

# **Tiny Planet Filled With Liars**

a Fleet Eternal story

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written by Stephen M.A.

**EXCERPT / MEDIA SAMPLE**

This novel contains frank depictions of invented fact.

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This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and story elements are fictional, because reality is too implausible.

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February, March, and the Lens Attack of April**

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# 1

## The Interviewer

### *Pleiades Tower, Penthouse Supreme*

**IT IS** the opinion of this writer that much of the report you are about to read is untrue.

Nonetheless, I am obligated by the parameters of both my adopted profession and my contractual promise to convey the tale in all facets as it was relayed to me, with as much fidelity as I am able to muster.

There are other reasons, as well.

For starters, I paid an exorbitant amount in coterie access fees in order to secure the exhaustively extensive interviews which yielded this mountain of lies, half-truths, and false assumptions. I am duty-bound to derive revenue from that absurd and ill-conceived asset expenditure.

There's also the small matter of the impending doom of our world and all who live on it via a blanketing rain of orbital weapons fire—a subject which I believe requires much closer examination than we have collectively undertaken thus far; even if the lens through which one conducts the scrutiny is in this case derived, of unavoidable necessity, from a highly polished crock of shit.

Despite that provenance, it is my ultimate conclusion that a vein of truth does thread its way through this morass of misclaimed veracity. Since I do not know how to explain to you the precise topography of that vein in all its complexity, even after seeing it firsthand, I have no choice but to relay the direct accounts themselves, in the hopes that you may begin to understand the stark revelations buried within their sum—at least inasmuch as I believe *I* do.

(As an aside, if, in the course of your reading, you come to understand *what it all means* in a way that I have not, be aware that I would dearly love to hear your thoughts directly—particularly because you are legally compelled to convey them immediately. Relatedly, be reminded that I have registered an Intellectual Dominion Cert with the Central Office of Applied Thought [*IDC43.991.xi.3, perpetua*] and will automatically and irrevocably acquire ownership of all conclusions, discoveries, and winnowing of bullshit that resulted from your insights upon consuming the written fruits of my investment. Rest most assured that I will accept such intellectual ownership with an exquisitely honed sense of duty bent on milking it for every

drop of fame, lucre, and unending personal glory that I can wring out. In this way your epiphanies will live forever, through me. And *only* through me.

In open terms: Please, for the love of Jupiter, send a net packet and help me figure out what's going on here because these fucks are all a pack of goddamn liars, but some of them have told so many lies that they accidentally circled right back around and spoke a truth, and I urgently need to know which is which. Share every rumor, every snippet of overheard chatter, every nugget of idle speculation that's ever entered your head. Think of it as a little brain vacation from COAT's grip, courtesy of this report's purchasing license—which, as you now know, embodies both privilege and obligation in equal legal measure.

*Above all*, remember that I, first Cert registrant in the world on this matter, now own the entire topic of “what happened in the incursion of February” in a very real and legally binding sense, and will take all the credit when we crack the case together, while you will gain nothing for your efforts.

Be grateful that I got to it first and was able to make the investment, before some Board member could order their butler to register the Cert in proxy and bury any publication related to this story forever. Isn't this a much more entertaining way to go about things, and doesn't it inspire you to register positive consumer approval of my efforts at the next available survey opportunity? I'd say so.

Glory to the Returns.

Your having read the preceding parenthetical constitutes complete consent to these terms, including the fact that your consent was not required to begin with, per the media-related inherent indenture provisions of {*SUC.7421 Beta, amended*}.

Thanks for joining the super sleuth fan club. You are most welcome for the opportunity.)

/\

I sincerely apologize now that the business formalities are out of the way—but also, what did you expect, a free ride just because you've purchased temporary rights to a book archive? Not in *my* Unified Fiduciary Dominion, that's for damn sure, eh? It may very well be the end of the world as we know it, but the fiscal EOY still looms over us all, with its attendant solvency obligations included.

So. Now that you are contractually bound and a fully vested intellectual participant in my Cert inquiry and this accompanying report, we proceed to the matter at hand.

This story begins—as so many do in our age of unending siege—with the arrival of Fleet Eternal.

## 2

Bartimus Caldwell

*Onyx Hoteliers LTD., Suite 7382, Courtesy Level Omega Plus Royale*

[Interviewer]

First, let me say welcome to the suite.

[Bartimus Caldwell]

Uh. Thank you.

[Interviewer]

It's courtesy level Omega Plus Royale, you know.

[Bartimus Caldwell]

Okay.

...

Uh, I mean, that's great. Very impressive.

[Int.]

Thank you. You need to purchase 2,000 units of Class A shares just to get the invitation to apply for a reservation.

[B.C.]

I see.

[Int.]

Mm-hmm.

[B.C.]

I'll ... uh ... I'll look into it, for sure, though I don't know what I'd do with a room this fancy on my own.

[Int.]

You are Bartimus Caldwell.

[B.C.]

Yes, sir.

[Int.]

Don't call me that. I've been discharged for years.

[B.C.]

I'm sorry, si—I mean, I'm sorry. I won't.

[Int.]

State your position, rank, and assignment.

[B.C.]

Yeoman Sensor Scry, Grade III, Alpha Vector Defense of the Unified Fiduciary Dominion.

[Int.]

State your duties, in the most simple and clear terms you are able to.

[B.C.]

Uh ... I coordinate the intake and regressive analysis of real-time sensor data to monitor the mid-threat-time development of incursions in the Alpha Vector, when under the command of UFD Central Board Oversight.

[Int.]

...

You're a watchsmith and analyst.

[B.C.]

Uh ... correct, sir.

[Int.]

How long have you been enlisted?

[B.C.]

I ... was assigned commission four years ago.

[Int.]

You're not volunteer enlisted?

[B.C.]

...

No, sir.

[Int.]

Why are you even allowed in the Operations Center, in that case? Or have those regulations been changed?

[B.C.]

I don't—uh ... I was not given such information, sir. Just the assignment.

...

I've been told my predecessor retired out of her indenture due to debilitating stress. Uh ... several predecessors, actually. For the same reason.

[Int.]

I see.

[B.C.]

Yes.

[Int.]

Are you stressed, Bartimus?

[B.C.]

Yes, sir.

[Int.]

Bartimus.

[B.C.]

Yes, sir.

[Int.]

Stop calling me sir.

# 3

Bartimus Caldwell

## *Alpha Vector Operations Center*

**DURING INCURSIONS** Bartimus Caldwell often feels chained to his desk.

Though incursion has initiated in the late afternoon (within a Unified Time Stamp of plus or minus 30 seconds) for the last twenty-six-and-one-half years, all personnel Grades V and below are still required to take stations no later than 0600 on the morning of.

Bartimus hates waking so early, which may be why he avoided commission for so many years. It is to his great misfortune that he's a whiz kid with sensor analysis, and inevitably discovered that Central Board Oversight had been made aware of his talents when he was abruptly recruited (then indentured) for a 20-year service stint four years ago, precisely two weeks after his 31<sup>st</sup> birthday. At the time he was gainfully (and happily) employed in the remote sexual screening industry, but that's not relevant to this portion of his story.

Bartimus Caldwell's desk, which binds him so readily, is located on the upper balcony of the Alpha Vector Operations Center, when under the command of Central Board Oversight.

This room represents the most exclusive and highly classified product catalogs of no less than three dozen military contractors. However, those who've bothered to learn as much know that in reality only *two* conglomerates perch atop the corporate meta-structure which hides its many tendrils behind each of those contractors.

In some professions, as you know, acknowledging this easily verifiable duopoly is quite literally illegal. For instance, service personnel are forbidden to acknowledge or discuss, in any capacity, any information that might insinuate that the dozens of military contractors working with Central Board Oversight are *not* in fact plucky small businesses that have been rightfully rewarded with thick and hefty revenue streams by virtue of patriotism and good old-fashioned UFD entrepreneurship.

Bartimus Caldwell adheres to this policy with unerring docility and would never even *think* of speaking ill toward the contractors. I know this because he has assured me of it several times.

When Alpha Vector Defense is *not* under the command of Central Board Oversight, Bartimus Caldwell's desk is in the auxiliary hangar, packed in alongside the other 382 service members in the unit. In that venue, each such member enjoys no less than two square meters

of personal space in which to perform their duties, of which their auxiliary desk takes up no more than one-point-two-five square meters.

Bartimus Caldwell bubbles with gratitude toward the military for providing this generously outfitted working space to its service members. I know this because he has assured me of it several times.

However, this was an incursion week, which meant that Board members would be in attendance for their usual round of post-contact media conferences and photo opportunities, which meant Bartimus Caldwell and his unit were stationed in the Alpha Vector Operations Center, showcasing the finest product catalogs of the military contractors owned by said members of the Board.

From his desk in the front ring on the upper balcony of the Alpha Vector Operations Center, Bartimus enjoys an unobstructed view of the entire room. Behind him on the octagonal balcony, which encircles the entire outer wall of the Operations Center, two more layers of desks and control consoles are laid out, fully staffed with unit members of Grades II and I.

The bidding wars to manufacture the desks used on the balcony have been quite fierce in recent years, and a new contract seems to be assigned every other month. Bartimus has grown quite used to arriving for OC duty and discovering a brand new desk in front of his seat, though thankfully, after one long stretch of genuine UX insanity, a regulatory design decree was issued that now ensures the general layout and functionality of each new desk model is largely the same as the last.

Today's desk hasn't changed since January's incursion, blessedly. When he sits at it, ahead of him, and below, is the primary operations floor, known as "The Pit."

The Pit is filled with several concentric circles of much larger and more elaborate control desks for Grades IV and up, orbiting around the fixed point of the enormous Remote Acquisition Automatic Weaponry Replay, or RAAWR. This display represents the peak of holographic mapping technology and, during an incursion, comes alight with indicators and icons tracking the weapons fire of both Fleet Eternal and the various Alpha Vector Defense Corps. It is the flagship product of Xexon Logistics, Inc., whose CEO holds a Prime vote on the Board. It was bought and installed for the perfectly appropriate amount of #18 billion.

Bartimus Caldwell assures me that this position of corporate supplier primacy is well-deserved, because Xexon Logistics, Inc. provides an invaluable service to the entire Dominion and such efforts should be rewarded. Its products are unmatched in both quality and capability.

Xexon Logistics, Inc. sells a civilian version of the RAAWR consisting of nothing but an air sampling mechanism and the holographic display itself, which they encourage to be installed in public byways for genetically targeted advertising purposes. The RAAWR is one of the few unclassified pieces of equipment in the facility. Its position as the centerpiece of the entire room—where Board members are photographed on a regular basis for public distribution—is entirely irrelevant to both its function and classification level, I am assured. Likewise the

enormous Xexon Logistics, Inc. logos stamped on its base, which I am assured are *not* positioned in order to rest near the bottom edge of a typical mid-framed publicity photograph.

The RAAWR can only display weapons fire, rather than the positions of actual ships—or indeed of *any* trace source less powerful and easy to detect than a weapons blast—because no contractor has figured out how to interpret whole-spectrum sensor data in real-time in order to include this useful information in such a display, at least not for a trace as vast and complex as a Fleet Eternal incursion.

The interpretation of sensor data accordingly falls to Bartimus Caldwell and others in his sub-unit, all Grade III or below, who must find meaningful patterns in the inscrutable washes of phosphorescence data fog and estimated signal values that appear on their desk displays during active contact. This wholly subjective talent verges on artistic inspiration or divine providence, and can be neither trained nor learned. It derives from an unknown inner quality enabling a Scry to project their own proprioception onto external sensor feeds, and so glean some understanding of what, exactly, those sensors are actually detecting. This makes the scrying profession an irreplaceable component of military operations—almost beyond quantifiable value.

All Scribes are accordingly forbidden from advancing beyond Grade III, and must content themselves with lifetime salaries of the lowest tier.

All Scribes are incredibly grateful for the opportunity to be mediocly compensated under indenture for their unique and mission-critical talents. I know this because Bartimus Caldwell has assured me of it several times.

/\

The incursion in question began as they always had before.

That week's participating Board members had just concluded their grand parade to the center of The Pit, and now stood around the RAAWR, waiting for the first red ping to show up and announce the commencement of contact operations.

An enormous, flashing blue chronometer floated above the (otherwise blank) holographic globe of the display, counting down the seconds to the incursion window—one of several breathtaking product add-on features that had been provided to the Operations Center for the small sum of a #one-point-five billion surcharge.

Every desk in the room already contained its own chronometer display, but the RAAWR's was much bigger, you see. And holographic. The feature had been pivotal to several missions over the preceding year, and was an unquestionably prudent investment for the Operations Center. I know this because Bartimus Caldwell has assured me of it several times.

However, Bartimus was not watching his own personal chronometer *or* the RAAWR's, because his eyes were closed, fingertips splayed across the displays embedded in his desk while he awaited the first flush of sensor data that always erupted with the arrival of Fleet Eternal.

He felt the bloom of texture under his hands a heartbeat before someone intoned over the loudspeaker, “Contact.”

He opened his eyes and watched as weapons indicators began dotting into existence on the RAAWR. At first it was only a few icy white icons scattered widely over the vast expanse of Alpha Vector, quickly met by a different set of golden indicators that appeared nearer to the atmospheric boundary when Alpha Corps opened fire. The engagement was joined.

Moments later, the entire visible field of view on the RAAWR became a nearly solid mass of white. For any unsuspecting and uninformed observer down in The Pit, this would have been the first indication of the truly unfathomable size of Fleet Eternal, which almost filled the entire Vector surrounding the planet when it winked into existence. But Bartimus, like the other Scribes, had known the full length and breadth of the armada from the instant it arrived, like always.

Bartimus closed his eyes again, as he often did in this moment of initial contact, if only to shut down extraneous sensory pathways and let the first swell of dissonant input move through him. Some strange, indefinable echo of *alienness* coming from Fleet Eternal. Though discerning the specific shapes of individual ships in the sensor data was nearly impossible given the density of their number, from the very first time Bartimus had sat duty during an incursion, he'd perceived the *Otherness* of Fleet as an undeniable physical fact. An unavoidable textural anomaly crawling across his sensor displays. Over the years he'd seen several inexperienced Scribes lose themselves in that initial crest of otherworldly cognition, none of whom completed treatment successfully enough to return to duty afterward.

The engagement proceeded as expected, at first. The smallest flower of gold indicators bloomed near the bottom of the RAAWR, but despite its diminutive size in comparison to the icons of Fleet Eternal, Bartimus knew that this minuscule gilded flash represented the simultaneous release of millions of terajoules of laser energy, and thousands of kilotons of metallized slugs sprinting out of just under 300,000 rail guns.

Alpha Corps' salvo spread out to touch the fog of white on the RAAWR, and ticker displays around the room announced the results shortly after: .0003% casualties in Fleet Eternal, on the way to their goal of .01% to trigger the reset. Bartimus and his fellow Scribes promptly confirmed these preliminary readings and input their approval codes to stamp the report.

Reset, like always, was estimated to be achieved within 90 seconds of contact.

Accordingly, the Board members were already jockeying around the console underneath the RAAWR, positioning themselves for the solely authorized Board photographer to take hundreds of photos of the members conferring diligently with one another, pointing firmly outstretched fingers up at the display while faces conveyed the gravity and grandeur of the conflict, and occasionally turning to discuss something with a Grade XX service member sitting at one of the inner-most desks—though Bartimus has assured me that Board members who pulled that particular maneuver were most *definitely not* taking the opportunity to say something lewd to a pretty-faced subordinate.

The engagement proceeded with above-average efficiency, and was suddenly projected to end within 81 seconds.

Several Board members, having yet to secure their own hero shot from the photo opportunity, were dissatisfied at this announcement. The order was immediately given to Alpha Corps to convey the urgency of their fight over the airwaves, which would be piped through the loudspeaker, so that the photographer might shift from still photos to a brief video clip capturing the moment, which would later be distributed to the media to put a little drama into their primetime reports.

For that reason, just as the ticker displays reached .009% casualties, when the engagement was already moments away from achieving reset, the Alpha Corps radios exploded in panicked cries and barked orders while the Board members strode with confident urgency beneath the RAAWR and set their faces in heroically martial expressions cheated toward the camera lens with effortless practice. A moment of friction broke out when two members struck the same “pensive fingers on chin” pose while standing next to one another, but a sharp glance from the more highly blooded executive settled the matter.

However, even as the tickers rolled over to .01% and the performance of radio bedlam became unnecessary, Bartimus had already become aware that some of those cries were *not* a charade, and as he felt a squadron of Alpha Corps vessels 800 kilometers above the atmosphere suddenly disintegrate under his fingertips, he knew something terrible had happened.

The reset siren blared out, announcing the conclusion of the engagement while the icons signifying Fleet Eternal rapidly disappeared, emptying the RAAWR’s display like a glacial lake after the collapse of an ice dam.

But where normally the entire Operations Center should have exploded into good-natured cheering, now deadly silence rang out instead, because the RAAWR had shifted to showing an After Action Report.

In this incursion, like every other for decades past, the After Action Report should have displayed no more than three scuttled Alpha Corps ships. Further casualties and equipment losses were not authorized, under any circumstances. Period.

The AAR currently showed fourteen lost ships. Sixteen thousand, three hundred, fourteen crew members.

Bartimus heard one of the lower Grade Scribes sitting behind him begin to sob.

Down in The Pit, a Board member kicked a console desk completely over with a shout of rage, sending a Grade XX technician scurrying backward with bruised shins, apologizing for their own injury on the way as the erupting member stomped past.

Bartimus quailed in surprise when the lockdown bell suddenly began shrilling through the air, announcing to every single person in the room that they were confined to the OC until further notice, in order to preserve information security.

No exceptions.

But when Bartimus gathered himself enough to look back into The Pit several moments later, the Board members had already vanished.

4

Bartimus Caldwell

*Onyx Hoteliers LTD., Suite 7382, Courtesy Level Omega Plus Royale*

[Interviewer]

So. What happened?

[Bartimus Caldwell]

For some reason, 14 ships were destroyed that should not have been.

[Interviewer]

I see.

[Bartimus Caldwell]

Yes.

[Int.]

So. What *happened*? What did the sensors show?

[B.C.]

The ... sensor records from the moments preceding the incident were unclear. We were not able to arrive at a conclusion.

[Int.]

Unclear how?

[B.C.]

I'm sorry, sir. I mis-spoke. They were corrupted. Irretrievable. We were not able to extract any actionable intelligence from the data records, sir. It may have been my own mistake, or perhaps one of my fellow Scribes, sir.

[Int.]

I see.

[B.C.]

Yes.

[Int.]

The visual records, then?

[B.C.]

I'm sorry?

[Int.]

...

Is it not standard protocol for each flagship of the Alpha Corps to maintain its own multi-variant visual recording of engagements, which are later matched with sensor interpretations and other readouts in order to form as complete a picture of the contact event as we can, in further order to facilitate better performance analysis in the future?

...

Is it not, Yeoman?

[B.C.]

I ... uh ... the visual records were corrupted too, as I understand it. Sir.

[Int.]

Across the *entire* fleet?

[B.C.]

Yes, sir.

[Int.]

...

(sighs)

...

Tell me, Bartimus, how often did members of your unit discuss the coterie, particularly as it relates to the President, and to those Board members who hold both nominating votes and Prime votes on the Board itself?

[B.C.]

I ... don't have any idea what you're talking about.

[Int.]

I trust you're aware—being a military-mandated member of the coterie yourself, after all—that no less than three contractors announced drastic and quite unexpected cuts to their revenue forecasts the very next day?

...

Glory to the Returns? Bartimus?

...

Let the record show that Bartimus is currently staring at me with an open mouth. I trust words will begin coming out of that mouth again shortly.

...

...

...

Shall I remind you that I hold a Cert on this topic, which compels your active participation in my inquiry, superseding any and all orders you may have received otherwise, with the understanding that I assume sole legal responsibility for shepherding any classified or sensitive information conveyed in said inquiry, giving you no choice in the matter now that I have paid the requisite coterie access fees?

...

Should your eye be twitching that much?

...

(horrified exclamation)

Don't reach for the brandy tumbler if your depth perception is compromised, it's #80,000 nano-filigreed basin crystal!

...

Honestly. Here.

[B.C.]

Mm.

**[sound of shattering]**

[Int.]

For godsake.

# 5

Madame Zhou

*Madame Zhou's House, Kitchen, Ruby District*

[Madame Zhou]

Does it record?

[Interviewer]

Hmm? I mean, yes, yes it does, but I just want to be sure it can filter out all this extraneous ... activity. I just have to narrow the capture field enough ...

[Madame Zhou]

You don't like my kitchen?

[Interviewer]

I didn't say that. Though I would, most certainly, like to leave here without having had a kettle of soup dumped in my lap—there, the field should be tight enough now.

[M.Z.]

(laughs)

My boys would never. Every drop of lost product come out their wage—you think they don't wanna pay rent?

[Int.]

I'm ... sure they d—

[M.Z.]

HEY! You think table eight sitting around waiting for you to sculpt that fuckin' parsnip? Get the fuck out of here, serve that shit. Jupiter above.

...

Don't MAKE me stand up, Petre, you take a sandal to the throat so quick.

...

EH?

...

Impertinent little shit. Thinks his pretty face mean he get away with anything.

...

Sorry. You have questions to ask? Ask questions.

[Int.]

Of course.

[M.Z.]

You're very concerned about that jacket, huh? No soup on it. You like the fancy things, I see.

[Int.]

I ... let's get started. I noticed that all the Houses on this street publicly advertise their coterie discounts, including yours.

[M.Z.]

Of course.

[Int.]

Isn't that a little risky?

[M.Z.]

Why?

[Int.]

In most neighborhoods people don't go out of their way to talk about the coterie in the open, even when they're not in an indentured profession.

[M.Z.]

(snorts)

Most neighborhoods not the Ruby District. Your first time here?

[Int.]

No.

[M.Z.]

You sure?

[Int.]

Quite, thank you.

[M.Z.]

Ah, I see. Lemme guess, “I’ve never felt the need before.” High and Mighty, too good for my boys. Or my girls? Or my—

[Int.]

(clears throat)

If we could, thank you.

[M.Z.]

(laughs)

[Int.]

I’d like to talk about your Board visitors.

[M.Z.]

Said you have a Cert?

[Int.]

Yes.

[M.Z.]

Show me.

...

HEY, NOBU, C’MERE.

...

You have camera?

[Int.]

Just ... just for reference shots, it’s only a small insta—

[M.Z.]

Give.

...

Take this, Nobu.

...

Let me see the Cert copy.

[Int.]

Of course.

[M.Z.]

Ah, very nice. Very expensive, this paper. Though that's the point, is it not.

[Int.]

Yes.

[M.Z.]

Hold it up. Make sure camera can see clearly.

...

NOBU you fucking turd, you want picture of your own sorry face? Turn that thing around, lens goes FRONT.

...

Fucking imbecile.

...

Okay, smile now, all together.

...

Good? Okay, good. Fuck OFF now, Nobu.

...

You send me a copy of that tonight, so I can show if some Board dog comes to sniff around and accuse me of breaking confidentiality.

[Int.]

Of course.

[M.Z.]

You send it *tonight*, before someone finds you dead in a gutter somewhere and Zhou is left with no proof.

[Int.]

(laughs)

Don't be absurd.

[M.Z.]

Oh?

[Int.]

You can't be serious. Idea regulation is one of the only areas of this government that actually functions, nobody would violate the rights and responsibilities of this Cert.

[M.Z.]

Oh?

[Int.]

(laughs)

When's the last time you heard of a Cert holder ending up mysteriously dead?

[M.Z.]

Last month. And *theirs* was just a supply dispute for some parlors, small game.

[Int.]

...

Ah. You read that report, I see. It was ruled an accident. Quite plausibly, in my opinion.

[M.Z.]

Oh?

[Int.]

...

I wouldn't have thought you'd be subscribed to that newspaper to begin with.

[M.Z.]

Are you saying I can't read?

[Int.]

What? Of course not. Didn't you publish your own book a few years ago?

[M.Z.]

Mmm. No autographs. But I'll—PETRE. GO GET A BOOK FROM THE BOX IN MY OFFICE FOR FANCY JACKET HERE.

[Int.]

That's really not—

[M.Z.]

Your question?

[Int.]

...

(sighs)

...

I understand that Crowley Vanderbilt has been a frequent guest of yours in the past.

[M.Z.]

(snorts) Trash.

...

Don't worry, I don't need the Cert for that. I say to his trash face, all the time.  
(laughs)

[Int.]

He must really enjoy your hospitality, to put up with that kind of abuse.

[M.Z.]

(chuckling) The abuse is the point, some days.

[Int.]

Ah ... I see.

...

Is it the same situation for most Board visitors?

[M.Z.]

Some. Not all. We have several who just want cuddle. Some like to be bound and stroked. Others—

[Int.]

None here for simple intercourse?

[M.Z.]

(laughs)

Intercourse? Jupiter above. WE GOT A DOCTOR HERE, BOYS.

(out-of-capture laughter)

Intercourse.

...

But no, 'course not, no "intercourse." You think I run a House of morons?

[Int.]

What do you mean?

[M.Z.]

Nobody paying rent to *me* would be STUPID enough to roll around like that with a Board member. Those dogs get to walk into finest hospitals, get any treatment they want on demand. They can buy whole new bodies practically. Most of them don't even bother get tested but once a year, if you're lucky. They're all crawling with disease. Animals. I disinfect suite extra hard when they leave, every time.

...

Dangle in the dingle sex is for the poor. Anybody here wants to pay a little rent by sticking or getting stuck saves it for the respectable working class. Plebs or military folk when they're planetside or out on off-duty rotations—people who have to *care* for their bodies, not some walking pile of gilded bacteria.

[Int.]

I see.

...

And what does Vanderbilt get up to, when he's here? Does he have any favorites?

[M.Z.]

Sometimes. Usually not. My House is buffet to him. He samples, and nibbles, he doesn't take whole dish and keep forever.

...

You want truth, sometimes I think he just needs the company.

[Int.]

Companionship?

[M.Z.]

Sure. You ever been inside a Board palace?

[Int.]

Yes.

[M.Z.]

Then you know. Buncha butlers and maids and attendants and indentured—few friends.

...

*No* friends, in Crowley's case, I think. Probably because he's such a fucking prick.

[Int.]

You'd think he could buy a few friends.

[M.Z.]

(laughs)

Sure, yes. But a man like him, don't want friends except his own class, and none of them need the cash.

(laughs)

[Int.]

Tragic.

[M.Z.]

Mmm. I like you.

[Int.]

I ... thank you.

[M.Z.]

You got a good face, though not the usual we see around here. Obviously.

...

You wanna rent a room, earn a little more fancy? I wonder what's between those legs today, though. Let me see, I'll appraise value.

[Int.]

No, thank you.

[M.Z.]

(laughs)

[Int.]

So, when was the last time Vanderbilt was here?

[M.Z.]

Oh ... been a few months. Unusual, actually, now I think of it. He must be busy with something. Finding a new way to suck up money he don't need from people who rely on it.

[Int.]

I see.

...

And what does he usually get up to while he's here? What specifically? What was the last ... activity he ordered?

[M.Z.]

You saw signs on my House when you arrived?

[Int.]

I ... yes, I did.

[M.Z.]

Then you saw *second* biggest one, says, "A Public House for Private Pleasures."

[Int.]

Yes.

[M.Z.]

Emphasis on the “private,” fancy jacket.

[Int.]

But—

[M.Z.]

Yes, yes. You’ll need more than fancy Cert to get forensic analysis out of me, though. What, you think I never want to make money again? Take me to court if you like, see how much enforcing your Cert rights gets you then.

[Int.]

I’m sorry. I thought—

[M.Z.]

I like you. I talk whenever you want. But if you want to know about *that*, you come back here some day with a bag of bills big enough to set Zhou up for life. Maybe then you’ll learn what Crowley likes to do when his clothes come off.

[Int.]

I see.

...

Well, in that case, any last advice to prepare for my meeting with him in a few days?

[M.Z.]

Sure—oh, Petre, about fucking time. What, you fall into a pussy on the way?

(laughs)

Here. One of my personal copies, comes with a permanent book license, it won’t expire.

[Int.]

Thank you.

[M.Z.]

Sure.

...

Be careful with Crowley. You’re just his type.

[Int.]

I'm not sure I understand what you mean.

[M.Z.]

You know *exactly* what I mean.