
File This Report

I've always dreamed about serving aboard a starship. As a kid I watched every Science Fiction movie ever made. Naturally, I joined the fleet as soon as I graduated from prep school. At the academy I scored in the top three percent of my class. I was commissioned, not as an ensign, but as a full second lieutenant. I thought I was on the fast track for the exploration service, instead I got selected as a staff officer and assigned to Admiral Richie's headquarters' staff. I get to read all the incoming reports so the Admiral can skip the relentless task. Which means the Admiral has all the power and none of the paperwork, whereas I have all the paperwork and none of the adventure. I do, however, have a minuscule bit of power ... I control the admiral's schedule.

The only stars I get to see are the one's outside the adjutant's office in spacedock. Instead of a starship, I have the finest computer equipment available, the admiral makes sure of it, so I can read his reports. The chief engineer is in my office every few days, updating my setup. When I'm not staring at the stars, dreaming, I'm digesting a wealth of reports from starship commanders who are leading the life I chose for myself. At night, I arrange the catering services for the admiral's gatherings and invite celebrities. I arrange for quiet late-night conferences between the admiral and some very attractive young ensigns. I am well known for my tact and always wait for them to leave my office before I drool. As my final duty in this regard, I cover up all his indiscretions. Space travel had made us a more confident, egalitarian and understanding people, but some things never change.

On extremely rare occasions I'm placed in charge of the admiral's personal yacht, to ensure an officer is on board while the vessel is in port ... oh, joy. This chore and the gold plaque on my desk which reads 'Justin Lozowski Admiral's Adjutant' make all the schooling and the mountains of tuition debts worthwhile. And the rest of the staff claims I cynical ...

Every day at noon, I brief the admiral on the days' incoming communications. Typically, he has a comely young yeoman in a very skimpy uniform take notes, even when all my summaries are right on his screen. To complete my humiliation, he likes to stare at her during the entire briefing. Then there are days where he will stop me in the middle of a sentence and say, "That will be all." Standard routine at those times calls for me to leave the admiral's office. I frequent practice pointing a disintegrator pistol at my temple in the free time I get from these early dismissals, but I haven't yet worked up the courage to pull the trigger.

The last adjutant was a lovely young woman, who could rarely be found in the outer office, and fleet command sent me as a replacement. Apparently, the admiral has not forgiven me for this ... even though I had *nothing* to do with it. As for the late-night conferences, he was not a forgiving man in this regard either. If the young lady was not up to his exacting standards, I am the first one to get an earful. "Find someone space worthy tonight ..." he'll bark at me as he blasts his way into his office.

Today's conference was just the two of us. The flickering of the room's monitors casts the admiral in silhouette. Under their blue glow, he paced like a loose top as I gave him my report.

The starship Concord reported exploring the Kayamanu OC-196 system, a densely populated and mineral rich system consisting of nineteen planets.

The most promising planet was dominated by diverse types of trees. They reach incredible heights, and frequently block out enough light to eliminate competition at the lower layers.

Many of these indigenous organisms appear to have developed unique ways to prevent them from being eaten. Beyond the typical bad taste and poisonous options, some have gone the extra mile and often survive an animal's digestion, ending up regrowing from a small specimen, which now has plenty of nutrients from the animal's excrement.

Low gravity has allowed many of the creatures on this planet to evolve into gliders, air travelers who cannot quite achieve flight. Many gliders have developed ways to effortlessly move from one place to another by using the winds. The only species which shows signs of sentience, however, are gnat like insect who have become masters of flight. Unfortunately for the Concord, these gnat-like creatures were able to slip past decontamination and have now infected the ship. Due to the insects eating the circuitry, the FTL drive is no longer operable. The commander goes on to report they will be able to eat through parts of the hull before any relief ship can arrive.

The admiral listened with calm detachment. No, in case you are wondering, I not making this up to get the admiral's attention. These are the kind of things I get every day ... honestly. As I continued, the admiral displayed a face worn by men who are not only disinterested, but actively bored. "Haven't you got anything I can sink my teeth into?"

"Well we're at war with the Transidosians." I replied, lowering my data pad.

"How did *that* happen?' He snapped.

"Well, sir, it seems the dominant race has an extremely large mouth. They have a ritual greeting which involves temporally swallowing another being's entire head down to the shoulders in a non-lethal fashion. Some young security officer got over excited and she responded rather violently with her sidearm, sir."

"Do they have a fleet?" he enquired.

I checked my pad, "No, sir. They seemed to be limited to ships which are only capable of intra-system transport. No military capacity what so ever."

"We'll, we'll let them cool off for a bit and we'll come back around to that one." He seemed disappointed. "Who's the captain?"

"Idar Ringstad, sir."

"Have him demoted." The admiral demanded.

"Begging the admiral's pardon sir, but he didn't cause the issue." I complained.

"Did I ask you opinion, Lozowski?" The admiral was in one of his moods. I'd have to remember not to invite last night's ensign back. "See this gold braid on my collar? Means I outrank you. Have the captain demoted. He needs to learn to do a better job training his security staff. Maybe give a briefing or two

before they join a landing assignment.” He changed the subject, “I understand something happened to the Immortal.”

“Yes, sir.” I was hoping to avoid this one, especially with the admiral in a sour disposition. “The entire science and engineering crew was shifted into another dimension by a graviton wave emitter. They’ll be stuck out there until the someone can tow them back or we can get them a replacement crew.”

The admiral’s face turned into a snarl, “How many times to I have to tell those eggheads not to all be in the same room when they test alien technology? Some of them might have to miss the grand event. I keep telling the admiralty, we need backup crews in stasis.” His eyes narrowed and his voice took on a falsetto feminine whine, “But nobody wants to go into space in stasis ... they all want to be part of the adventure.”

“Yes, sir.” I remarked.

“Did I ask you Lozowski?” He barked, “I was being rhetorical. I get to say rhetorical things without some wet behind the ears junior officer commenting ... because I’m an admiral.” He shouted the last phrase to make sure I got the message ... or because he felt like puncturing an eardrum today. It can be hard to be sure of the admiral’s intent sometimes.

Even in the outer office, I’m not safe. Right through the door, I can hear his piercing voice, “Lozowski get in here. Where are my shipyard reports?”

He’ll grab the pad out of my hand the instant I come through the door. “You can be replaced you know. Chief Engineer Groton is dying to build me an android. You want me to make his year?”

“No, sir,” I wasn’t my being a coward mind you, it’s I simply my desire to avoid going into history as the last human adjutant in the service.

“Get out of my office.” He’ll yell. I kept eagerly hoping he’d have a heart attack, but medical science had advanced too far to be helpful in that regard. Fortunately, I keep a stack of extra pads in my desk, so I can keep working. Somehow Chief Groton always knows when I’ve lost one to the admiral, and he comes up with another one for my desk pile.

On Canus Prime they still use paper reports, only the paper is embedded with nanobots. The nanobots fold the paper into an origami animal and make the reports deliver themselves. I kept threatening to requisition some and force the chief to attach them to a service pad ... only I’m positive they wouldn’t fold well. “I’m sure you’ll learn to handle the admiral,” he smiles back at me when I made my threats, “if you put your mind to it. Of course, you’ll have to give it your undivided attention.”

The other day, Chief Groton came in with a device which easily fit in the palm of his hand. “What’s that?” I foolishly asked.

“Phase discriminator,” he replies with a grin as big as one you’d see on any kid who’d received a cookie. “It’s half the size of our current model.” I should mention, I didn’t do exceptionally well in my engineering classes, but I knew that a new phase discriminator was as about exciting as a new type of screwdriver ... and about as useful. “Don’t show your toy to the admiral,” I told him flatly, “or you’ll come out of there half *your* previous size.”

But the universe hates me. How do I know? It's simple, as I finished explaining how childish the chief was being, showing off his new toy, Admiral Richie came waltzing out of his office. "Ah, what's that?"

"New phase discriminator," the chief announced proudly handing it over to the admiral.

Richie turned the thing over in his hand like it was a useless piece of junk. "Feels good. How soon can you distribute these to the fleet?"

"Right away sir." Groton beamed.

"Well then, get right on it." As Groton rushed out the door, Richie turned to me, "Don't you have some work to do? Try to make yourself useful Lozowski."

It's not the first time he's caught me off guard. During one session I explained there had been several reports of Captain Avranches acquiring a new boy toy, namely one of the navigators. "Shall I have her relieved?" I asked, assuming he'd want to follow regulations.

"Any complaints from the navigator?" he inquired.

"Nothing on record." I replied.

"Next," was his only response.

"Excuse me sir, I think ..." But I didn't get a chance to finish. When the admiral gets serious, he gets quiet, but his voice gets more determined, "Did I ask you what you *think* second lieutenant?" He stressed the rank, reminding me of the difference between ours. "We'll leave Captain Avranches alone. You have to respect a woman who knows what she wants, lieutenant. Now let's do some genuine business."

"We'll have to assign a new crew for the Osprey," I announced.

"Oh," the admiral sounded a little startled. And he was not a man easily shaken. Some things seemed like they had an obvious solution, but the admiral had his own ways about him. "The entire crew has been replaced by doppelgangers." I declared.

His face was wearing an expression of disbelief. "How do you know?"

"Well, the replicas are pretty good, sir. However, they each retained the glowing red eyes of the Vandorian sect sir. They're the religious sect who likes to take possession of a host body. They retain the host's memories but they use their own personalities." I figured this was an open-and-shut case.

"I've been reading the reports," he explained. This statement did trouble me a bit, I admit. In the past, I'd always been sure the admiral didn't read any incoming reports. "Seems like they are running a tight ship. Have they broken any regulations?"

"No sir, spotless record."

"Let's keep them on then; seems like we already have a replacement crew." The room's lights flicked and them seemed to dim. The admiral's main screen shuttered slightly, as it did when it was displaying a meeting reminder. "There's an embassy party tonight. Get Yūkiō in here."

Yūkiō was the only civilian permitted in the inner office, and she always went in alone. On this occasion she arrived wearing a close-fitting black suit with an exceptionally short skirt. She moved with a purpose, her hair in a tight bun. I wouldn't have been surprised if she managed to make a samurai sword appear out of some unseen pocket of her severe outfit. That's the kind of person she is. There was also a rumor that this woman, in the six-inch heels, was a negative emotion eater. When she left, the admiral was a different person. He was convivial, charming and almost ... dare I say it ... good humored. I had my suspicions, but his eyes remained a deep ocean blue. I even had the eyes scanned for contacts. Some of the Vandorian's can be quite clever. In any case, the effect only lasted about 24 hours, after which, he returned to his normal disagreeable self.

On this occasion though, I didn't envy him. The incoming embassy was from the Noduians, a race of pigmy-like humanoids who were an early fleet contact. Unfortunately, the first ship which visited them accidentally left a Three Stooges movie. The clever Noduians soon learned how to make a projector, and based their entire culture on it. Their servants throw banana skins in everyone's path. Still others toss coconuts into the air. In real life, having a 10-pound nut thrown 20 feet onto your head is quite likely to kill you. As a result, a Noduians embassy is cause for combat pay. Chairs everywhere are designed to collapse unexpectedly to allow for pratfalls. The common greeting is a slap in the face, followed by an ungentlemanly 'woop, woop.'

I'd like to say they are the exception, but there not. The Wadi enjoy games, but not just any game. They like to transport you into another dimension to play. Play chess with one of them and you are very likely to find yourself turned into a piece on a very large board ... armed with anything from a high energy weapon to a stone tipped axe. The only good news is, you only die in their game dimension. All you get to keep from the experience is the very vivid memory of being slaughtered by another player's piece.

About two years into this job, I got a report a classmate of mine had been promoted to full lieutenant. I pulled out the disintegrator pistol from the desk and finally pulled the trigger. I guess I should keep the thing charged up if I want it to work.

I was putting it back in the drawer when Peter zapped himself in.

I recall a university wide gathering for Professor Zorar. It was a scheduled scientific announcement and we all sat waiting in the auditorium, the stage bathed in a single spotlight. Everyone expected it would be the expected breakthrough in transporter technology, since Professor Zorar had been working on the method for years. Instead he stood before the assembled student body and announced, "Transporters are a technological impossibility. Forget about it. Get over it and learn to fly landing craft like normal pilots. Stop wasting *my* time and *your* money." Then he calmly walked off the stage.

Peter, on the other hand was a Fludosian, he could zap himself over 500 miles in an instant. Only he didn't use any technology, all the Fludosians could do it naturally. I heard, after they were discovered, old Professor Zorar retired and now lives somewhere secluded in Montana. Anyway, Peter, as usual, wanted an appointment ... and he kept zapping his way into the outer office to get it. It's one thing to have someone barge into the office via the door, it's another thing to have them suddenly appear behind you. Fortunately, the smell of ozone in the air tended to give him away.

"Peter, what do you want?" I tried to ask politely. "I mean, before I ask you to zap yourself into a lake."

“I want an appointment.” He complained bitterly in a winey voice which always makes my hair curl, “I need a command Justin. I need it bad. After all, I’m the only one in the fleet who can zap down to a planet from orbit.”

“Forget it,” I said. “If anyone is going to be bugging the admiral about a command, it’s me ... not you.” I scarcely had any authority, but the admiral’s appointment calendar was one of them. There was no way I was going to help an underclassman, who hadn’t even graduated, get a command before I did.

“Not before I get a command,” he announced casually. I had to swallow down a desire to punch him. “Besides you don’t have the eyes for command.” Fludosians also had four eyes ... except for the occasional oddball who had five. They were damn proud of it too. They loved the old Earth joke were someone called a man wearing glasses ‘four eyes,’ only they didn’t get the fact it was meant as an insult.

He grabbed my arm and I found myself on the other side of the station, standing by the water fountain. “I been practicing.” He wore the face of a pleased puppy. “Now I can take other people with me, simply by holding their hands.”

“Can you zap us back now?” I must have sounded annoyed, because his face changed color. They always do that when humans get annoyed with them.

“Do I get an appointment?”

I gave him my most determined stare. I’d been practicing that too. “No.”

“Then walk back yourself,” he stalked off in a resolute huff towards the mess hall. As I walked back I kept thinking this was not the job I had dreamed of getting. I’d had better jobs in nightmares. On the way back, I spotted the Orion out the observation window. It was small, maneuverable and had the fleet’s first stealth system. If I was extraordinarily good, maybe I could convince the admiral to let me sit on her deck for a minute or two. Pigs had a better chance of actually flying in the ship than I did.

Passing by the living quarters, I ran into a group of junior officers heading for the recreation area. I recognized one young ensign from the academy. She was at least a foot shorter than I was, but she had a perfect body. I tried to be discreet, but I’m afraid my stare attracted her attention. “Justin, how are you?”

“Fine, thank you.” I lied.

“What ship are you assigned to?” she asked sweetly. “You must be doing pretty well, second lieutenant already.” She played casually with my insignia.

“Actually, I’m on Admiral Richie’s staff. I’m his adjutant “

“Uh, Fleet Operations” some of her associates teased, “A datapusher.” I ignored the less than friendly jab. My calm exterior didn’t betray the fact I was ready to push him off balcony down to the supply section below. The limited gravity meant he would have floated down harmlessly into some crates, but the resulting thud would have been entertaining.

The young ensign gave her fellow officers a cool glare. I don’t know if she just felt sorry for me, or wanted to apologize for her fellow officer’s behavior. “I’m on the Orion. Why don’t you come visit me? We’ll be in spacedock for the next two weeks. Upgrades,” she smiled and rolled her eyes delightfully, “You know how boring those can get.”

"I can imagine," I smiled back. If only she knew. I was picking up a PhD in boredom. I was practically an expert instructor. My first lecture would have put her crew to sleep in under five seconds. Ah, the joys of being a staff officer. "I'll drop by if I get a chance." I nodded politely and went on my way back toward the office. It was going to be a long walk. I make a mental note to get the dean to assign Peter to waste reclamation when I got back.

When I finally returned, the outer office was filled with Bagoolan's. They're four armed, red skinned aliens who are thugs, pure and simple. They didn't even have the courtesy to make even a non-aggression pact with Earth. They looked unhappy. I slipped past them and casually took my seat.

"We want to see the admiral ... now." They did their best to intimidate me. Bagoolan's carried large swords across their backs. It was more of a fashion statement than anything else, but they were still weapons. I tried to make myself appear unintimidated. "What business do you have with the Admiral?" I asked, checking the schedule.

"None of your business little man," his voice was loud and angry with a hint of contempt. "We have business with the admiral."

"No, you don't," I responded serenely, "If you did, you'd be on the schedule ... and you're not."

They drew their swords with an angry grunt. I signed slightly and opened my desk drawer. Pulling out the disintegrator pistol, I laid it on the desk before me, the sound of the weapon's metal casing clicking menacingly on the desk. The group looked at each other and slowly sheathed their swords. Good thing they couldn't tell I don't keep the thing charged up.

"We'll come back." They muttered indigently.

"I'll put you on the schedule for next week," I replied helpfully. They muttered and grunted, but they shuffled out of the office with their tails between their legs ... literally in this case.

Going back to work, I glanced at the latest daily reports. The crew of the Brazil had now been rescued. The ship was practicing a live-fire drill using a tractor beamed asteroid towed behind the ship. During the exercise, a gunner in the upper weapon's turret accidentally hit the FTL drive on the ship's stern.

Subsequently, the engine exploded leaving the ship a burned-out hulk in just a few minutes, forcing the crew to abandon ship in escape pods and endure almost a week in deep space. Of the more than 350 men aboard, only a few dozen survived.

Another captain, ordered his landing craft crew to abandon ship when their drive appeared to fail during a landing. The craft was steadily descending, the friction of the decent exceeding the hull's melt down temperature. He ordered the crew to escape pods. To his surprise, however, the craft didn't burn up. Instead, due to the loss of weight, it continued flying until it crashed into the planetary government's house, killing the waiting dignitaries.

Another captain had ended a war by destroying the military forces of both sides with a full spread of Delta torpedoes. I made a note to set up an appointment for him. Richie would soon be tearing him a new asshole ... those Delta torpedoes are damned expensive.

A report popped up from the Jackson, they had arrived at Cygnus 6 on schedule. Which would have been fine, but the orders were for them to go to Sigma 6 ... so they were now 200 light-years off course. They'd need at least two days to recharge the FTL drive, which meant they were going to miss the emergency rendezvous by at least 18 hours.

On the wall across from my desk there is a collection of 3D images of captains. Richie called it his wall of shame. It was a collection of officers who had either been killed because of a senseless mistake they had made or transmogrified into useless forms for the rest of their lives. I made a mental note where I was going to hang the picture of the Jackson's captain.

The wall is a constant reminder space is a dangerous place, not because of the aliens we encounter, but because of the officers who commanded ships in the fleet. Take Captain Kevin Howie who, while trying to encourage his men on a rescue mission, struck the walls of a canyon with a stick. As he kept hitting the side of the canyon, trying to coax forward officers who were convinced the terrain was unstable, he caused an avalanche, killing 32 crew members and 88 locals. Then there is the example of the Exeter's Captain Alice Rogers, who took the ship into low orbit around a small inhabited planet. The Exeter was so massive it caused an exceptionally high tide in one of the lower lying regions unintentionally flooding it. Then when she took the ship to a higher orbit she caused a meter-high tsunami which flooded the surrounding residential areas and capsized several boats.

The largest image on the wall was reserved for Captain Lionel Arthur Porter. His unenviable command resume included wrecking a sister ship with an ill-directed probe launch, friendly-firing another one, and accidentally shooting a Delta torpedo into a starbase commander's front office. However, all these incidents paled in comparison to the time he inadvertently launched an armed torpedo right at an alien battlestar engaged in a peace mission. The big ship managed to dodge it just in the nick of time.

Porter's ship finally met its demise when its weapons managed to destroy an incoming energy attack at the last minute. The plasma ball exploded just outside the hull, destroying the vessel. Miraculously, all the crewmembers survived.

I like to think of the faces on the admiral's wall as poster children for friendly fire. Still the job goes on. Somebody has to do it. Personally, I was thinking prison convicts, but they are out of the question. Not because they might commit a crime, but because the courts would call the assignment excessive punishment. Makes me believe we should abolish those pesky unjust punishment clauses. Recently I been getting that sinking feeling. The one you get when you are drowning and you become aware you can no longer keep your head above water, so you resign yourself to your fate. I've been feeling just like that lately ... and it has been cheering me up.

The days turned into months and then into another year. Don't think it hasn't occurred to me the computer can summarize the reports just as well as I can. In effect the only thing I was doing, the computer can't do, is arrange for lovely young officers to be entertained by the admiral's late-night conferences. I was a space pimp. The realization made we want to charge the disintegrator pistol.

The admiral woke me from my daydreams of suicide. "I'm placing you in charge of the Orion, commander." He remarked typing something into his console in his usual deliberate one key at a time method.

“Excuse me, sir, I didn’t catch the name of the commander,” I mumbled, knowing I was going to be chewed out for not listening.

“Commander Lozowski,” he barked, “You ... you dunce. Try not to screw things up.”

“But I’m only a second lieutenant,” I said startled.

“You going to argue with me commander?” he asked indignantly. “See this gold braid on my collar? Means I still outrank you. I get to promote people. You’ve been competent Lozowski ... and you know how to keep your mouth shut. We still reward people in the fleet for that. I realize you imagine I’m unaware you’d sell your right arm for a field commission, but I am. I wasn’t always an admiral, commander. Besides there needs to be some kind of reward for living through the hell I put people through. Dismissed.”

He waited for me to reply, but I was too dumb struck to answer. “Just say thank you and get out before I change my mind.”

I gave him a snappy salute and he returned it with a gesture one might interpret as a casual salute, but most people wouldn’t. I had to resist the urge to skip happily out of the office. As I turned to leave, the admiral addressed me with one final order, “Lozowski ... I don’t want my new adjutant reading me any stupid reports from the Orion. It’s now got a skipper who should know better.”

“Yes, sir.” I replied. I think it was the first time I had ever said that with a smile on my face.