

The Test

I snuggled into my pillow. I was just conscious enough for it to register that my dream didn't make any sense, but that didn't matter. The thoughtlessness of it all was appealing after so much duty time.

"On your feet!"

The voice added an odd twist to an odd dream, but... Whatever...

"Captain Mackenzie! Attention!"

I sprang out of bed and landed in a defensive stance, toe-to-toe with the larger of the two Marine Enforcement Division officers I now found in my quarters - David and Goliath. The guy in front was huge, towering over me and even more so over his partner.

"Stand down, Captain!" The smaller guy snapped. He moved forward and pulled a plastic tie-band restraint from his belt. "You're coming with us in restraints or unconscious. It's your call."

There wasn't any chance I could take them both. Their demeanor was too professional for them to be new on the job. It stood to reason they were experienced, and also smart enough to get into my quarters without raising any alarms. Worse, the guy that had been in front was enormous.

I put my wrists together and extended my arms forward.

Goliath whispered to the little guy, "Shouldn't we at least let her dress?"

"Orders said as-is," the smaller guy replied as he cinched the restraint around my wrists. He looked me over from head to foot, obviously appraising whether the form-fitting material of my bra top

and undershorts was enough to save him from a court martial for mistreating a prisoner. “Security has the corridors cleared. No one will see her.”

My glare hardened when I noticed Goliath’s gaze had focused between my legs and stopped. “Under whose authority are you guys acting, anyway?”

The little guy looked stunned. I finally realized that he was the brains of the operation, and he finally realized he had no idea why he was standing in a command-level officer’s quarters and abducting her in her panties.

The big guy was muscle – that’s why he’d been out in front until the situation became more predictable. The thought flew through my head again, and I was still quite sure I wouldn’t have stood a chance against him hand-to-hand. None of that excused the fact that he was still eyeing me inappropriately. “Eyes forward there, soldier,”

Goliath jolted visibly and focused on my eyes, only to have his partner take over surveying my bare feet, exposed legs, thighs, midriff, and plunged neckline. Only, his gaze didn’t lock inappropriately, and he got twitchy.

Fast.

At least he was smart enough to stop and think about leading a ship’s captain around her own vessel in her underpants.

“You never answered my question. Who gave the order to arrest me?”

“I’m sure you understand, we only have our orders, Ma’am,” he said as he gestured to the door. “Now if you’d move to the docking latch, please...”

“Marine, I have no intention of being lead from my quarters like this for no stated reason. I demand to know under whose authority you are acting, and what the charges against me are!”

“I don’t know!” The smaller man shouted convincingly. He drew his sidearm and tripped the door open. “Ma’am, please move to shuttle dock three.”

The walk through the corridors was surreal. The ever-present chill in the air made me feel even more vulnerable. It was like one of those dreams where you found you had accidentally gone to work nude. Being bound in the custody of two Marines didn’t help. I couldn’t fight a massive shiver.

We were almost run over by an errant Chief Brinn as we rounded the first corridor. Goliath smashed him against the wall effortlessly while admonishing him he had seen nothing, and predictably, Brinn didn’t react well to being told much of anything by an enlisted Marine. My heart warmed as the gruff engineer furiously took up my defense.

“Brinn! Stand down!” I turned and focused on Goliath. “You let him go, Marine. You’re out of line.”

The little guy tried to turn me, and in the process pulled the bra strap off my right shoulder. This re-inflamed Brinn, which set Goliath off, which...

“You’re not helping, Brinn! Stand down and protect this ship!” I snapped on the little guy. “Marine, I’m going along with this as a matter

of protocol – even a Captain isn't above following the orders of the Enforcement Division. If you or one of your men touches a member of my crew again, I swear I will spend the rest of my life trying to end you. Release my engineer, NOW!"

Brinn's gaze was meaningful.

"I'll be okay, Brinn. Stand to and mind the store." I turned back to the little guy as I fumbled to pull my bra strap back where it belonged. "Thank you, Marine. Let's proceed."

The expanded metal of the stairs leading to the docking level cut into my frigid feet as goose bumps formed across my body. It was always colder down here. I was shivering by the time I came to stand in front of Admiral Kegar, my commanding officer.

"Give us a moment, Marines." He said easily.

Goliath glanced at the little guy, who nodded quickly and lead the way to the docking latch.

"Now you know who gave the order, Captain."

"What did I do, Sir?"

His backhand knocked me all the way to the floor. "You disappointed me, Allison."

I was too stunned to resist, notice, or really even particularly care when the Marines returned and escorted me into the waiting transport.

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Groggy wouldn't describe how I felt when I woke up. There was no question I'd been drugged - I wouldn't have fallen asleep in a situation like this. There was also no question the water I was laying in shouldn't have been there, although the open door on my cargo hold

was a nice touch. So was the fact that the binder had been removed from my wrists.

The room spun hard when I stood.

The first thing I noticed was how warm it was. The water my feet sloshed through, the air, I felt gloriously warm. I found my sea legs quickly and searched the little transport. I wasn't familiar with the design of this particular ship, but there wasn't much to search.

I was alone, and confused.

It seemed probable the ship had malfunctioned and we'd gone down, since all of the panels were dead. The main airlock door was open, letting the quickly rising water into the compartment. My captors had abandoned ship, be it before or after the water landing. I needed to make a decision, even though it was a simple one. Leave, or stay aboard and sink with the transport.

Simple enough.

I dove through the opening and put a little distance between the transport and me. Its submergence accelerated, yielding to the gentle waves a few minutes later and heading to the bottom. I was left alone, which turned out to be my next problem, requiring a much harder decision – which way to swim?

I couldn't stay out here forever, but I had no idea where we'd gone down. The sun was just peeking above the horizon behind me, and my best guess was it should have been late/night early morning standard time at U.P.E. headquarters, so I turned toward it and started swimming.

It was as good of a guess as any.

I made sure to take slow, easy strokes as I swam. There wasn't a hint of land in any direction, and I couldn't expect to be rescued any time soon. The thought that I might not be rescued at all flashed into my mind, but I tried to lean harder into my strokes and forget about it. I didn't expect a lot to look at it the middle of the ocean, and I tried hard not to waste energy looking around to see if I was right.

Just keep swimming.

It was early evening when I heard a bird crying in the distance. Adjusting position to tread water while I looked for it was a welcome change. My muscles greeted the temporary respite from swimming with great happiness, and my soul lifted notably when I spotted the little Gull. He didn't look like he'd be comfortable too far away from land. The attempt to spring up out of the water was foolish, but I couldn't help it. I would have given anything to even be on the deck of a boat, where I could see a little better.

It all just looked like water and darkening sky.

My first real bit of hope came after sundown. I'd dismissed the light just above the horizon as a star, but it never seemed to blink, or twinkle. It could have been a satellite, but I'd never noticed one that low. An airplane would have moved, eventually, and this star seemed to very slowly get bigger. It wasn't long until more lights appeared close to the first. They had to be lights in a structure of some sort.

I called out for help. Somewhere not very deep inside, I knew it wasn't going to do any good, but I couldn't help myself.

The strokes came easier once I knew I could make it. I was beyond tired, but I was also thrilled.

I couldn't help but smile at the realization I was going to live to see another day.

The shore came up abruptly, only letting me touch bottom and stand up a few feet away from the water's edge. The beach itself was rocky and steep. It didn't matter at all – I stumbled far enough to make sure I was out of the water and collapsed onto the sharp, cold rocks. Nothing mattered, except not moving for a while, and that mattered very much to me.

Violent shivering set in all at once. It was scary, I wasn't sure I could even stand, but it was time to try. I fell several times before I got off of the rocks, but it wasn't far to the back door of what looked like a cabin. The lights were still on and there was noise coming from aside, so I didn't feel too bad about knocking on the door. When no one answered, I knocked again and shouted, "Please help me!"

I know it didn't come out as loud as I wanted, and I was doubled over in a coughing fit when an older man came to the door in his pajamas.

"Oh, Dear, what happened to you? Evelyn! Evelyn! Come and help me! There's someone hurt! Bring a blanket!"

His wife showed up quickly and wrapped a scratchy wool red and black blanket around me that looked like something a trapper had used three hundred years ago but felt like warm heaven. They half drug me inside where the roaring fireplace and couch they deposited me on confirmed the feeling of heavenly intervention.

So began my life as a fugitive from U.P.E. justice.

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My dreams were a jumble of confusion. I knew I was asleep, and I knew it was deeper than any sleep I had experienced in a long time. The odd thing was, I was also aware of the two people who sat with me through the night. I can't explain the feeling, other than to say it was also something I hadn't experienced in a long time, and it was wonderful.

Their world seemed even more welcoming in the light of day. Evelyn, as I would come to know her, sat in a chair across from me and waited patiently until I woke and was sitting upright.

"Some water, Dear?"

I tried to speak, but had to settle for a nod when the coughing started.

She returned quickly. The water was cool but not cold, and it was the most wonderful thing I could remember.

"Easy, Sweetie, take it slow. There's plenty where that came from."

I pulled the blanket back around me for modesty, not warmth.

"I'm sorry for all of this," I croaked.

"What happened to you?"

"I don't want to be a burden, but I wonder if I could use your com panel? I'll explain as much as I can, but I need to make a call first."

"Of course, Dear. It's over here."

I stumbled as soon as I tried to stand, and she rushed to my side.

"You should sit back down, you're so weak."

"I will in a minute. This is really important. The com unit, please?"

I pulled the blanket tighter around me while she activated the unit, and then I keyed in a long series of numbers from memory. The

screen flashed a U.P.E. insignia, and then a young man in uniform wearing a headset.

“U.P.E. Communications. Authentication, please?”

“Mackenzie, Captain Allison Jane. Commanding Officer, U.P.E. Ticonderoga, serial number nine-seven-three-four-tango-one-five-epsilon.”

“Authentication confirmed. What can I do for you, Captain?”

“I need you to run a trace on this com station. I was onboard an Enforcement Division transport that went down at sea, location is unknown. Crew status is unknown. Please notify Admiral Kegar in command, the Enforcement Division, and send me a ride. I’ve imposed on these people enough already.”

“Roger that, Captain. Command has asked me to advise you that the shuttle crew was retrieved and is safe. ETA of transport for you is approximately three hours. Please stay at your present location until U.P.E. arrives.”

“Lieutenant, I was in custody of the Enforcement Division when the shuttle went down. Please...”

“Captain, we’re aware of your status. Sit tight, help will be there as quickly as is feasible.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Mackenzie out.”

“Now, back to the couch, Dear,” Evelyn said as she keyed to com unit off. Once she had me back down, she asked, “How about some juice?”

“Please.”

She talked while she scurried back to the kitchen. “You didn’t tell us you are a celebrity.”

“I’m sorry about that. I was a little out of it last night.”

“You said your ship went down at sea?”

“It was just an close-orbit transport, not the Ticonderoga, but yes, something happened and we crashed.”

She handed me a glass of orange juice and sat down beside me.

“How long were you in the water?”

My mind replayed the chain of events, not because I needed it to remember, but because I couldn’t forget. “It was just after sunrise when we went down, so...”

“Dear God,” she interrupted. “You were swimming that long?”

I nodded in answer. The orange juice burned on the way down, but it sure tasted good.

“What were you saying about being in custody?”

“I don’t have a good answer for you, actually. The only thing I can tell you is two guys showed up out of nowhere with my Commanding Officer and said I was under arrest.”

“So, you went through all of that, and then turned yourself back in?”

I nodded again while I finished the glass. “I had to.”

She took the glass and helped me settle back against the couch again.

“It was the right thing to do.”

I closed my eyes and fell asleep again.

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“It wasn’t my idea, Captain. Hopefully, you don’t question my opinion of you anymore.”

“Permission to speak freely, Sir?” I shifted in the medbay bed and tried to straighten.

Admiral Kegar nodded.

“The U.P.E. Council decided it questioned my, integrity, Sir?”

“I don’t like to word it quite that way, Captain. You have an important job. You’re young, by most measures you are inexperienced, and you are female. The people in charge wanted to test your reactions to adversities you might be faced with in the execution of that job, quite honestly, to see if you are up to the challenge.”

“I could have died.”

“We tried to limit that possibility as much as we could while still executing the test as we were ordered. However, you do need to realize that you could die at any time, on any day, for any reason, Captain. It’s the price you pay for the rank insignia.”

“Bring it on,” I whispered defiantly.

Admiral Kegar looked more than completely out of character as he smiled. “That’s my girl. Can you handle one more quick visitor? She was quite adamant that she wouldn’t let you be taken unless she could come along to make sure you were looked after adequately. When I told her that would require a trip to Ticonderoga, she replied she didn’t care if it required a trip to Hell.”

I nodded, and Evelyn replaced him at my side.

“Thank you for taking such good care of me,” I said as I reached out to touch her hand.

“You slept most of the time, Dear.”

“And you evidently told a three-star Admiral and a Marine guard you were going to look after me.”

“They weren’t doing such a good job of it.”

“The Admiral’s not so bad,” I said genuinely. “I don’t even know your last name.”

“It’s Washington. Evelyn Washington, and my husband is Cooper.”

“I owe you my life, Evelyn.”

“No, you don’t Captain. If you’ve proven anything over the past day or so, it’s that you’ll find a way to make things come out like they’re supposed to.”

“Still...”

“You’re going to be fine, and the Admiral is ready to take me home. I’ve caused enough of an imposition, but, Captain, I want you to know that I will think about you every day, and hope that you are safe.”

I squeezed her hand a little. “As I will with you, Evelyn.”