

Cards...

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I picked cards, Cap't.

Sort of funny, me sitting here with a deck of cards, sharing a berth with probably the one guy in the universe who thinks it's a sin to so much look at cards...

OK. Sorry. I misspoke. You don't think it's a sin... you'd just rather stare out the port window and watch the stream slip by. Doesn't change you know. Won't change. It's pretty, I'll grant you that, but it isn't going to change.

Yeah, but I was going to tell you about the cards. You see, I don't think it was a mistake you and me being bunkmates... no more than who I got on my first tour.

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I didn't go to the academy. I was drafted up. I didn't want to be in the Guard. I was happy being a civilian. The Earth was the place for me: solid ground, lots of girls, and folks who would play cards.

I guess I got lucky once too often. Won a little too much money. Never really tracked down the who, the where, the what, or the why of it all, but it's the only explanation. What did the Guard want with a guy like me? It reeked of revenge. But you know, what can you do?

Me, I bought a new set of cards. Clean slate. Got me some Fletchers. I figured maybe the old pack was unlucky or something. Maybe it had given something away... like me. So maybe it was time for a change. Cost me everything I had... and more.

You know the only personal item I've ever carried into space was these here cards? I even sold my bunk allowance. I mean, even if I won something up here... or at least, up there, during that first tour, I wouldn't have been able to keep it. Wasn't mine to have or to hold. Isn't that always the way?

I could have won anything: a book, a ring... heck, even just a pair of dice, and it wouldn't have done me any good. I'd be in violation, and who was going to gamble away their weight allowance?

Ha...

That was me thinking, I could gamble, I could rig it. I mean, I thought I could win, but with the Fletchers... They got controls you know: back up, 'ryption, all that stuff. You can't game them... you know, cheat.

Look here. Watch the deal...

See, I would have lost. Pair of fives for you, jack high for my. What do you say? Double or nothing for the view port window?

And there it is: a four flush with a pair for you. Not great, but for me... Well, I least I'm getting better. Queen high.

Queen high...

Of course I can cheat. Crypts don't mean nothing to me, Cap't. That's what I do. Ever notice that.

Look at this...

Straight flush.

Aces and eights, it's the dead man's hand. Or my favorite...

Five aces... of spades no less. You don't see that out of a registered deck very often. What do you suppose the odds are Cap't?

Yeah, well... You keep on looking out the window. It ain't going to change none; and I'll just keep on talking.

We were talking about the Queen... before I got sidetracked, that is. Angelina Marcosus, we just called her Angel. And she was. Can you see the tear in my eye just forming at her name, at her remembrance. She was a beauty. Stole my heart from day

one, even before liftoff. And then there was Carlos -- Carl, the C-man, or Sierra de Madre. He had some freaky last name I never could remember. He had a thing for Angel, too. Of course, I mean, everybody did. Even Captain Dave...

You ever hear about any of them? Captain David Rosenthal or the rest? Convicted of treason I believe it was. Cowardice in the face of the enemy. Condemned to fly out on an invasion ship. Sound sort of familiar, Cap't?

Yeah. I wasn't saying you. You're not a coward. I know that. You're here to make sure we all die good and noble like? What happen'd Cap't? Overslept? Got too drunk the night before? Or maybe you had someone like me on your crew?

Ha...

Just your luck. See, there you go. You pulled the joker again.

Were you in the Sky Guard?

Going to be tight lipped about it? Well, no worries. Let me tell you about it. It was boring. We were up there for six years. Four of us in a tin can no bigger than the control deck here... for six goddamn years.

We did anything to pass the time. I mean, anything. Use your imagination, Cap't. Lord knows we did... but mostly we just played cards.

I never won. Not once. I mean, they were Fletcher's right, so I couldn't cheat... and then the game they were playing: Liars Poker. Can you believe that? What kind of game is that?

We'd all log on, set the cards to the standard, but worn, and rubbed thin. You know, the eight of hearts would have a little nick in the corner. The king of spades might have a bent corner. And you could flip it back and forth to mark it... or unmark it, as was your desire. You know, little things like that. It was a different deck each time we played, so it's not like I had an advantage, but that's the way Carl wanted to play... so we humored him.

It was Captain Dave that chose the game though: Liars Poker. It's a simple game, but he excelled at it. In case you've never

played, let me give you the low down. It's just like five card stud. You look at your hand, figure out what you got and then start bidding until somebody calls your bluff. In a game like that you want to start small...

Now how'd it usually go...

"Seven high." That'd be Carl.

"Geez! Find a pair at least. Go full house," Captain Dave might say as he stalled, looking around, so he'd get a feel, and you'd never really know. "Sevens!"

"Eights," Angel say. She was quick. No real thought, just pure instinct, and passion.

And then me, "Can't I just fold?" Oh, I was bad. I was horrible. I never won. And then after they told me for the millionth time that you couldn't fold, I'd go, "Four sevens," and there wouldn't be a seven in play. Even I knew that.

But Carl wasn't any better. He'd always just go one higher, counting on luck, with his counter of, "Eights."

In the end, it really always was between Angel and Captain Dave. "Straight flush... to the jack."

"Show 'em, Captain. Show 'em," she'd say, and then we'd all lay them down, see if the Captain could make his flush out of the 20 cards showing on the table.

Of course, whenever I laid my cards down, I'd always have to decide whether I wanted someone to win or not, whether my cards would help with the rest. I could never change their cards, they'd already seen them, but mine. Nobody knew what they were till I laid them down, so no sense... declaring it till then.

Anyhow, the cards on the table, we'd see if the Captain made his straight flush using all four hands of our hands... and if he did, then he'd collect... and if not...

Let's just say I did a lot of extra work in those six years. I don't think I had a good hand once... but it was worth it.

Being in close quarters, living on top of each other... You know, they'd get to watching, get to thinking. I obviously sucked as a gambler, so why waste my weight on the cards?

Tarot, Cap't. Tarot.

You ever hear of Tarot?

Yeah, one of those heathen things. I agree. Best to keep it down low. Try to keep it from the rest of the crew. Do it under the covers, off in a corner, just staring at the cards by myself. But they'd come over, see the difference on the backs, on the fronts, and then after a while... they started asking questions.

So instead of Liars Poker, we played Tarot one night. I showed them a reading. Just showed them how it's done, the theory, explaining stuff, but you know not really saying anything...

What are you going to say?

But off in a corner, one on one...

"I don't know Captain Dave, I just got this bad feeling. The decoupler's acting up, and well..."

I'd tell him about the reading I'd done, recreate it, and just sort of shrug. I just felt it was my duty to let him know...

Anyone could have seen the 'coupler was going to fail. Even me. But the cards... they worked magic, almost like someone had sabotaged the damn thing...

I started giving readings, alone, in pairs. I never got anything out of it. We all wanted Angel. Hell, even Angel wanted Angel. I gave her to Carlos.

Yeah, I did.

Gave them all private readings, nudging the two in that direction, Captain David away, and well... Who wasn't going to believe it?

The sacrifices I made. Six years up there with Angel and the C-man. So close. And they were so much in love. It be like they were right over there, Cap't. And me and Captain Dave would gaze out the port, play a hand, or just try not to stare... cause that was the hardest...

Sigh...

I lost everything Cap't. Everything. I gave it all away. My weight, my free time, even the girl I could have had. I didn't have to give her away... but I knew the war was coming.

I'm not a coward.
OK. Maybe I am...
But how many died?
Would four more or less either way have made a difference?
One more ship? Would that have mattered?
We had a six incher. A six incher! Like it was going to swing the tide.

Got your attention with that, huh?
I rigged it. I gave them readings. Saw the reports, saw the coming battles. Cause I can see shit like that! Death coming and writ large. You don't need no Tarot deck to tell you that!

Navy should be glad we saved them the goddamn ship!
Should be a goddamn hero...
Yeah, the window's safer, Cap't. Look out there. I gave 'em readings. They were convinced. I mean, they were true believers at that point. I predicted everything through those cards, and I mean everything. I ran that mother fucking ship behind a deck of cards, and that fucker sailed. Damned if I was going to go down to a bunch of Bugs on a million to one shot!

So we didn't.
I let them know they were going to die.
I let them know the truth.
That it wasn't going to matter. The gun was going to freeze, crack, we'd never get a shot off, and in the rush to get there, our regulator would fry. We'd be sitting ducks. Dead. No contribution.

No. I didn't do this sitting around a table. I did this on the sly... acting morose.
"Something the matter?"
"Aw... I don't mind dying Captain Dave. I can do my part, but there's got to be another way..." and then I'd walk him through the reading. I'd pull new cards to add to the old; and by then, he sort of knew what they all meant. And he could see that they weren't good cards. They were the cards he'd been seeing for years... before he lost at poker, before he fought with Carlos,

before everything that had ever gone bad for him during those last six years.”

I didn't do anything but that...

Didn't pull a switch.

Didn't cut a wire...

Carlos did that. Angel did that. Even Captain Dave did that, but I didn't.

When the court martial came, nobody accused me of doing nothing... nothing specific, nothing you could deny. Just of being a subversive element... as if that said it all.

Guilty by association, Cap't. Ain't that a hoot? And now you're my best friend. My only friend. Think on that, Cap't. Think on that.

So, how'd you survive? What did you do?

Or better yet, what didn't you do?

Now, don't be looking at me like that, Cap't. They put us together for a reason. Even somebody as ornery and close-minded as you must be able to see that. They didn't mean for us to invade, for us to launch a counteroffensive.

You ever take a good look at those fifty “marines” we got on ice? You ever look at Margo, Cap't?

Well, maybe you wouldn't. But I would. I have. She ain't a marine, Cap't. Looks more like a breeder to me. Same with Sara, Angie, the rest. Wouldn't be surprised if half of them couldn't shoot a gun, wouldn't shoot a gun... And even if they were first in their class, top notch, gung-ho, eager to die, just like you, Cap't. What then?

You going to take out an entire world by yourself?

Or maybe you think you're going to hitch up with another half dozen ships, and then, yeah, that would do it.

Snicker.

Six ships, 24 guns, almost a gross of bombs... you could probably could take over the universe with that, Cap't. Hell, one little Bugger outpost don't stand a chance against that sort of firepower...

And then, you're just going to turn away?

You like the view out the window there, Cap't?

It a good one?

It ain't going to change you know. That stream is going to keep on slipping by. We ain't on auto...

Yeah, that got your attention. We ain't on auto, Cap't. Cut that sucker out long ago. This ain't no two year joyride. It could last forever for all I care.

Come the end of it all, when the universe collapses back on itself, you and me be riding the crest -- smooth as silk. Cause you see, I ain't coming out of the stream, we ain't coming out of the stream, till we got an agreement.

They knew I'd do this. Don't think they didn't. Little ole me breaking their codes, overriding the presets. Didn't take me but an hour. Anybody could of done it. You could of done it, Cap't. If you had the will.

It's not the life I dreamed of... floating through the stream. It could be better... but it's better than dying.

I figure there are thousands of stars out there, maybe even millions, and a man like you, Cap't... A man like you might be able to pick the right one, out of the way, out of reach. A place were a man could hide...

You know what I'm talking about. A place were a man could hide, Cap't. You got a gift, man! Use it! Look at the charts, figure it out. Trust me on this, the Big Boys want you to run. They want you to hide. That's why you're here.

So, just tell me where to set it down and I will.

But we ain't going to bug central or anywhere's close by, Cap't.

Oh, you can save your glares for somebody else, Cap't, somebody who cares... or there's an idea: teach your children well. That's what I say, Cap't. After all, they'll believe whatever you say. Me and my cards will make sure of that. But one thing you can be sure of, we ain't setting down within a thousand light-years of them bugs.

And when the next generation comes of age, well, you can fight them, then. The bugs will still be there, you know, watching, waiting.

Heck, not even waiting. Mark my words, first chance they get, they'll hit your children hard -- your grandchildren, your great grandchildren if you get lucky. But no matter where we run and hide, they'll be coming, you can be sure of that.

And when they finally do arrive, maybe we'll be ready, and your words... well, you'll be like a god, a prophet, telling all your children of the coming plague and hard times. And before that, while you still alive, you'd be master of all.

You're the Cap't, after all.

And me, I don't need for much. All I need to know is where to set down, Cap't.

That's OK. No need to rush. Take your time.

You probably do your best thinking staring out that window, Cap't. Don't you? Well, while your thinking about the planet, spend a moment thinking about the girls, too.

Who do you want? Sara? Margo? Take your pick. Hell, pick both... and another to boot. You know they packed enough. Did you ever wonder why, Cap't?

I mean, did you ever stop and wonder that part out, wonder why?