

The story's background reveals that the narrator is a psychic detective, sent to interview the crew of the Free Trade Ship Eager, to test their reliability for later jobs. One of those interviews was with the ship's navigator, a spindly woman of elegant bearing - but one who is prone to teasing those she finds inferior (which is nearly everyone). Either naive or romantic, the narrator takes the teasing as intentional innuendo. Between other interviews, she preys upon this misunderstanding in hopes of exposing him to his "weakness". The detective decides to elicit the advice of the jovial and gregarious captain he had met earlier....

This time, the bridge was much less bustling. It was nearly vacant, in fact. At the forward end, the pilot and co-pilot sat uniformed in their assigned chairs, with the Geller Field generator between them; its silvery tendrils spreading out to cover the entire ship, sparkling in the light like morning dew on a spider web. Intricately baroque craftsmanship of aluminum fixtures at the unoccupied stations were punctuated with fine-grained rare wood and glossy black data screens.

The only other people here were in a meter-deep maintenance well, both intently observing the inside of an access panel. Occasional flashes of sparks lit the well brighter than the sufficient over-head globes. One was a broad-shouldered, silver-haired man wearing blue workman's coveralls and heavy work boots. In any ordinary rustic setting, one might forgive for assuming he was a lumberjack. His more wiry-built partner was of course, Captain Dirk. This time, the captain was dressed in a fine linen shirt, unbuttoned to mid-chest, rolled to the elbows and mostly un-tucked from grey twill trousers and their attendant white braces.

"Captain, may I ask you a few more questions?"

He vaulted the safety rail up to my level with ease, and wiped some expended silicate lubricant from his fingers with a rag that made me wonder which direction the grime would travel.

"How can I help ya, lad?" he said in an accent so mid-hive, I thought he might be mocking me. The electrician he had been helping returned his work alone.

"Sir?"

"People called my father 'Sir'. I don't know, maybe he deserved it. I've found it used most often as a disingenuous term of contempt for one's position. Maybe my father deserved some of that, too. I am a merchantman - call me 'Dirk' if you must, but I prefer 'Captain' as that is both my position and rank aboard this ship."

"Yessir. I mean, yes Captain..." nautically perplexed by the moment, I added, "aye, captain?"

He gave a sincere chuckle, "You had some questions?"

"Oh, Right. Yes," I began, unsure of how to phrase my befuddlement. "Well, I can't seem to stop thinking about your Navigator Stah'zya..."

He interrupted with a mischievous smirk, "Oh? Did you have the dream where she's wearing nothing but an Arbiter's breastplate, and demanding that you submit with a riding crop?"

Wide-eyed at the captain's sudden and open expression of sexuality, I slowly began to shake my head 'no', even though the concept intrigued me.

He laughed, and put his arm around my shoulder in a huddle, "Don't worry, your secret is safe with me, but for any thoughts of romance you might have toward her, you should drop them quickly.

"First, navigators are a breed of their own; they have a gene that makes them what they are, that gives them the third eye, and the warp vision that we will never understand. That gene needs to be kept pure, lest the entire empire crumble for lack of transportation. To that end, navigators almost exclusively breed amongst themselves. Only for the most powerful of political alliances or most lucrative of trade agreements would one of them ever choose to do otherwise - and then, the unions are fruitless.

"Secondly, on a spireship, zero population growth is considered a mandate. The ship is, and has been for centuries, just big enough to hold, house and service the current throngs. A larger generation would necessarily mean starvation and excess loads on the recyclers - a hazardous situation for all onboard. By extension the act of sex is, even when pregnancy is impossible, deemed inadvisable. Casual sex may not be seen as necessarily dangerous,

but at least a guilty and decadent indulgence. For the few void-born who choose to leave their home spireship, like our Lady Stah'zya, this attitude (and other quirks of their childhood) are carried through with them to other worlds and other places, even when it would be imprudent.

"Of course, similar inconsistencies are ingrained in all of us. You and I were born on hive worlds, where the rich and powerful live at the top with fresh air and sunlight, and the poorest live near the bottom among the discarded filth and toxic effluvia. If I had assigned you quarters near the belly of the ship (which seems to be the bottom due to the artificial gravity) you probably would have instinctively thought it a slight or insult. In reality, those decks are the easiest to embark, and are therefore usually seen as premium guest quarters. None of that is wrong however. It is as it ought to be. People should maintain their individuality, and a large part of that is their upbringing.

"Third, I can inform you - unequivocally - that her passions no longer range into the pleasures of the flesh."

Fearing that she'd suffered some horrid disfigurement or vile warp mutation, I urgently began to ask, "How do you..."

At that moment, the door slid open, as Sah'zya stepped onto the bridge. My mind was still panicked about what the captain meant, I reactively reached out and grabbed the memory from her mind, without malice but also bereft of consideration for her privacy, or the secrecy of my ability.

A warm haze hung low in the dimly lit stateroom of Malachi Skalenj, master navigator of the pirate frigate Clenched Fist. A fine meal of roasted fowl, fresh fruit, and Pliceene wine lay mostly-consumed on a table setting that was oddly discordant with the Spartan steel furnishings which characterized the corner it occupied. Along the opposite wall nestled a wide bed covered in robustly red-colored sheets. The sheets in turn were tussled and twisted around two slim, porcelain figures tenderly wrapped in each other.

He kissed her lips, her chin, her neck, her shoulder while softly running the tips of his finger down her side: her chest, her waist, her hips, her thigh.

Reaching her knee, her cupped it underneath, giving her a tickle before lifting it wider. She giggled.

She caressed the arm on which he had been supporting himself, with a demure glance to the side. "Again?" she whispered hopefully.

His only response was another series of kisses: her clavicle, her breast, her ribs, as he positioned himself between her legs. She lowered her hands, one tracing small circles around her clit, the other guiding him in. He supported her hips with both hands, and slowly, ever so slowly, he pressed inward. She gasped as her walls engulfed the head.

Each thrust was delivered with a swirl of his hips. She was never quite sure if he knew how delightful the changing angles felt to her, or if it was just his own rhythmic device. Sooner than she expected, his lunges became more erratic. She smiled with pride, satisfied that she could give him this pleasure. He threw his head back in ecstasy... or was it pain?

His chest exploded.

Blue and purple tentacles erupted from both halves of his torso. Before the masses of suction cups were even fully formed, they lashed out to restrain her limbs. As she opened her mouth to scream, another tentacle wedged itself in her mouth. She could feel others probing her body, lifting her from the bed, sprouting snake-like feelers. One brutally punched into her vagina, filling her to bloating, pressing against her cervix; another wrapped around her neck, choking tighter with each struggling motion.

With each new flailing appendage, there were new sensations, but new pain, and new fear. There seemed to be no end of tentacles: suction cups on her toes, slimy tips flicking in and out of her of her anus, even some exploring her ears and nostrils. She couldn't breathe.

Instinctively, her third eye opened, channeling a burst of searing warp power. The clot of tentacles disintegrated to fluid. She panted, catching her breath. As the slime drained from the bed to the floor, it turned to mist.

The mist swirled up from the floor in a column. it slowly formed the image of a gaunt, elderly woman.

"Mother?" Stah'zha asked, still almost delirious from the hypoxia, for her mother had been dead these last 3 years.

With a ghostly echo, the form scolded, "You have endangered everyone aboard with your promiscuity. Have you no sense, child? Must you feel only with your crotch, not your heart or mind?"

Stah'zha had heard that speech before, and the guilt returned. Before she could reply, the mist swirled to reform into a handsome man with a high forehead and glasses.

"Warp incursions have caused the loss of countless ships. It happens because a ship strays out of safe warp currents. It is your responsibility as a navigator, even above your own needs, to prevent this."

Swirling once more, the mist became the visage of a wizened man in a long, unkempt beard and priestly robes.

"You have a duty to your house, and a duty to your ship, but above all your duty is to the God-Emperor. Should your deeds fail that challenge in his all-seeing eyes, you shall surely be punished."

The mist dissipated, leaving only the sounds outside her room, faint but terrified screams of the crew, and gurgling, crunching motion.

"Oh mother," she cried, "it is all my fault." Pulling her knees to her chest, and wrapping her arms around them, she began to sob.

A warp incursion would allow the terrors of the warp, the innumerable beasts lurking in that void, to penetrate into the ship's reality. They would slay the crew in horrific and dastardly ways. No one survives those incidents, the rumors say - the ship ends wrecked on warp shoals, forever caught between realities. Everyone would die, those that she loved, and those who would protect her - and it was because she was too selfish, too decadent, too passionate to follow the advice given to her all her life. She could hear it happening outside. The tears fell from her chin onto chunks of flesh that must have once been Malachi.

A crack of energy detonated outside, and the sickening sounds of death suddenly ceased. The door burst open, and a young Dirk charged in, wearing

a Quartermaster's dress uniform, and wielding a Melta-gun. "Where is the Navigator?" He demanded.

Reactively, she picked up a handful of scattered intestines, and offered them to him.

Outside, another soldier kicked the corpse of a psychic warp beast along its spiny back, "I'm glad we finally shut that thing up."

"Oh." he sighed in dismay. "You are the other navigator, right? We need your help. Immediately."

Still uncertain of what was real, she managed to ask, "the crew... is alive? They would still want my help?"

He knew she must have witnessed whatever happened to the master navigator, and smiled sympathetically, "we're pirates; we're tough. No little Geller Field glitch is going to knock us off. Most of the crew is safe, and the boarding parties are securing the rest. We still need to get out of this warp torrent, though... and you're the only one aboard who can do it. You owe that much to the crew, it is your job, and your duty."

"I have a duty to the crew..." she recited, "to the ship... to my family.. to my profession... to the Emperor." Her conviction began to strengthen, as she stood from the bed, "never again shall I let my flesh come before my duty."

Dirk eyed her naked body and tossed her a robe from the dresser, then roguishly smirked, "you don't have to go that far..."

I vaguely remember falling to the deck, and from the sour taste remaining in my mouth afterward, I may have also vomited. That had to make a wonderfully positive impression on both of them.

When I woke, Sister Sila was seated beside me in the infirmary. Her short, spiky, copper hair only accentuated her pointed features - and poignant expression.

"Had you done that to some people aboard this ship, they would be calling for you to be spaced. They would be well within their rights, and I for one would not frown upon their decision.

"I am myself, by dint of position and profession, required to detain and renounce you to The Inquisition, for such an ability would surely brand you a wytch. It is to your fortune that my duty to the Captain is greater than either of these. He has convinced me that, since I did not observe the incident myself, I must treat it as ship-board rumor - at least until a witness comes forward to identify and charge you.

"The captain also spoke to Stah'zha on your behalf, and she agreed to forego the harshest penalties for your trespass. However, it would be wise if you made a concerted effort to apologize unreservedly. I have placed a psy-lock on your powers until either you leave this ship, or attain the password through Stah'zha's forgiveness."

A psy-lock is a mental barrier that prevent the use of psychic powers. Only the most powerful among sanctioned psychers have the ability, and then it only works on significantly weaker (and unconscious) opponents. I had no idea that Sila was that strong - or that a ship this size would rate such power. Yet still, the culpability was mine. I accepted the restraint without testing it, even though it meant that I could not continue with my assignment.

Being "branded a wytch", isn't nearly as benign as having a plasma-hot iron sear a permanent mark deep into your flesh. A wytch is handed over to the Black Fleet, and transported to Holy Terra, where the essence of their very soul is consumed as fuel for the Great Warp Beacon; this has the minor side effect of slowly burning the flesh from the bones of the still-living subject.

So my livelihood, my freedom, and even my very life relied on my ability to extract forgiveness from a woman whose unique coldness intrigued me sufficiently to be drawn in like a moth to flame.

To be continued...

{This is a first draft. Commentary is welcome.}