

STRESS MANAGEMENT

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“The temp duty people don’t have a GQ post yet. Hold tight with them where you are.”

--ANS Beowulf internal communications, January 2276

“Tanner, you’ve gotta help me with this,” said Baldwin. “You’re the only one—”

A sharp jolt shook the deck and the bulkheads. Dishware rattled on the galley table over their heads. As soon as it passed, Tanner threw a skeptical look at his fellow Master at Arms. “You know why you got this assignment.”

She sighed. Jesse Baldwin’s petite frame fit under the table a little easier than his, but she didn’t look any happier to be there. With the faceplate of her helmet still racked back, Tanner saw her frown. “It was funny. You laughed.”

“Well, yeah. I don’t hand out assignments.”

“Ah—excuse me?” asked another voice. Tanner twisted around to the other three people sharing their shelter. Unlike everyone else in the galley when the alarm hit, they had nowhere else to go. Shadows and awkward postures under the table made it hard to read the nametags. With the faceplates down, he couldn’t tell the new yeomen apart. “What was that?”

“What was what? Baldwin’s joke?” Tanner replied. “Alliteration, mostly.”

“No, that bang just now.”

“Oh. That was a hit on the ship.”

“We’ve been hit?” asked another yeoman.

“Probably a few times by now,” he answered. “When you can feel lit like that, it means we either took a missile or something on *Beowulf* blew up.”

“Or something bumped into us,” said Baldwin. “If we aren’t hearing alarms and warnings, it’s out of our hands. Tanner, I’m serious. You can’t leave me hanging.”

“This isn’t a serious assignment. It’s busywork.”

“I know it’s busywork but it’s still orders from the boss,” she replied.

“How are they giving you busywork when we’re under attack?” asked the third new yeoman.

“It’s the Navy, y’know?” answered Tanner. “Half of everything is busywork whether we’re at peace or at war. Probably more than half if I’m generous. You’re yeomen. Is it any different for you?”

“They sent us up here to finish all the admin work left by the ones who died in the invasion,” said the first. “And to catch up on the casualty records.”

“Okay, but when that’s done?” said Tanner.

Another jolt reverberated through the deck. Tanner’s head snapped to the side at a loud clatter against the floor. Falling plates and utensils were exactly what he should’ve expected here, but his heartbeat picked up anyway. He forced himself through a deep, slow breath.

“When that’s done, they’d better send us back to Raphael,” grumbled the second.

Tanner considered the additional paperwork that would follow additional enemy attacks, but he kept his mouth shut. He couldn’t blame her for wanting to leave. Who wouldn’t?

“I didn’t ask for this assignment,” Baldwin pressed on. “I’m asking you because you’re the only one who believes me.” She grabbed his shoulder and looked him in the eye. “You’re the only one who believes *in* me.”

Tanner looked at her hand on his shoulder, then back at her. He laughed. She did, too.

After that first awful year in the Navy, it was good to have friends again.

“Come on!” Baldwin shoved him.

“Okay, okay. I’ll help.”

“How are you two joking around while we’re under attack?” asked the first yeoman.

“Because we’re locked in the galley and there’s nothing to do,” Tanner said with less stress than he felt. “We’re fixated on bullshit as a defense mechanism. I’m fucking terrified.”

Despite their faceplates, all three yeomen looked stunned. “But aren’t you Tanner Malone?” asked one.

Baldwin exploded with laughter. She nearly fell on her side. Tanner groaned.

A brief, loud tone heralded an announcement: “All hands, secure from general quarters. I say again, secure from general quarters.”

“Guess we’re not under attack anymore.” Tanner slid out from under the table. “Huh. I think that set was the only thing to fall off the tables. You can come out. We’re good.”

“That’s it?” asked one yeoman. “We just took a couple hits. Now it’s back to lunch?”

“Whoever’s handling damage control is probably still at it. They said to secure from GQ, but usually that takes some time. Probably gonna stay empty in here for a while.”

“Yeah, but... it’s already over?” asked another.

“It’s gotta be another hit and run.” Tanner pulled his helmet off with relief. “NorthStar and CDC have the ships to do that. They send a couple ships in to make us all rush to GQ and take a few pot-shots before jumping out in FTL. Then they’ll send another ship to do it again. They’ve got more ships than we do, so it’s easier for them to keep up the tempo. They don’t usually do much damage. It’s mostly to stress us out.”

“Worked on me,” said a yeoman emerging from under the table.

“Yeah. Me, too. They probably won’t be back for a while, though.”

“What if they are?”

Tanner shrugged. “Then everyone goes back to general quarters. This one’s out of my hands. I have to let it go.”

“That’s how you deal with it?”

“Today, yeah. Hopefully tomorrow. When that doesn’t work, I’ll figure out something else.”

“Baldwin here,” she announced behind him on her holocom. “I’m with Malone in the galley, still with the temporary duty people. Should we send them on their way?”

After a pause, the reply came clearly enough for all to hear. “Yeah, the way to administration is clear. Back to your patrols after that. Good looking out for them.”

“Gotcha.” Baldwin freed her head of short, boyishly-cut auburn hair from her helmet. “That’s the show, everyone. Thanks for hanging out with us.”

The collected yeomen glanced to one another, helmets still securely fastened. One opened up a holocom with a ship’s map and status reports. “That’s really it?” asked another.

“Might want to ask admin where they want you for the next General Quarters,” said Tanner.

“Oh, and you’re all combat veterans now. Make sure you put in for your bloodstripes.”

“Wait, what?” The second yeoman looked around in shock. “That was like five minutes! We hid under a table!”

“The rules say that still counts. Everyone under the tables in the officers’ wardroom is gonna do the exact same thing.” Tanner grinned. “If they have bloodstripes after this and you don’t, you undermine their credibility. Can’t have that, can we?”

Faceplates or not, Tanner knew a dropped jaw when he saw one. The trio shuffled off, looking back in shock and confusion on their way out of the galley. Tanner meant to follow until he felt a tug on his arm. “Hey. You said you’d help,” said Baldwin.

“I know. Soon as we take them to admin.”

“They know the way. They’ve got holocoms. We can get back to our stuff.”

Tanner frowned skeptically. “Pretty clear we’re supposed to go with them.”

“Was it? I didn’t hear that explicitly.” Baldwin grinned. “C’mon, you know I found a pattern. This is the perfect time. We’re *on patrol*.”

“Oh my god,” Tanner sighed. “Fine. Where? You’ve already thought this through, right?”

“Yeah. We need a line of sight where we won’t get spotted. The table racks over there should work, especially if we turn out a couple lights. That won’t look weird.” She walked with Tanner to the serving line and then along to the far corner, where currently unused tables and benches stood folded and secured on racks. Gaps between the metal and plastic offered vision along with concealment. At the touch of a nearby button, half the lights of the galley cut out to leave pools of shadow that added to their cover.

“This is only one access point to the stores,” noted Tanner. Even with the galley deserted, he kept his voice down. Surveillance was still surveillance, after all. “Any of the storekeepers and any non-rate on mess duty could get in there from the other side.”

“It’s not the storekeepers,” Baldwin whispered. “I don’t think it’s a non-rate, either.”

They waited.

“Why not?” whispered Tanner.

“Storekeepers could cover their tracks and a non-rate would’ve been caught by now.”

They waited more.

“Didn’t know you had such feelings about the bloodstripes,” whispered Baldwin.

Tanner sighed. “Y’know, when I got mine, Admiral Yeoh told me this whole thing about how a uniform tells a story and how you can rely on people—what?” he grunted when she nudged.

“Oh my god. ‘*This one time when I was hanging out with Admiral Yeoh.*’ Jesus.” She rolled her eyes. “Was that the first time you went to the Annual Address, or the second?”

“Honest to God, you’re the last person I’ll ever try to impress,” said Tanner.

“Good,” she scoffed. Then frowned. “Wait, why not?”

“Because you haven’t given a fuck before now. I can’t tell you how much that means to me. I need more of that in my life, not less.”

Satisfied with his response, Baldwin fell silent. Until she didn’t. “Still not gonna date you.”

“I know. Still means a lot.”

“Aw. See, that’s a good response.”

“Thank you.”

They waited.

“Are you really terrified, or was that bit all self-deprecation to make them feel better about being scared?”

“The shooting I can’t do anything about is the worst. Waiting for shooting when I know it’s gonna happen is also bad. I’m freaked out when I can do something about it, too, but at least there’s some agency. The rest of the time it’s this constant underlying dread, but it’s so constant now I’m kind of numb to it. Or maybe I’ve adjusted, and that’s a freaky thought, too.”

“Have you talked to anybody?”

“Bunch of people. At this point I think talking about it is how I lash out. Kind of a relief valve sometimes. All my anger comes from fear. I’ve had some people tell me to stop talking about it because it’s bad for morale.”

“But you haven’t stopped?”

“Nah. Fuck ‘em.”

Baldwin snorted, trying to stifle her laughter.

“What about you? How do you deal?” he asked.

“I tell myself combat isn’t gonna get me out of all the other awkward and stupid stuff I have to do after the fight.”

“Like this here?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Also, I distract myself with pointless gossip. The rest is denial.”

“That sounds good.”

They waited.

“Fuck, how long has it been?” asked Baldwin.

“Four minutes.”

“Holy shit, I picked the wrong rating. I’m not cut out for law enforce—!” Baldwin dropped her comment at the sound of a nearby hatch. She gripped Tanner’s arm as if to warn him, but he already had the message.

The footsteps weren’t silent, though it was close. He passed directly in front of their hiding place, light of complexion, a little light of hair on his head, and mildly heavier-set than most of the crew. Nobody made chief while still in their twenties and hardly anyone in their thirties. Not everyone got the same benefits out of their longevity treatments. Still, he wasn’t likely out of fitness standards—not for the old guard, anyway.

He carried his helmet low in one hand against his hip, looking casual. His expression of idle exhaustion and even boredom didn’t match his darting, vigilant eyes.

Tanner didn’t recognize him or catch his nametag, but *Beowulf* had only so many chiefs. This one wasn’t one of the storekeepers who ran the galley, either. Nor did he have an obvious reason to go straight into the chill stores. The hatch shut behind him with a hiss.

“You know him?” hissed Baldwin.

“No.”

She brought up the wrist mount on her holocom and worked quickly with its menu screens. Her camera options came up with only one wave of her fingers through the holographic image in front of her. Another command killed the screen itself. She detached the little black marble that served as her recorder/projector and set it at the outer edge of the racked tables and benches.

They almost missed the subtle reopening of the chill locker. The hatch hung open in silence for a brief second, then a little wider as the chief scoped out the scene. From there, he exited quickly and moved to the coffee station. His helmet still rode low in his left hand, tilted to keep the opening close against his thigh. He slowed and relaxed once again, gathered his drink in a personal thermos, and ambled right past the hidden watchers on his way out of the galley with the same expression as before.

Baldwin gathered her recording orb with an excited squeak. “Baxter. Did you catch that?”

“I saw it happen, yeah,” Tanner murmured.

She emerged from their hiding spot, calling up the recording on a holo screen. “God, I can’t believe he’s a bos’un. This is perfect.”

“You’re really gonna double down on that after you got yelled at already?”

“I’m gonna rub everyone’s face in it when I’m proven right, yeah.” A quick replay in dim holography confirmed his identity on their way to the exit. Baldwin threw a triumphant look back at Tanner.

“We gotta catch him with the goods first.” Tanner opened the exit hatch with all possible stealth and peered out into the passageways. Up ahead, Chief Baxter disappeared down a ladder—*No, stairs*, argued the contrary part of Tanner’s brain that still hated Navy lingo. He pushed that aside and hustled with Baldwin to catch up.

“Gotta be in his helmet,” said Baldwin. “It’s big enough that a bulge would show in his vac suit pockets. What do you think he’s doing with it?”

“I don’t know, but that guy is not a spy,” said Tanner. “That’s fucking ridiculous. We can’t treat every bit of litter like it’s evidence of sabotage.”

“You can if you’re Master Chief Floyd,” grumbled Baldwin.

They followed the “ladder” down to the next deck, looked each way down the empty passage, and saw no foot traffic nor a likely hiding spot nearby. Rec rooms and the like would still be closed down this soon after an engagement.

The next deck below provided more variety in possible destinations. “He had to have come down here,” Tanner said quietly. The passages led to mostly machinery and storage, inviting no foot traffic at the moment. “The next down is mostly crew quarters and below that is marine country. Besides, he wasn’t that far ahead of us.”

“The evidence was all found in out-of-the-way areas before,” Baldwin considered. She looked over the relevant hatches as they walked. “DC gear lockers? Nah, too likely they’d get opened up for spares right now.”

“And there’s too much open access to the tool and cleaning gear lockers,” Tanner agreed.

Observation and consideration brought quiet words to a standstill. The silence that followed was in truth no silence at all, filled as it was by the white noise of vibrations, humming power conduits, and rotating gears. Baldwin’s face lit up with an idea. She snapped her fingers and pointed to a sealed hatch: HVAC 13.

Tanner shrugged. It was as likely as any. His partner keyed up the recorder of her holocom for evidence and threw a wicked grin. “Bos’un Baxter, Butter Bandit,” she hissed with glee. “That’s going on my—oh god,” she gasped. Her eyes widened. “No. Think of the title!”

“These reports don’t usually include titles...?”

“Baldwin Busts Butter Bandit Bos’un Baxter!”

Tanner rolled his eyes. “You don’t call someone by their rating once they make chief.”

“Don’t spoil my alliteration! I’ve already suffered enough for my art. Now is my moment of triumph. You ready?”

He nodded. She hit the lamp on her holocom, unnecessary for a clear picture but a nice touch for the sake of drama. Tanner rolled his eyes, took a deep breath, and threw the hatch open.

“Oh shit!” gasped the man inside.

“Oh my god!” Baldwin’s hand came up to cover her eyes, but she couldn’t look away.

“What do—why are you here?” shouted the chief.

“What are you doing with that?” Baldwin all but shrieked.

“Uh...chief, we need you to put the butter down,” said Tanner. “And zip your vac suit back up. Please.”

“Ugh. Gross.” With effort, Baldwin turned her head. “For fuck’s sake.”

“Or for the lack of it,” muttered Tanner. She kicked him. “What did you think we were going to find?”

“I thought he was eating it! Or hoarding it! Or... or...” she waved her hand at the disheveled chief. “Something else!”

“Oh god.” The chief sucked in a shuddering breath, releasing it with a sob. “Oh god.”

Tanner winced. “Y’know...we’re not even looking at a crime here, really.”

Baldwin hit him. “Tell me that when I’m seeing this in my sleep!”

* * *

“Baldwin, Malone, hang back a minute,” said Lt. Commander Jacobson. Around them, the morning watch broke up from their briefing. As instructed, the pair reluctantly moved from their seats toward the small podium. Jacobson went over his notes, subtly giving everyone else the hint to step out of earshot.

“You noted in last night’s reports that Master Chief Floyd’s concerns are ‘resolved,’” said Jacobson. “No note as to how or why, though. Can you elaborate?”

Baldwin threw Tanner a pensive look before casting her gaze to the deck. She said nothing.

“Sir, we investigated and took care of the matter at the lowest level, as you’ve encouraged,” said Tanner. “No victim, no crime. It won’t happen again.”

Jacobson’s eyebrow rose. “When the ship’s senior NCO asks for an investigation, he needs a better answer than, ‘We took care of it.’ So do I.”

“Yes, sir. I—we understand.” Tanner hesitated, giving Baldwin a chance to speak up, but she still had that same look on her face. “Baldwin noted a pattern in the evidence. The empty tubs and wrappers turned up after each engagement, so we followed that pattern. It was just someone looking for a little, um...stress relief, sir. Things are tense for everyone. He’s trying to get by like the rest of us. Nothing more.”

“He? So you have a suspect? Who is it?”

“One of the chiefs, sir.” Hierarchy and privilege irritated Tanner, but it was his best leverage for saving the culprit this time. He watched Jacobson’s face for the inevitable frown at all the complications invoked by that rank. “Fairly respected. Solid performance record. We didn’t want to push anyone into a corner over this. It won’t happen again.”

Jacobson made a face. Though Tanner dreaded a demand for a name, the boss asked instead, “What was he doing with it?”

“Unspeakable things,” Baldwin shuddered. “Unspeakable things.”