

We Bleed The Same

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Chapter 1

"DANNITER PARQUE?"

An unfamiliar silhouette in the doorway. Was this the one? The one who would finally move on from questions, to...?

"They told me you're famous, Mr Parque, but I'm not from around here. So would you please be good enough to confirm your identity?"

Danny swallowed and nodded.

The mountain of a man advanced into the room and Danny cringed back into the bare metal chair. He wished he could sink into it. Encase his vulnerable flesh in the hard steel to protect it against the violence he suspected was long overdue.

As the man entered the cone of light projected downwards by the shade of the only light in the room, Danny could see that most of his bulk had run to fat. He did not look like the others who had been carrying out the interrogations so far. The marked improvement of quality in his tailoring gave him sharper, more defined edges. If Danny's previous interrogators' physical fuzziness had gone hand in hand with incompetence, then this one's precisely creased outline was probably a matter for concern.

The man turned around to face the guard who stood in the doorway, stun-baton at the ready.

"Wait at the guards' station."

This was new too. Not only did he dare to give orders, but did so with the tone of someone who expected to be obeyed. The guard departed, pulling closed the heavy riveted door with a resounding thunk. Danny felt fear and vulnerability wash over him as the man put down a large file, adorned with the Imperial coat of arms, on the bare metal table between them.

This type of folder was unfamiliar to him, even after all of his years working for the Government. It was stuffed with smaller folders inside, each of which had a plastic tab on the corner. He found it quaint that paper files were still used in some departments, especially those which were security related, but he realised their psychological effect for the first time.

It sat there. Like a time bomb.

Danny had an overwhelming urge to reach out and open it, find out what the hell was inside, but his hands were shackled to the chair's uprights. The man opposite was in no hurry. He took off his jacket before rolling up the sleeves of his shirt. Why would he need to do that? He pulled out a disposable tissue, wiped real or imagined dirt from the other chair and dropped it on the floor before sitting down. With both hands on top of the folder, he peered across the table.

"Why are you here, Mr Parque?"

"I... I don't understand..."

"Mr Parque, I sincerely hope that we can do this without the assistance of the guards."

Danny stopped breathing. He thought of the noises he tried not to hear. The ones that went on all night...

"I'm sorry but look... I've answered questions from the police, the GSO, the Proctors, some guys who I assume were Naval Intel and the LaMarque Investigations Office. All their reports must be in that folder. What else is it you want to know?"

"You can tell me what actually happened."

"Excuse me?"

“They were all concerned with your motivation. I’m interested in events. Their reports are thoroughly unenlightening with respect to the facts, Mr Parque, although your prediction concerning my file falls down – for some reason I don’t have an L.I.O. report in here.”

He made an annotation on the cover of the light green folder. A flash of hope cut through Danny’s mind. Had someone finally decided to help him? The man put the lid back on the pen and placed it on the table, looking up at Danny with a cold, penetrating stare from washed-out, blue eyes.

Danny felt a chill in the uncomfortably warm room. “Who are you?”

“My name is Kepler, but I guess what you actually meant to ask is *what* am I? I am the one you tell, Mr Parque. I’m your opportunity to save yourself.”

Kepler leaned back, his shirt stretching over an adequate midriff. He somehow affected an air of co-mingled expectation and boredom, but Danny could still see nothing but cold calculation in his emotionally dead eyes. He thought about what to do next and figured that at this stage, there really was nothing to lose.

“Okay, where do you want me to start?”

“Excellent!”

Kepler leaned forward again, opened the front page of the file and pulled out a pair of reading glasses. “Danniter Jean-Michelle Parque. Aged 33 standard as of last week. Happy birthday, Mr Parque! Born to a tax proctor and a police forensic accountant – the very same ones who cracked the Rindallian Crime Syndicate Case. At the age of 13, as a result of your parents dying in the Place de l’Empreur incident, you became famous as *Little Danny P* – a mascot for the great liberalisation of LaMarque. The Governor became your guardian on a swell of public support and a privileged education and career followed. You were in charge of his private office by the age of 29.”

He looked up. “Well done Mr Parque.”

“Excuse me?”

“Those who aspire to central government should reach a senior position by the time they’re 30. You just made it.”

Danny shrugged and looked around the bare concrete walls of the cell. Kepler put his glasses down on the top sheet and folded his arms, ignoring the look of despair that Danny was sure must be on his face.

“A meteoric rise, Mr Parque, but what happened next?”

Danny took a deep breath.

Chapter 2

AT HIS DESK outside the Governor's office, Danny scrolled through the advanced copies of the following day's new stories, sent in from all the major media outlets. Stylus in hand, he swiped black electronic lines through those running counter to what the LaMarquois Government knew to be true and wrote a large D in the margin. D-notices. They had always been called that although he did not know why. 'Dodgy'? 'Diabolical'? 'Don't you fucking dare write this'?

As usual he started with the society and celebrity sections, checking what they had to say about him and giving any with jokes the black line treatment. Disappointingly, only three mentioned him today and, although two were positive, the third was that stupid infographic from *The Verzail Squamk* that they had been attempting to get through the office for weeks. The one charting his progress with the society women of the LaMarquois capital.

Turning to the real news stories, he did not expect to find anything interesting, so it came as a shock when he reached the *LaMarque Daily Post's* leader to find 'Danny Parque: is he really up to it?' That bloody woman, again – Jeanette Marceaux. She'd had it in for him ever since the Agricultural Commission's annual review. After he had given her the quote '*The LaMarquois citizen's ability to feed himself has always been his greatest advantage*', she had written a really subtle, sarcastic piece that he hadn't noticed on submission because of the following day's hang-over. He had been sending her news

suggestions ever since, showing he was on top of his brief, but she always responded with more and more scathing pieces on his abilities. It had reached the point where he dare not delegate the press review for fear of something getting through.

Danny hit the distribution button, leaned back in his chair with his hands over his face and sighed, his mind wandering to the anticipated aromas of the wine he would soon be drinking. He would go to the Sommelier's Club. George would see how much he needed it and wave him through. Then a quiet seat in the corner. The red list. Time to make a dent in the 1017 Grappiers. The pulling of the cork. Getting his nose right inside the bowl and inhaling...what would it be? Blackberries...nettles...a hint of honey...

"Danniter Parque?" A woman's voice. Danny took a moment to imagine a face before pulling his fingers down. Wow. He'd got it right.

"Call me Danny."

"You mean like *Little Danny P?*"

He felt a flash of irritation as a smile flickered around the edge of her mouth and her eyes twinkled. She continued.

"You're a PPS now, so isn't Mr Parque more appropriate? I'm Sandrine; I've been assigned to this office." She held out an elegant and well manicured hand. For just a moment it looked like she expected him to kiss it but then Danny shook off his fatigue and rose to shake it instead.

"Seriously Sandrine, it's all first names here, even the Governor."

She made a gesture to brush her hair out of her face despite the fact that not a strand was out of place. "Well in that case, it's Sandie."

"Okay then, Sandie." Danny came around to the front of his desk and realised the height he assumed she possessed due to heels was entirely her own. "Have you brought your file?"

She pulled it from under the arm of her Maison de Perle three-piece suit. Danny tapped the screen and, being surprised by the reported age of 25, immediately scrolled down to her employment notes. “Two years in Government Liaison? Is that it?”

She had the good grace to look embarrassed. “Yes I know. Two years of picking menus and deciding which wines to put on the tables.”

He scrolled down further, “So what will you be doing here?”

He frowned as, where he expected to find ‘Assistant Diary Secretary,’ he discovered ‘Governor’s Special Assistant.’

“Shit! Who did you have to do to...?”

“Ah, Sandie, you’re here!” said Governor Claremont as he hustled into the room clutching an empty mug. He changed course as he saw her and kissed her warmly on both cheeks.

“Welcome! I’m afraid a big report’s just landed on my desk, ma chérie, but Danny here will look after you...”

“I will...?”

“He’ll show you where the pens are, anyway, and he should be able to guide you through the gastronomic catastrophe of our canteen.”

He leaned closer to her and whispered in mock-conspiratorial tones, “Other than that, you should probably ask me!”

Danny’s confusion continued while the Governor and Sandie laughed. He never thought of old Hercules having dalliances with women young enough to be his daughter.

Daughter?

He returned to the top of the file and read her name – Sandrine Valnuageux. Wasn’t that the surname of the Governor’s brother-in-law? Ah! The ‘little niece’ of whom the Governor would speak in glowing terms after his second glass of Shupillier.

Danny became aware that they were both looking at him expectantly.

“Find anything interesting in her file?”

“No, Hercules. Sorry, I don’t mean Sandrine...”

“Sandie!”

“...sorry, yes, Sandie. I don’t mean she isn’t interesting, I mean...er...”

Why the hell was he flustered?

The Governor leaned closer and whispered, “You’ve actually gone red.” He grinned broadly and punched Danny in the arm before swaggering off, asking loudly if anyone had seen the kettle. Sandie smirked at him.

He tossed her file onto his desk.

“Well, I’m done for the day and it’s far too late for you to start anything now. Just dump your stuff over there and we’ll start fresh Monday. I’ve had a heavy week and I fancy a drink. Care to join me?”

“I guess I should keep in my new manager’s good books. Sure, let’s go for a drink.”

ABOUT THREE WEEKS after Sandie arrived, the Governor asked Danny to step into his office. He was lighting his pipe, which meant a reflective mood, so Danny put away his notebook and sat down. The Governor continued to look out at the panoramic views from his window while he puffed the expensive Simplaeran tobacco to life. He turned to face Danny with a strange smile. “You know I never had children?”

He and the Governor had grown close over the years but this sudden topic of discussion still took him aback.

“It’s none of my business Hercules, but yes, I know.”

The Governor smiled. “When I took up this position it was made clear there were to be no complications from familial obligations or inheritances – no dynasty building. But I’ve been here a long time. LaMarque has gone from strength to strength and I like to think I’ve had a great deal to do with that. I could have moved on but I like it here. I’m a native of LaMarque and have put

my roots down again, deep down. It has got to the point where I care who will come after me.”

Danny was stunned. “Are you leaving?”

“Not yet, not for a good while.”

He drew lazily on his pipe and Danny sat patiently but his head was abuzz with thoughts and hopes and dreams.

“I took you in on account of what happened to your parents – you know that. They were good people and true LaMarquois. What happened... was horrific. So I gave their son a break.”

Danny felt the usual pang of sorrow and pain at this subject but tried to focus on what was to come next.

“But it turned out you’re special. You rub along well with people, you get the score and you inherited your parents’ moral compass, which is a rare enough quality.”

Things often started sounding like speeches when Governor Claremont spoke at length.

“Did you ever wonder why you advanced so quickly when your competitors had connections and influence and important parents?”

“It had crossed my mind.”

“Because all that influence created too much noise, and I couldn’t tell who was actually a patriot. I want the one who comes after me to put LaMarque before anything else.”

Danny looked at the floor and mumbled something self-deprecatory.

“I like you, Danny. You remind me of myself and, if I had had a son, I’d have wished for him to grow up with the qualities and values you have. The population knows and respects you, and you are competent.”

Now his ears were ringing. Was the Governor about to say...?

“In twelve weeks’ time I have to nominate someone to go to the Central Governmental College on Home. It will be you, as first step on the road to eventually bringing you back here to become the next governor.”

He smiled warmly. "I plan to make you my heir and I will work hard to make you my successor, too."

The Governor looked at him kindly and passed a tissue. "A lot to take in, I know. But it is why I've brought in Sandie, to start training her as your replacement."

Danny pulled himself together and thanked his patron warmly before taking his leave. He smiled and paused as he reached the door. Maybe now his pursuit of Sandie would not be so fraught with potential pitfalls.

"Was there something else?" asked the Governor.

He decided not to let on, just the same.

"No, Hercules. Thank you."

He let himself out.

FOR TWO DAYS after the startling meeting with the Governor, he did not see Sandie. She was away on a fact finding mission regarding veal production standards or some such. Upon her return she appeared before his desk, grinning.

"I brought you something back."

"Oh?" said Danny looking up to see a riot of freckles on her beautiful face; a result of her time outside in the agricultural districts.

She placed a bottle of LaMarquois 35 year old Chateau Claremont Grechand Shupillier in front of him, with a large bow tied to the front in the family colours of black and gold. Danny was astounded.

"That thing must be worth 3 months of my salary."

"Four and a half actually but Uncle Herc called me with your good news and told me to liberate something from the cellar."

"I'm speechless."

She leaned forward and spoke quietly enough that none of the others in the office would be able to hear.

“I know we usually go out with the guys on a Friday but I thought we could go back to yours and drink this in private.”

SANDIE SAT ON Danny’s chaise longue while he found a pair of tall, thin Shupillier glasses with flared tops. He returned to find she had kicked off her shoes and tucked her feet up under her so that she leaned in towards the middle of the seat. She had taken the band out of her hair and it fell to one side of her face, tumbling towards her shoulder and skidding over it like a waterfall hitting a rock shelf. He sat down next to her and reached for the bottle, pouring the sparkling wine carefully, so as not to waste a single, expensive drop.

“So, Central College boy,” teased Sandie as he passed her one of the glasses, “what should we drink to?”

Danny smiled, “Your uncle and his impeccable taste.”

Sandie sipped the Shupillier and fixed her stare on him over the top of her glass. Danny drank from his own and felt the bubbles bursting in the top of his mouth. Licking his lips, he noticed that she had undone the top two buttons of her waistcoat, the jacket having previously parted her company by the door. He leaned forward and made to brush the hair away from the side of her face, but his hand reached her ear and stayed there, stroking it. She turned her head and kissed his palm before turning back to where his face was waiting. Her lips turned out to be so very soft. She advanced a little across the settee towards him and his other hand found its way to her

“MR PARQUE!”

Danny blinked and remembered where he was.

Kepler smiled from the other side of the table. The first smile Danny had seen from him.

“Is this strictly relevant?”

“You asked me to tell you what happened.”

“Mr Parque, I’m already firmly convinced that everyone is having better sex than me. I do not wish to have my nose rubbed in it by you.”

“Turning you on, is it?”

The smile vanished from his face and Danny instantly regretted his flippancy. He had forgotten for just a moment the reality of this man’s power over him. Kepler took off his reading glasses and folded his beefy arms.

“I have other predilections, Mr Parque.”

He paused as the possible threat sank in to Danny’s mind. After a few moments, the lesson presumably having been deemed learned, Kepler put his glasses back on and once more picked up his pen.

“Would it be accurate to say you started a sexual relationship with Miss Valnuageux?” he asked, taking notes again.

“It was more than that. We fell in love.”

“Did the Governor know?”

“We thought we were being careful but I suppose he must have done.”

“Why do you suppose that?”

“Well, I’m here aren’t I? There must be some reason he’s letting this happen.”

“I see. Continue.”

TEN WEEKS AFTER that first night, Danny restlessly arose and donned his dressing gown. It was still dark, but, so as not to disturb the slumbering form still in bed, he refrained from switching on the light and fumbled around his desk until the computer blinked on. As it warmed up and ran the security software, he looked across at the recumbent and beautiful body lying in his bed.

A beep announced that he was hooked to the secure server. He opened the file marked ‘Project 4’ and connected to the intelnet to see if there were any intelligence updates relevant to the case. As

the system searched the database, he glanced at the clock and noticed it was still 0423 local. He couldn't sleep. The solution to the Rindallian problem was proving elusive and with his Central nomination looming, he was under increasing pressure to wrap it up.

“No new information.”

No help there, then. Sighing deeply, he leaned back with his hands over his face, rubbing the slight ridge on the top of his nose, a physical trait shared by his mother, although the steeper bottom half of the facial feature had been inherited from his father. He couldn't help thinking they would have no problem seeing the answer.

An arm snaked around his neck from behind and was quickly joined by another. Sandie kissed the back of his head.

“You still obsessing about the uranium problem?” she asked.

“Mmmm.”

“I'll get some coffee on.”

Danny kissed her hand. “Love you.”

“I know.”

A mug appeared in his hand a few minutes later and Sandie used her thigh to bump him up the bench in front of the desk.

“It just doesn't make sense. I can't tell how Rindall managed the price cut.”

“Couldn't it just be as simple as them taking a loss to try and hurt us?”

“No. Uranium's profit margins are dictated by the navy. They let a cartel operate because they don't want any instability in supply coming from trading it on the free market.”

“They've found another way of shaving costs then.”

“You'd think, but everyone's been doing that for years. There's no slack left in the system.”

Danny sighed and sipped his coffee. So stupid to be hung up on a problem that his mother would have solved in five minutes flat. Maybe that was it – just a good old piece of forensic

accountancy. Make the numbers dance until they fall into the pattern that made sense.

“You look like you’ve had an idea, Danny. I’ll go for a shower.”

She picked up her dressing gown as she left the room. When she returned twenty minutes later, she found him breathing hard and staring at the screen.

“What is it?”

He turned and stared at her.

“I dug out the full breakdown of costs as we know them from our own production, and compared them to intel on Rindall. Then I created a programme that would compile combinations that added up to within the margin of error for their price reduction of 18.5%.”

Sandie slapped her forehead.

“It was all so simple!”

“You’re taking the piss.”

“Sorry...”

He was too excited to listen to the rest of her apology.

“Only two combinations came out. One total was from tool maintenance, ground to orbit transportation and the Senate lobbying budget.”

“The bribes.”

“Yes, the bribes. So there’s no way *that* could be it.”

“What’s the other?”

“Workers’ wages, health and welfare payments and the safety budget.”

“Do you mean...?”

“I think they’ve gone back to the gulag.”