

Jovian Shadows Draft 2

First Officer's log, 2109-02-16

The JKP is closing in on the Jovian system, and the crew is getting antsy. We've been cooped up in this bucket for weeks, and it's taking its toll.

The Flying Wolves want to get to work. They won't be happy until someone's at their mercy, captured, or killed.

Criminals, the lot of them. The Marines needs bodies when their robots won't do. Give the mean ones commuted sentences in exchange for a chance at shooting big guns and a uniform that will get them all the tail they could want, and they'll jump at the chance like the dogs they are.

Doesn't matter that they're expendable. The criminal mind doesn't tend to lend itself to forward thinking. They let the brass deal with that.

Don't get me wrong, there are a lot of good marines in the Flying Wolves, but they're hungry for blood and pussy, and if the Big Dog or myself wasn't in the way, they wouldn't take no for an answer for either.

We have three women on board this boat. Two navy officers and one marine. The officers are True Blue, but the marine, CPL Gwen Jones, is a killer and drug dealer, according to records. And she seems to hold her own among her criminal pals.

LT CDR Heather "cute cheeks" Castaneda doesn't get the respect her rank commands. She's a little thing with a big attitude and an ass that wont quit.

Problem with her is the marines aren't afraid of her.

Hell, I'd make a move on her myself if I wasn't her senior officer. Word gets back to Home Office fast, and those limp-dick civvies would shit cows if they found out. They might not give a rat's nut about the marines, but officers are expensive, and they don't want any tarnish on that brass.

Anyway, those two have shacked up together to make Castaneda feel more comfortable. I know Jones likes the her as much as the rest of the marines, so I don't know what she's getting out of it.

LT CDR Jane Doe is the ship's doctor. Like every damn military doctor I've met, she's hard as steel and spits glowing hot nails. Maybe one too many field amputations gets to you. The Flying Wolves are all afraid of her. Shit, so am I.

Maybe it's more than the attitude. She has that metal plate with those lenses and lights over her eye that gives people the creeps. That, and the reminder she took a shot to the fucking *eye* and kept going.

As long as Big Dog and me keep the Wolves in line, we shouldn't have any problems.

But a lot can happen in four days. That's how much longer until the Jovian system.

The old JKP is holding up better than expected. It's her last tour, and if she makes it back, she'll be turned to scrap and recycled.

The traitors are still refusing Westhem Core's observers, so it's come down to a show of force. That's where we come in.

The JKP may be an old bucket of bolts, and the spinning gravity decks may have been retrofitted, but it's still a capitol ship and still has bite.

They captured Europa Station and have somehow taken over the AI. That means they have the

defenses at their disposal. We could probably nuke the thing and spin it into Europa's gravity well with a decent shot, but that's one hell of an expensive station, and boarding and reclaiming would be the order of the day, and what the marines are antsy for.

If only those were our orders...

The door buzzer startled Strathmore out of his narration. "End log. Timestamp." He turned toward the door and yelled, "What?"

A muffled voice called back. "Sir, there's a problem."

Strathmore stood and opened the door. He glared at private Al-Aziz. "What is it?"

"There's a problem on the bridge, sir. It's commander Castaneda."

Strathmore swiped his jacket from a table. "Where's the captain?"

"Engine room, sir. You were closer."

Strathmore zipped his jacket tight. "And you thought I could take care of this so the captain wouldn't blow a gasket."

"Aye sir."

Strathmore sighed. "Right. Let's go."

Strathmore had never let anyone know how harrowing it was for him to leave the artificial gravity of the spinning center-decks and head back into the zero-g parts of the ship. It was worse when the elevator was set to high speed. The gravity evaporated like a comet heading for the sun.

The closest he ever came to complaining was when he asked Big Dog Broadsky why they hadn't moved the bridge to the spinners when the ship had been retro-fitted.

"Too expensive for a shit-bucket like this." Big Dog had a hundred names for the JKP, but he loved his old ship all the same. He once confided in Strathmore he was going to be broken up standing there for the decommissioning ceremony.

The elevator reached the axis and began its revolution to dock at the right angle so the passengers could walk out into the hallways of the old zero-g sections.

The mag-boots clicked and clacked with every step toward the bridge. It took a particular set of muscles to walk at any speed using those things, and a lot of practice. And it was still a pain in the ass.

"So," he said, "what are we expecting?"

"It's Harmon, sir," Al-Aziz said.

"Of course it is." Strathmore squinted his eyes, staving off a headache. "What did that juicer do this time?"

Strathmore punched the bridge access code into the keypad and the door opened.

Private Stankowiz stood. "XO on the bridge!"

Everyone who wasn't already standing stood.

"As you were."

Harmon and Castaneda were still standing, staring at each other; Harmon glared down at the shorter woman with menace, while Castaneda stared back up at the slab of beef in front of her, defiant.

Strathmore stomped up to the two. "What the holy hell is happening on this bridge?"

Castaneda didn't break eye contact with Harmon. "Gunny Harmon is refusing a direct order, commander."

"Harmon, you Frankenstein! What do you have to say for yourself!"

"Commander, this—" Harmon finally broke eye contact with Castaneda and faced the XO. "She ordered a course correction, sir."

"Why did you not jump over the goddamn moon to obey that order, gunny?"

“Only the captain can order a course change sir.”

Strathmore pointed at the big chair. “Whomsoever sits in that seat speaks with the voice of God, gunnery Sargent!”

“But sir!”

Strathmore put his fingers on Harmon’s midsection, pushing up, and with a practiced sweep of his foot, unmoored the big man’s magnets from the floor. He gripped Harmon’s shirt and thrust upward, slamming the now weightless sergeant’s head on the ceiling before planting him back down on the ground with a mag-boot click.

“If you ever disobey a direct order from your commanding officer again, you will be standing tall before the man!” Tiny drops of blood spun around the Harmon’s head like little planetoids before being sucked up into the ceiling scrubbers. “You are confined to quarters until I figure out what to do with you.”

Harmon saluted and walked toward the bridge door, a slight wobble in his step.

Strathmore faced Castaneda. “Lieutenant Commander, meet me in the ready-room.”

“Yes sir.”

Captain Broadsky was livid. “Tell me again, Tech, in language that doesn’t make me want to bludgeon you with this here spanner.”

Technician Alphonso swallowed. “The rear attitude thrusters have been sabotaged, sir. If enough juice was supplied to it...”

Broadsky folded his arms and rested them on his bulging belly. His black and gray beard trembled with rage. “How did this happen? Who has access? Names!”

The tech picked up a small box with wires that protruded like legs from a dead bug. “This thing could have been placed only by my crew or a flag officer. They’re the only ones with the keys.”

“Bio-fucking-metrics! What about the biometric locks!”

“Sir,” Alphonso put the metal bug in a bin and closed it to keep it from floating. “The contractors never finished the security systems. Keys only.”

Broadsky’s nose flared. “What kind of boom are we talking about?”

“Just enough to cripple the engines.”

Broadsky scratched his beard. “What’s the point of that, unless they sabotaged the decel-array, we could still fly.”

The two men glanced at the bin with the bug.

Broadsky slammed his fist down on a com-link button. “XO, repair crew to front engine room! Battle stations!”

Corporal Jones sat on an exam bench in Jane ‘One-Eye’ Doe’s medical bay. “I don’t need a refill on those sleepers, doc. I’m doing fine now.”

Doc’s implanted eye made a faint whirring noise as it adjusted to its mental commands. “Protocol says I gotta check you for lingering side effects. Follow-up to any ship-grade enhancers.”

Jones folded her bare arms across her chest. Her tattoos couldn’t hide the goosebumps. “Why is it always so damn cold in here?”

“I could,” Doe said, “order you to take off your tank-top...”

“No thanks.”

Doc smirked as she thrust a metal tube against Jones’s shoulder. It made a pop as the laser-needle jabbed the skin. “I like it cold, Jones. Maybe I was a Yeti in a past life.”

“That implant did a number on your brain, eh doc?”

“Watch it, Jones. I’m still a doctor and a lieutenant commander in the Navy.”

“Sorry, sir.”

Doe put the syringe into a sheath attached to the analyzer. “Huh.”

“What is it, doc?” Jones fidgeted.

“You metabolize very quickly, marine. No trace of the sleepers.”

Jones grabbed her jacket. “Are we finished here?”

Doe glared back at Jones. Her implant buzzed and whirred.

“Sorry,” Jones said, “Are we finished, sir?”

The general quarters klaxon pulsed. Doe sighed. “Go on, it sounds like you have to go shoot something.”

Castaneda stood at attention in front of the desk in the ready-room.

Strathmore took a seat. “At ease.”

Castaneda put her hands behind her back.

“Now then,” Strathmore started, “What the hell is going on here?”

“It is standard procedure,” Castaneda said, “for the crew to be composed of commissioned naval officers aware of the chain of command.”

“You might have noticed lieutenant commander that this is not a standard ship. Nobody wants to serve on the JKP’s final mission, and any officers assigned bribed their way out. Only the command staff is left.”

“But the bridge crew—”

“Let me stop you right there, Castaneda. This ship is a firecracker filled to bursting with the gunpowder of combat soldiers. The mission is a simple drop-and-load. We’re to occupy the station and return it to Westhem.”

“Sir—”

Strathmore continued. “We have a shit-ton of vile criminals, many of them who realize this could be a one-way trip. We got the smartest NCO’s on the bridge to back up Cepheid and fire the weapons. Cepheid’s programming won’t allow the military to fire on other humans or begin the invasion.”

“Our AI is a pacifist? That’s just fantastic.”

“Don’t be fooled. Westhem could send a signal and override the programming. Cepheid would follow their orders and flush us all out into space. Cepheid works for them, not us. He’s just there to keep the ship safe and keep us in line.”

Castaneda grimaced. “That’s a morale booster.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. No Westhem AI has ever had any problems whatsoever.” Strathmore rolled his eyes.

Castaneda snorted. “Of course not. Except when they do.”

Strathmore got back on track. “So what happened with Harmon?”

“He refused an order to change course.”

“Look, Harmon is loyal as a tumor if he respects you. But he’s the kind of guy you have to hammer respect into. That’s why they respect Big Dog Brodsky.”

“Permission to speak freely, sir?”

Strathmore nodded.

“The reason they respect captain Brodsky is that he worked his way up the ranks. His life is dedicated to his crew and his ship. They don’t respect you in the same way. They fear you.”

Strathmore cocked an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“They know you’re tight with Broadsky, and that you won’t hesitate to discipline in his name—whether the captain sanctioned it or not.”

“You think I’m a thug like the rest of the criminals, don’t you...”

Castaneda put her hands on the desk. “You and I both bought in. Westhem payed for my commission. Yours was paid for by Eurocorp. Grunts don’t buy in, they sign up because it’s better than what they had. But Broadsky is career. He’s here because he’s got nothing else but love for the navy.”

“It doesn’t matter who paid, Castaneda,” Strathmore said, “it matters what you do once you’re in. A little girl like you—”

“Knows a lot more than you think, Strathmore.”

Strathmore leaned back in his chair and glared at Castaneda. “Oh really? Go on.”

“This ‘little girl’ has done her research. She knows about Deutschebank’s investments in the Jovian station project. I know who paid for you to be here, sir.”

Strathmore leaned toward Castaneda. “You watch that talk. I’m True Blue, and don’t you fucking forget it.”

Castaneda was undaunted. “How much respect would you have if the crew found out you were a Deuchebank spy? Are you giving the same reports to them as Westhem? Are you sharing secrets with Eurocorp in contravention of the joint military secrecy pact?”

Strathmore winced. “You...”

“Look commander,” Castaneda stood back and folded her arms. “I have no reason to doubt your loyalty to the navy and the mission. But everyone knows officers like us can retire at any time and take our officer’s commissions to any corporation we want and have a nice, cushy job with a window office. The grunts are here until they’re no longer useful.” Her smirk was barely suppressed. “But if even the *rumor* that Deutschebank paid for your information got out, you could kiss your chances for your own ship, or even a pension, goodbye.”

Strathmore leaned back in his chair. “You crafty bitch. You can’t handle the Wolves, but you can fuck the brass in the ass as well as any corporate stooge.” He ran his hand through his hair. “What do you want, Castaneda?”

“I want to keep this ship running and see the mission succeed. And I want you to tell the wolves to fucking *obey their goddamn orders*.” She stood straight and unfolded her arms. “Sir.”

Strathmore drummed his fingers. “Why did you make the course correction?”

“An uncharted asteroid showed up on the long-range. I wanted to bump us to give it a wide berth.”

“When were you going to inform me or the captain?”

“I was going to wait until my shift on the bridge was over. It didn’t seem like an emergency.”

Strathmore nodded. “Very well.” He stood. “We’re done here. I—” He touched the communication implant in his ear. “Cepheid! General Quarters, everyone to battle stations!”

The computer replied, “Aye sir.” Its voice echoed through the ship. “Condition one, all hands to battle stations. Condition one.” The lights turned from white to red and an alarm klaxon sounded.

The officers left the ready-room. Strathmore addressed the bridge. “Lieutenant Commander Castaneda has the con. You will follow her orders to the letter.”

Castaneda took the captain’s seat. “Orders?”

“I have to join the captain in the forward engine bay. Keep her steady until we get back.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

The walk to the front engine room was not a long one. The bridge was on this side of the center-

decks. But it was long enough that Strathmore had time to think about the alert.

There was no way it could be an attack. The rebels had no interceptors that could make it this far from their station and return safely.

No, the traitors will turtle up in their station and await the boarding attempt. Going broadsides with a station was never a good idea— the JKP had a nasty bite, but against the might of a station, few ships could manage.

Sure, ranged missiles could probably overwhelm a station's defenses, if the goal was to destroy the station, but Westhem would never allow that kind of money to be flushed down the drain.

So if it wasn't the rebels...

Strathmore was getting queasy. His gravi-stims were probably wearing off. He wondered how the hell the techs who worked in low-g all the time handled it without having stim-patches all over their skin.

He entered the forward engine bay. Broadsky was bent over, looking into an access tube. A tech was buried in the tube like a tick, feet dangling out the end.

The captain glanced his way. "Someone tried to sabotage the engines."

"What? Who?"

"You vetted these men, Strathmore, you tell me." Broadsky went back to looking down the tube past the wiggling, cursing tech.

"They all checked out. The Flying Wolves aren't exactly the technical types. The only people with the know-how would be these engineers, and the officers."

Broadsky turned back to Strathmore and grabbed his shoulder. "We have a bad situation, John. There's no telling how many bombs have been planted on this ship."

"Jesus. How many have you found?"

"Just one so far. They said it was wired to blow when we made our final course changes to bring us to the station. With both engines blown, the ship would automatically fire the maneuvering thrusters until we came to a stop."

Strathmore nodded. "We'd wind up drifting right into the rebels' hands, dead in space." He scratched his ear. "But that's kind of a risk, I mean, on the one-in-a-million chance we came across an uncharted asteroid—"

Broadsky turned back to the tube and stuck his head in. "Tech, what's taking so goddamn long?"

Strathmore paused. His eyes widened. "Oh Jesus!" He reached around and slammed the communications button. "Bridge! Do not change course! I repeat, do not change—"

Corporal Jones felt the rumble under her mag-boots.

She ran as fast as she could to her quarters. Everyone else was running to the arms lockers and strapping on their gear. The soldiers were on automatic. They were doing what they were trained to do.

And so was she.

She locked the door behind her and took off her jacket. She drew a slender knife from the inside pocket before tossing the garment away.

Jones rummaged through the bathroom and grabbed a small first-aid kit. She tossed it on a table and sat, opening it and pulling out a tube of wound-seal.

She sat and took several deep breaths before jabbing the blade into her forearm. She tore the hidden tissue-graft out, and the concealed com-code radio with it.

Her teeth gritted and tears flooded her cheeks from the pain, but she kept quiet.

With the bloody gristle slapped down on the plastic table, she now focused on gluing her wound closed.

The blood pooled on the table like an overturned kettle of tea, running off the edge in oozing waterfalls.

She pressed the tissue graft six times, activating the radio. It was only powerful enough for 30 seconds of one-way broadcast and she wasn't even sure they were close enough for the signal, but she had to try.

“Europa, code Xavier. We have a problem.”

Castaneda stood next to Doc One-Eye as the doctor worked on the XO's back and leg. “What's the prognosis?”

The doctor grimaced as she pulled a sharp piece of blood-stained plastic from Strathmore's back. “Better get used to that chair. You're in charge now.”

Castaneda swallowed. “No, no that's not going to work.”

“Look,” Doc said, “Strathmore may or may not wake up from this, but if he does, he'll be in no shape to assume command. It's my call, and that's the way it is.” She looked over to a computer terminal. “Cepheid?”

The computer replied, “Commander Heather Maria Castaneda, according to Westhem military protocol, you are hereby promoted to acting Captain and given command of the Westhem Navy ship WHN James K. Polk. Congratulations.”

The small symbols on Castaneda's shoulders beeped and changed from indicating the rank of Lieutenant Commander to Captain.

Cepheid sent an announcement alert sound to get the crew's attention. “Attention all hands. The WHN James K. Polk is now under command of Captain Heather Castaneda. She has full operational control of Westhem AI designation ‘Cepheid.’”

Castaneda ran her hands through her short, black hair. “This isn't happening...”

“You control Cepheid now,” Doc said. “You *are* the ship. Now get your ass to the bridge.”

The change in gravity from the outer ring to the bridge only increased Castaneda's disorientation. It was her ship now, whether she wanted it or not.

She didn't.

But that didn't matter now.

“Oh balls.” She paused outside the door to the bridge and took a long, slow breath, before opening the door and walking onto the bridge.

“Captain on the bridge!” The bridge crew stood reflexively.

“As you were.” Castaneda sat in the big chair. “Sit-rep with engine array one?”

Corporal Thorsson cleared his throat. “Array one is clean and clear, captain.”

Set nav to simulate a tumble. I want to account for everything. No screw-ups.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

She stared at the viewscreen on the wall before standing again. Have sergeant Harmon and commander Doe meet me in the ready room.”

She walked off the bridge into the room Strathmore's discussion about Harmon took place.

“So what’s old ‘one-eye’ here for” Harmon said, “to sedate me if it gets real?”

“Stow it, Harmon,” Doctor Doe said, glancing askance at the big man, “or I will.”

Castaneda sat across from the two on the opposite side of the desk. “Easy, you two.” She studied Doe and Harmon. They were both nervous, each in their own way. Doe was cautious, Harmon, volatile. “I need you both to focus. We’re all going to be in roles we didn’t prepare for.”

Castaneda slowly slid a small black box toward Doe. “I’m promoting you to full commander. You’re my XO now.”

Doe took the box with an uncharacteristic delicacy. “Are you sure about this?”

“You’re the only one for the job.”

“Well, that’s literally true.” She paused and winced before opening the box and pressing her thumb down inside it.

Cepheid spoke. “Lieutenant Commander Jane Doe is now promoted to full commander and is recognized as executive officer aboard the WHN James K. Polk, by order of Captain Heather Castaneda. Congratulations.”

The rank insignia on Doe’s shoulders flickered and changed accordingly.

“So,” Harmon folded his arms, “how do I fit into this little love-fest?”

Castaneda faced the sergeant. “I know why you’re acting out. You’re scared.”

“What did you say?” Harmon leaned forward. “You just crossed a *line*.”

“You’re scared,” Castaneda continued, “because you’re in a tiny can spinning through infinite space. There’s no ground to pound, and you’re waiting for orders you don’t know will ever come.”

“What the hell do you know about the marines, cute-cheeks?”

Castaneda leaned back in her chair. “I know you’re expendable. I know that if Cepheid calculates we cannot finish the mission, none of you are making it back. He’ll scuttle the ship instead of taking the chance of it falling into enemy hands.”

She pulled a package out from under the desk and set it in front of her. It was a folded Navy uniform. “I’ve read your file, Harmon. I know everything about you. I know you’re a smart man who’s never been given a chance to show it.” She slid the uniform across the table. “And that’s *Captain* cute-cheeks.”

Harmon glared at the uniform like it was radioactive. “What the hell is this?”

“A chance.”

Harmon picked up the uniform and looked back up at Castaneda. “This... this ain’t me.”

“As my second officer, you’re no longer expendable. You have responsibility. You’re in charge of your destiny, and all the marines on this ship, not just your squad.”

Harmon’s brow furrowed. His cheeks puffed up and he let out a long breath as he studied the blue folded package in his hands. “You know, this is effectively a pardon.”

Castaneda nodded. “If that’s how you want to see it. But I’d rather you see it as a chance to show your honor.”

Harmon gritted his teeth and flared his nostrils. He stood and started to take off his uniform.

Doe’s implant made a subtle whir as it focused on the disrobing marine.

Harmon donned his new uniform and turned to a simulated window. “Mirror.” The window became reflective. He posed. “Well ain’t that a sight.”

“Cepheid,” Castaneda said, “promote Harmon to first lieutenant.”

“Walter Aimes Harmon, by order of the Westhem Navy and captain Heather Castaneda, you are hereby granted the full rank of first lieutenant.”

Harmon’s shoulder insignia flickered and changed.

Harmon stood up straight and turned back to Castaneda.

Castaneda stood. “Congratulations. You’re third in command of the JKP. But make no mistake,

lieutenant, this commission comes with responsibility not only to the ship, but to the entire western hemisphere of Earth. And if you are negligent in your duty, I will deal with you accordingly. Do you understand?"

There was no sarcasm in Harmon's voice. "Yes sir."

"I know you'll do the Navy proud." She reached across the desk and held out her hand.

Harmon glanced down at the offer and back up to Castaneda, as if this was the strangest part of the whole situation. He reached over and took her hand and shook it. "Thank you."

"Now wait on the bridge, I have to talk with the XO for a moment."

Harmon turned on his heel and stepped out of the ready room.

Doe shook her head. "One hell of a gamble, captain."

"Harmon wants to prove himself. He never would have risen up the ranks if he didn't. Now he's got a chance to prove himself to the world. And it's the only way I could control him."

"You sure about that?"

"Yes. I have to be."

The officers left the ready-room. "XO, take the Con, I'll be in my quarters."

"Aye Aye." Doe sat in the captain's chair.

Thorsson glanced at the newly minted lieutenant and snickered.

Harmon was on him in a flash. "Son, you stow that shit or I will take a dump on you so big, Mars will look like a fish turd!"

"Yes, sergeant!"

"Thorsson, you fucking ape!" Harmon pointed at his own rank insignia. "You look at the brass on my shoulder and say that shit again! I dare you!"

Thorsson looked like he was about to wet himself. "Sorry sir!"

"I got my eye on you corporal." Harmon took a seat next to Doe.

"Old habits die hard, eh lieutenant?"

Harmon cleared his throat. "I supposed they do, commander."