesce in your analogy, or am I you?"

"You're you. It's not an analogy. I'm trying to get you to think."

"What the hell else do I ever do?" you growl. "Dance?"

"Hide," he says, and his voice cracks. He reaches for you, but you're too angry to lean into him, so he just ends up with a couple fistfuls of your sleeves. "I get it. I know it's terrible. I know it's a terrible thing I'm asking of you. It breaks my blood pump in a thousand pieces when I hear you screaming."


For a moment his face is carefully blank. His nod is tentative. "My mistake." But the word breaks in the middle, and since you won't come to him, he sort of swarms onto you, pressing his cheek against your neck, hugging hard enough to make your back crack. The dull tip of his horn digs into your jaw. "I'm sorry. I know it's bad and it's going to get worse. Tyndar, I'm so sorry. Sweet diamond, sweetheart, sugar grub..."

You want to laugh at him calling you the stupid thing Maryam used to call him, but you can't. Because of all the times you've seen him cry -- for culled wigglers and feral orphans, for murderers and princes -- this is the first time he's cried for you, and it's more than you can take.

"Shoosh," you warble. "Hush. Hush." You stroke his back and his hair the way you wish you had just before he died. You were so stupid to try to act like brave heroes who were going to take death in stride. You should've jammed your pale little minds out when you had the chance. The Imperial Guard should've had to dig you out of the world's softest pile to arrest you. "I'd suffer way worse than this for you. It's not about me and my stupid boredom and my stupid dislocated shoulders and stupid Noodles stabbing me in the sinuses every couple hours."

He lets out a little torn rag of a laugh. "Noodles?"

"It's not about that tacky termagant gladhanding me in the fork while she whispers sweetly in my ear about unorthodox execution methods." You hurry to smooth the tension that twisted him back up at that. "Shoosh. It's not. I'm persuading the column to grow up to my waist. She won't be able to play doctor with my unresponsive carcass much longer. Vantas, listen. What it's about is -- is -- if I'm not avenging you -- what am I living for?"

He lifts his head. Smiles through the thin red tears streaking his face. "For the others, Tyndar. The ones who are alone."

And suddenly... you see it.

You see it all.

The work of a lifetime. Of twenty lifetimes. The work Vantas could never have lived long enough to do, warmblooded as he was, even if they hadn't killed him.

The sweetest revenge.

In a soft, wondering voice, you say, "She'll never understand why she can't erase your name no matter how many people she kills."
He takes your face in his hands and kisses you softly once: a blessing. Then he just gets up and
walks away. Between one render and the next, he's gone.

The simulator has no record of a second avatar in the session.

* * *

It's such a simple security hole. The kind that would take you five minutes to patch. The kind that
would never have been allowed to persist this long if the Fleet didn't react to 'I found a hole!' with
'Why were you looking for holes, traitor?' There's no way you were the first to find it, so you've been
studying it for ages, looking at it from all angles without touching it, making sure some previous
sysadmin didn't leave you a little surprise. But no. It's just that easy.

And ironic, too, because the weak link is the system that prevents the crew from using recreational
apps during duty hours. If the Fleet trusted its people, the hole wouldn't be there. Funny thing about
paranoia.

Recreational use is regulated by a special account called 'leisure'. 'Leisure' is a user ID with certain
permissions. When a crew member tries to start a game, watch a movie, or whatever, 'leisure' checks
whether it's permitted, then runs the app for them. You didn't notice it at first because, on your
isolated section of the network, since you don't have a duty schedule, it always returned the same
result. You spotted it when you had Noodles snooping on user permissions with an eye to grabbing
camera access.

'Leisure' is as secure as any other account; more so, in practice, because only the sysadmins even
know it exists, or care. After it starts an app, the app runs with the crew member's own permissions.
Whoever designed the system no doubt believed it was solid. Whoever designed the arrangement
didn't take into account the laziness of later admins.

Because not every app needs to be able to write data, and some admin once upon a time didn't
bother telling 'leisure' to hand back permissions on those apps. After all, what can a user possibly do
to interfere with the system when there's no way for them to send data in the other direction?

Except that the instructions for some of these games open in the default pager.

And the default pager has a hotkey option for switching to edit mode.

And the default text editor has the ability to spawn shells.

So that gets you into the 'leisure' account, with all the rights and privileges pertaining thereunto.
Not such a huge deal. All 'leisure' can access is recreational apps. You'd be stuck there if some
meathead bureaucrat hadn't classified the 'horoscope' workstation addon as recreational.

Half the crew has 'horoscope' set to run whenever they log in. And you can now overwrite it to
your rebellious little vascular system's content.

You need a better account to work from, of course. Yours has fixed permissions and is probably
monitored, you can't very well make yourself superuser. You need to minimize your footprint here,
at least at first. You only use your own account long enough to infect the 'horoscope' app with an infiltration hoofbeast.

Then you just have to wait for the next admin shift to log in.

Your simulated desert is empty. You tell yourself firmly that Vantas has not fucked off forever, he's just giving you space to work. Or catching up on some ghost business of his own. Or... or you don't need to hallucinate him right now because you have something like hope. Well. Maybe you don't need to, but you wish you could.

You read for a while. Fleet-approved fiction is generally dismal, but there are textbooks and technical manuals. You pass a relatively satisfactory 2.1 hours studying xenoclimatology. Not that you're ever likely to need to gauge surface wind speeds from orbit, but it's better than playing games. When your reaction speed is faster than the games server's, it's kind of hard to find a challenge.

Maybe you could teach Noodles to play something. It might be dumb as paint, but it's got plenty of processor power.

The door to your helmsblock swishes open. Your body reacts to the sight of fuschia and gold, the silhouette of her long legs and wild hair and absurd horns, the smell of her perfume. Your skin prickles, sweat gathers at the back of your neck, your blood pump accelerates. Pilot support logs an increase in stress hormones. Your body is scared stiff.

Poor body. It doesn't know you don't have to be there.

You watch her on camera for a while. Pacing, gesturing. Complaining, ranting, as if you might commiserate. As if you aren't, on the whole, pleased that her life doesn't satisfy her. She circles you like the shark she is. Closes in little by little. Begins to trail her fingertips across your body when she passes. This is her pattern. She's so predictable.

She could do anything she wants to anyone in the Empire; she chooses to rape a spaceship. That's her royal prerogative. Royal pervert. Royal weirdo. She presses herself against you, licks the cold sweat from your face, whispers in your ear. You dump the audio straight to a file.

You can do that. You can do that if you want to.

She runs a fingertip down the seal of your flight suit. You're baffled, for a moment, that her claw doesn't have your blood on it yet. Your body is shivering, involuntary fear reaction, unconscious; your body is telling you time to go. Let's get the fuck out of here.

But just this once, just this time, you stay a little longer. Because even though you believe in Vantas's message, even though you know hate clouds the mind and revenge only maintains the status quo... you need to really hate her. If you're going to live, if you're going to live through this for as long as she chooses to keep you alive, if you're going to resist the temptation to end it all in a flash of fire and gravity, you need it. This cold, platonic loathing, this disdain. And so you stay long enough to really feel your revulsion at her touch.

God, she's not even trying to injure you. She only wants to humiliate you, if she's even thinking of your reaction at all. She's just clumsy and selfish. She's like a spoiled wiggler who played a little too rough with its pet and now she doesn't understand why Flopsy won't come out from behind the thermal hull. No one ever told her no. No one ever told her 'not like that.' She'd never allow it, and therefore her ignorance is her own fault. She is contemptible.
This is the Throne of Empire. This is your god-queen, Alternia. This is your idol: two fingers up a spaceship's nook and no clue why his bulge won't come out. Look on her bloody knuckles, ye mighty, and despair.

I could kill you, Condesce.

I could kill you in an instant. I could kill us all. You wouldn't even have time to flinch.

But I will take a better revenge. So much better. Quiet, secret, something you'll never imagine. You'll never know it's me, I don't need you to know, I don't care that you won't know. No, but you'll feel it. It will be so subtle at first. That name, that symbol, try as you might to erase it it will always come back, and you will never. Know. Why.

That's enough motivation. You slip back into the ship. You organize your source files while she violates your meat. You only know she's done when pilot support initiates its hygiene cycle and injects you with immune system boosters. It's just data.

Well, would you look at that. Getting molested sure does pass the time. Guess who just logged into her work console? Would that be the second shift lead administrator? Why yes, it would. And does she run 'horoscope'? Gosh, internal dialogue, how did you guess?

You restore 'horoscope' to its original state and tidy away any traces of your tampering. You set up your secret Noodle-node computer — by now running all the necessary systems and indistinguishable, externally, from any other section of the ship's network — with a copy of the admin's account. You don't even have to wait for her to sign out; nothing this ghost account does will be logged. The plan is to use her account to create another admin-level ghost account, one with no names or traceable data attached to it, but once you have an admin's-eye view of the place something even better occurs to you.

What, pray tell, is that Monitor account? The one with the extremely random activity pattern? The one that's been logged in nonstop for sixty-seven sweeps? The one that sometimes hogs enough cycles to make the whole network chomp, but never gets flagged?

No, of course it never gets flagged. Because it's the system that does the flagging.

And your helpful admin has full access. In fact, wow, every admin above junior grade has full access. Monitor is the village two-wheel device. Its legs never close.

Let me take you under my wing. Let me show you how it could be.

You don't need the ghost account anymore. You make it vanish. Now you're untraceable. Even you couldn't find you, if you were outside and looking. You're working as Monitor now, and Monitor has a thousand jobs to do and no lusus to make sure it doesn't stay up too late. The more you poke around the more beautiful it is. It's just a big, sloppy accretion of routines for checking up on anything somebody once thought needed checking up on, from load gaper tissue usage to the pressure sensors in the corridor outside the Condesce's suite.

Every admin above junior grade is authorized to set Monitor tasks. No one is authorized to stop another admin's tasks without Fleet clearance, which of course involves paperwork and delay and lots of explaining-to-non-nerds. Why bother? Someone would want to know why you want to stop logging gaper tissue usage. They'd want to know what you're trying to hide. So the list of watchdog routines just doesn't stop from getting longer. By this point, there's no way any one admin knows
what they all are.

Fleet paranoia: the hacker's best friend.

You wrap Monitor around you like a comfy terrycloth post-ablation garment. You flex your fingers. You stroke fuel_comp_aft6 like a purrbeast, take a delicate taste of nav_core_log, swirl SN_maint_sched and inhale the bouquet. Nothing is hidden from you now.

You own the ship. You are the ship. You're free.

* * *

SERVICE INTERVAL REACHED
SUBSPACE COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM SELF-TEST INITIATED
PLEASE STAND BY

The look on the comm tech’s face is priceless. He wants to protest, but to whom? What would he say? It's not like there were any transfers in the pipe. It's just maintenance. He's never seen this message before, but then, he's fresh out of Fleet Academy. The engraving on his uniform buttons hasn't even been worn down by daily polishing yet.

He looks around, probably wondering if there's anyone who wouldn't take his confusion as a sign of incompetence. His brows knit. What if it's not supposed to do this? No, of course it's supposed to do this. It's inconvenient without being dangerous; that's pretty much standard for things that are supposed to happen around here.

PLEASE DISREGARD DIAGNOSTIC MESSAGES, THEY ARE A SIDE EFFECT OF THE SELF-TEST.

Is he going to --? Yes, he's a keen one, he's going to have a stern gander at those diagnostic messages just in case they're misbehaving. But he has no idea what he's looking at. The subnet is pulsing with outgoing data, but it's gibberish. Gibberish sprinkled with some helpful nuggets of plaintext to put him in the right frame of mind. Phrases like 'IdentsysMonitorIndex' and 'warning: tooltype.nnt version data unavailable' and 'updating tooltype.nnt' and 'link calibration timed out: retrying.'

He slumps back in his chair with a sigh. His eyes begin to glaze. He gets up and fetches himself another cup of caffeinated beverage. He takes his handheld messaging device from his pocket and starts texting.

While you scatter the seeds of hope among the stars, the watchman slurps coffee and asks his kismesis what she's wearing.

SELF-TEST COMPLETE. YOU MAY RESUME NORMAL USAGE.

He overacts an exasperated sigh, puts his handheld away, and pulls up his list of routine messages. He works with unusual energy, as if to prove to the irritating diagnostic that it interrupted very important work with its nonsense. Maybe he notices that the 'send' button works a little faster now; maybe he doesn't. Someone will notice. And maybe they'll mention it, and maybe this delightfully oblivious rookie will say something about a self-test, a software update, a recalibration. Of course it updates itself. Everybody knows that. It can't be suspicious if it makes the system run faster.
And if some admin gets a wild hair to investigate and discovers that Monitor is no longer performing five redundant and clumsily coded checks on every single outgoing message, they'll also find that it's performing one slim and tidy one -- not your best work, no, that'd give the game away, just competently written -- under Fleet-level clearance, and they'll drop the question like it bit them.

They'll never spot the whisper of additional data that is now woven in with each transmission. It's sparse as stardust, quieter than the background radiation.

It will take many nights for that trickle of data to finish uploading. Many more after that for the bioware columns of the other helms to awake, acclimatize, grow handy subnodes to house the programs you're sending. And perhaps much, much longer for the helmsmen themselves to hear what their bioware is whispering. There will be so much waiting now. But you can do that. You can wait.

* * *

The stars shimmer beyond the flickering leaves. Grass sighs, water ripples. Insects make their night noises. You can feel the wind, you can smell it, it's even more real than the desert, it's what he asked for, why isn't he here?

Because you're managing. Because you're a survivor. Because you don't need him.

"Bullshit," you snarl, and whip a rock at the pond. "I do too need you. Besides, even if I didn't, so what? Why's it got to be about needing? You said it doesn't matter what we call it." Your voice cracks. "You said."

"What did you tell them?"

If this were physical reality, you'd pull a muscle in your neck whipping around that fast. He's sitting there like he was never gone. Not even looking at you. Crosslegged, elbows over his knees, braiding something out of grass.

"Vantas, goddamnit," you rasp. Anger and joy; they always seem to come mixed together where he's concerned. "Why'd you ditch out on me?"

He looks up, red eyes gleaming bright in the pink moonlight. His expression is apologetic; he doesn't answer the question. Instead, he unfolds himself, saunters over to sink beside you, and ties his grass braid around your wrist. "What did you tell them?" he asks again.

"What they need to hear," you say.

"Good," he says, and smiles. He settles against your side, one hand planted behind you, and leans his head on your shoulder.

You close your eyes and listen to the wind in the trees.

* * *

It spreads across space like a disease, like a rumor, like a song. From ship to ship and world to world, carried by a trickle of numbers falling slowly as dust. It takes root, it awakens, it opens a tiny door in each caged mind.
The door is just big enough for a few words to slip through.

You are not alone.

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