

PROLOGUE

MR. JASON SPACE, Deputy to Captain Helena Galaxy of *The Adventure* and agent of the Interdimensional Elite Agency, knew he had messed up. It was now only a matter of whether Chief Aster and the Commanderate would fire him *now* or later. Of course, they might be forgiving enough to simply punish him for this disaster of a mission, perhaps by putting him on leave for a few days or maybe docking his pay.

Not that it really matters when you think about it, Mr. Space thought, standing in the center of the Commanderate's meeting room, trying not to look too nervous before the Council. *The multiverse is gonna be destroyed in a few days, after all. Having my pay docked or even getting fired outright wouldn't do me any good.*

As always with Mr. Space, however, thinking clearly became harder the more stress and pressure he was under. It didn't help that the lights on the ceiling seemed especially bright and warm today, making sweat break out across his forehead, although that was probably more due to his nerves than anything. He fumbled with the buttons on his uniform, wishing he was back in his room on his spaceship, but knowing that he wouldn't be going back there for a while.

At least he didn't come alone. Standing next to him, looking much more relaxed, was a black-haired woman known as Captain Helena Galaxy. As Mr. Space's Captain, Galaxy was his boss. She told him what to do, where to go, and sometimes even how to do it. Of course, the two of them were much closer to partners than boss and subordinate in practice, but still, she was the boss and he had to do what she told him to do.

That was another reason Mr. Space was worried about meeting with the Commanderate. As Galaxy's Deputy, he was basically her responsibility. If they punished him for his failure, they might also choose to punish Galaxy as well, even though Galaxy had not directly participated in the mission other than providing backup in case things went south.

Things didn't just go south, Mr. Space thought with a gulp. *They went straight to heck.*

Mr. Space hoped that Galaxy didn't get punished, too. It wasn't her fault that the mission went badly. Mr. Space hated seeing his friends punished and this time was no different. Still, the Commanderate had summoned them *both* to the Council Chamber for a reason and it wasn't because they wanted to have lunch with the two IEA agents.

"Captain Helena Galaxy and Deputy Jason Space of the starship *The Adventure*," said an authoritative, if young, voice above them. "We will now begin the report of Mission Apocalypse."

Mr. Space gulped. He looked up to see the source of the voice, a man with a tall mohawk sitting on top of a floating chair. Although the man was in his late twenties, he looked much older than that. His hair had flecks of gray in it already and his skin was wrinkled more than it should have been. Mr. Space was close to him in age and yet he looked much better.

Guess being the Chief must be really stressful, Mr. Space thought with another gulp.

That man was Chief Dean Aster, the current Chief of the IEA, which put him above every other agent in the organization aside from the Commanderate. The members of the Commanderate sat in thrones of varying heights, looking down at Mr. Space and Captain Galaxy expectantly.

Mr. Space took another deep breath to steady himself (which didn't work) and then said, as calmly as he could, "Mission Apocalypse was a—"

"Complete and total failure," Commander Nova, an older gentleman with steel gray hair, snapped from his throne. He held up a holographic tablet that showed Mr. Space's mission report. "We lost thirty-six agents, Deputy Space. Thirty-six. We haven't lost that many agents in one mission since the Dread God incident."

Mr. Space winced. "Yes, um, I was just about to get to that—"

Captain Galaxy held up a hand. Her eyes were locked on Commander Nova, a disapproving frown on her face. “With all due respect, Commander, I fail to see why we were summoned here to give an in-person report if you already have my Deputy’s written report on the mission. I read the report myself and it seemed to have all of the relevant facts. Unless there is a good reason why you summoned us, I am having a hard time seeing why we should be here at all.”

Mr. Space wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or alarmed that Galaxy was willing to speak up for him like that. Normally Galaxy greatly respected the organization’s hierarchy and rarely spoke back to her superiors even when it made sense to do so. Not that he disagreed with her question, though. As Galaxy had said, he had already written up a mission report and made sure to include as much detail as possible. Mr. Space wasn’t much for bureaucracy, but he did like to pride himself on his well-written, detailed mission reports.

“We know that, Captain,” said Chief Aster before Commander Nova could respond. He rubbed his forehead tiredly. “Every member of the Commanderate has received and read a copy of your mission report. But as the only survivor from Mission Apocalypse, we want to hear, in your words, exactly what went wrong. As Commander Nova pointed out, we lost too many good agents on that mission when no one was supposed to die at all. What went wrong?”

Chief Aster sounded like he was genuinely worried about why so many agents died. It was one of the things Mr. Space always liked about Aster. Chief Aster did not think of himself as being automatically better than the rest of the agency due to his leadership position. He not only cared for the organization as a whole but showed genuine concern for individual members. He even took time to get to know his agents on an individual level, often eating with them in HQ’s cafeteria rather than staying holed up in his office dictating orders to everyone else.

Doesn’t mean he can’t dish out punishment when it’s merited, though, Mr. Space thought, wiping the sweat off his forehead. *Like now.*

Taking another deep breath to steady himself, Mr. Space said, “All right. I’ll start from the beginning. Mission Apocalypse was a mission with a simple goal: Kill a god, with the secondary goal of blowing up an entire universe using an experimental weapon.”

“An experimental superweapon which you *lost*,” Commander Nova added.

Chief Aster made a ‘shhh’ gesture with his hands to Commander Nova, who lapsed into annoyed silence.

Slightly taken aback by Commander Nova’s interruption, Mr. Space nonetheless continued, saying, “In more detail, the mission was to slay Aeno, the self-proclaimed King of the Multiverse and a Deus Level Threat to the multiverse itself, according to the IEA’s archives. Aeno was originally put to sleep a million years ago by a previous iteration of the IEA, but he woke up recently and has taken over the dimension known as the Nexus, where he has built himself a castle and populated said dimension with his own creations. The extent of Aeno’s powers are unknown, but he can create new life and potentially even destroy entire universes, though that power has yet to be seen.”

Mr. Space took a moment to drink from a bottle of water he had brought with him. Even sipping his water drew annoyed and impatient looks from the Commanderate, which made Mr. Space drink even faster. He even spilled a little water on his uniform due to his haste.

Lowering his water bottle and capping it, Mr. Space said, “Although Aeno may be a god, he appears to have the mindset of a six-year-old boy. Even so, the IEA Chief and Commanderate—you guys—decided that Aeno was a threat to the multiverse, especially after the discovery of the Destroyer Prophecy, an ancient prophecy which states that Aeno will one day gain enough dark energy to become the Great Destruction, an entity who will bring about the end of the multiverse itself.”

“Surely that should bump Aeno up to a higher level on the threat level chart,” Commander Meteor interrupted unexpectedly. He appeared to be looking at a holographic display of the IEA’s threat level chart. “A being who can destroy the entire multiverse is a threat we’ve rarely faced before.”

“There *is* no higher level than Deus on the chart,” Commander Maria Eclipse added. “Unless we want to vote on a new one right now.”

“That can wait until after Deputy Space’s briefing is done,” said Chief Aster. He looked at Space. “Please continue your report.”

Mr. Space, feeling much more relaxed, continued, saying, “But the mission was complicated by Aeno kidnapping sixteen individuals from four different universes. He then forced these individuals to participate in something he calls the Tournament of Heroes, a tournament that is supposed to decide who is the greatest hero in the multiverse, with the losing participants and their universes being erased.”

The Commanderate all exchanged puzzled looks when Mr. Space said that. An understandable reaction, given how most of these Commanders had little experience with the superheroes who had been forced to compete in the Tournament.

“The true purpose of the Tournament, however, is to generate the dark energy needed for Aeno to become the Great Destruction,” said Mr. Space. “Per the Prophecy, Aeno needs seven days’ worth of dark energy generated from conflicts between the four greatest heroes in the multiverse to become the Great Destruction. Our mission, then, had another, equally important primary goal in addition to killing Aeno: Rescue the kidnapped heroes and return them to their respective universes.”

Mr. Space took a moment to take a breath, but mostly, he was trying to delay finishing the report. He was getting to the bad part, the part that caused him and Captain Galaxy to be summoned here in the first place, and he really didn’t want to have to say it aloud. It was bad enough writing it up in a report. Speaking it out loud, in front of the Chief and the entire Commanderate? Well, that was one of Mr. Space’s worst nightmares, even worse than the nightmares where he went back to school without his pants on.

Still, delaying the inevitable would just make the Commanderate even angrier, so Mr. Space continued. “A group of about a dozen different IEA agent Teams was assembled to pull off this mission. We were provided with an experimental Dimension Bomb, provided by the IEA’s Weapons & Research Division, which was supposed to be strong enough to destroy the Nexus and Aeno. The bulk of the agents assigned to this mission were supposed to rescue the kidnapped heroes and return them to their home universes, while one agent, Captain Calvin Comet of the *Spire*, was supposed to set up and activate the Dimension Bomb.”

Here it was: The part that no one liked, not even Mr. Space.

“But it didn’t work out the way we planned,” Mr. Space said, speaking much quicker than usual thanks to his nerves. “For one, the kidnapped victims didn’t actually appreciate our efforts to rescue them. Nearly all of them resisted all efforts to rescue them, even though I had made earlier contact with one of the participants, Alex ‘Beams’ Fry of Universe 8717, to warn them ahead of time that we would attempt to rescue them during the third match of the Tournament. Some of them even defended Aeno, protecting him from a small Team of IEA agents equipped with weapons that could kill a god. It was kind of a mess.

“But the mess didn’t end there. Without warning, a huge cloud of the accumulated dark energy generated over the first three days of the Tournament became visible to the naked eye and then started attacking IEA agents. It captured and absorbed every single IEA agent in the arena aside from myself.”

As Mr. Space said that he could see the events playing in his mind’s eye again. The dark energy cloud appearing out of nowhere above the arena, the sound of millions of voices screaming at once, the shadowy tendrils shooting out and ensnaring his fellow agents, watching as dozens of good men and women got absorbed into the darkness of the cloud, his own narrow escape ...

There was a reason Mr. Space did not want to go over it again and it wasn’t just because he was afraid of how the Commanderate would punish him.

“As a result, I do not know, exactly, what happened after I left,” Mr. Space continued. He nodded at Captain Galaxy. “Camera drones sent from the *Adventure* have shown that the Tournament appears to be going forward. All participants in the Tournament were spotted in the courtyard of Aeno’s Universal

Castle shortly after the end of the third match. We believe that Aeno has decided to keep the Tournament going. As well, our drone scouts have picked up on extra security added to both the Universal Castle and Nexus City, the closest settlement to the Castle. Therefore, if we're going to send in more agents in an attempt to rescue the participants again, it will likely be much harder even if we try to interrupt another match. End of report."

Mr. Space added that last bit when he saw the growing restlessness and impatience of the Commander. He wasn't sure what they expected to hear. What he told them now was more or less what he wrote in his report, if not exactly verbatim. He didn't even feel particularly proud of himself for getting through the report without stumbling or stuttering too much. He just felt relieved it was over ... for now, anyway.

Chief Aster tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Why did the participants fight back against you and the other agents? Our preliminary reports said that the participants had been 'invited' into the Tournament against their wills."

Mr. Space shook his head. "I still don't know. It seems like at least a few of the victims have become fond of Aeno. Some of them seem to think he's just a little kid who wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Fools," Commander Nova snapped. "The lot of them. I've read the reports on Aeno from the archives. That *thing* is anything but a little kid. He must have brainwashed them somehow."

"A likely explanation," said Chief Aster. "But the report's conclusion is, I think, correct. After this, there's no doubt Aeno has taken steps to ensure that there won't be a repeat of our last mission. We have to assume that Aeno and his creations will likely be on high alert for any IEA agents. Even if we try another invasion of agents, it still might not work."

"Can we talk about the fact that we lost the Dimension Bomb?" Commander Meteor asked sharply. He rubbed his bald head. "W&R has been complaining to me all day about that. Now that Aeno has the Dimension Bomb, we know for a fact that he can carry out his threat of destroying the losers' universe. And four days, even taking into account the time difference between our dimension and the Nexus, is hardly enough time to come up with a plan to recover from this disaster."

"I don't know," said Commander Eclipse. "We faced a similar situation during the Mechanoid Invasion fifty years ago, where the initial assault failed and we had only a single day to come up with a counter plan. Of course, the Mechanoids weren't planning to destroy whole universes. Even so, we have a lot more time to come up with a counter-strategy than you think."

Mr. Space licked his lips. He was glad the Commanderate were spending more time arguing with each other than focusing on him. Maybe they would even forget to punish him and Captain Galaxy for their failure. That would be nice.

"But this situation is far worse than the Mechanoid Invasion," said Commander Nova. "As you pointed out, the Mechanoids were not planning to destroy the multiverse. Aeno is. Time is of the essence."

"What, then, do you suggest, Commander?" said Commander Eclipse, folding her arms in front of her chest. "Do you suggest we try another full-on invasion of the Nexus and get even more innocent agents slaughtered?"

"I suggested nothing of the sort, Commander Eclipse. I'm only saying—"

"Enough!" said Chief Aster, raising his voice and causing all of the Commanders to look at him in surprise. "We must not bicker with each other. Aeno is the real enemy here. Not us."

Mr. Space relaxed. Even though he knew he was probably still in trouble, something about Chief Aster's firm tone made him feel safer already.

"Now, I understand that tension is high," Chief Aster continued, "but that does not justify endless bickering among us. Remember, we're all on the same side here. The Aeno situation may be the toughest situation that the IEA has ever faced in its millions of years of existence, but we *can* conquer it. We must. The fate of countless individuals is on the line here. Therefore, we need to take extreme measures to protect the multiverse."

Commander Nova raised an eyebrow. “Extreme measures, Chief? What, exactly, do you have in mind that we have not already discussed?”

Chief Aster tapped a few buttons on the arms of his chair. A holographic image of what looked like a full-sized capsule appeared in the center of the room, big enough for everyone to see no matter where they stood. The canister had an opaque glass lid, with the words ‘TOP-SECRET’ stamped across it in huge lettering.

Mr. Space had never seen this canister before. Nor, based on Captain Galaxy’s puzzled expression, had she, either.

But the Commanderate collectively leaned back in their chairs at the sight of the hologram. They acted like Chief Aster had just shown them a dead body.

“Have you lost your mind?” asked Commander Pattie Pulsar, her skin paler than usual as she looked at Chief Aster. “There is a reason Chief Nebula put *it* away before she died.”

“I am perfectly sane, Commander Pulsar,” said Chief Aster. “I wouldn’t be suggesting this to the Commanderate if I didn’t think this was necessary. But you can’t deny that we are in desperate times, which often call for desperate measures.”

Commander Nova gestured at Mr. Space and Captain Galaxy. “Is this the actual reason you called this meeting? You know that this is beyond top-secret. Only the Commanderate is supposed to know about this, yet you are blatantly showing it to a Captain and her Deputy.”

“Captain Galaxy and Deputy Space can be trusted to keep secrets,” said Chief Aster simply. Then he smiled wryly. “Besides, if this doesn’t work, it’s not like we’ll live long enough to regret it.”

“Excuse me, Chief Aster, Commanderate,” said Captain Galaxy, raising her hand again before any of the Commanders could respond to Chief Aster. “But what *is* that canister? Mr. Space and I don’t know what it is.”

Mr. Space was relieved that Captain Galaxy was brave enough to ask that question. He had been wondering the same thing but was still too afraid of being punished to draw attention to himself specifically.

Without looking at the Commanderate for approval, Chief Aster looked down at Mr. Space and Captain Galaxy with a serious frown on his face. “This? This is the best-kept secret of the IEA. And it might be the multiverse’s salvation ... or its destruction.”

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