

Venetian Trade Guild Main Guildhouse, New Venetia

“Be well, old friend. I will see you soon,” says an older man wearing a finely crafted uniform of the Venetian Trade Guild, the Elder Guildmaster’s patch on his right shoulder. He reaches out and touches the screen and it powers itself down. He looks out the window with a bemused look on his face, lost in memory.

Three sharp knocks on the door are followed by the gentle swish of wood rubbing against carpet as a young cadet opens the door and addresses the man sitting behind the desk.

“Elder Guildmaster, you are late for the Guildmaster ...”, he starts saying but gets no further as the man raises his hand, silencing the cadet.

“Have we corrupted our youth so much that proper decorum is totally lost Cadet Tsai?” the old man quietly asks.

The cadet stops cold, knowing he just stepped on a proverbial mine.

“Perhaps you should try again cadet,” the man says without looking.

The cadet clears his throat and draws himself up to his full height before beginning, “Elder Guildmaster, I’d like to remind you that the Guildmasters meeting was scheduled to start five minutes ago. The other Guildmasters are present and waiting for your arrival.”

He man stands from his chair and slowly makes his way towards the cadet, “Better, cadet, better. As long as you learn from this, it won’t hurt your appraisal ... much.”

As the Elder Guildmaster walks past the cadet, the cadet’s face falls in disappointment. What the cadet does not see is the grandfatherly smile cross his mentor’s face as he walks by.

“The passage of time takes on a different meaning as you get older cadet, never forget that,” he says as he exits the room, “Come let us go and see what the other Guildmasters are doing.”

“Yes sir,” the cadet replies, closing the door.

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Three men and a woman, all in well made uniforms, wait quietly around a very old, half moon-shaped, wooden conference table. One of the five chairs around the outer edge, very ornate in design, remains empty. The circular seal of the Venetian Trade Guild is in the floor at the focal point of the arc made by the table.

Minutes later, the Elder Guildmaster enters the room and makes his way to the empty chair. Once he makes himself comfortable, he picks up a gavel on the table and bangs it three times. “Normally this meeting is to discuss progress on various activities of the Guild. Today however, I received a call from Chef Executor of the Culinary Institute, Charles Rooblin. Chef Rooblin would like our assistance in a very important matter and I choose to discuss how we are going to fulfill his request instead of our normal course of business.”

The man pours himself a glass of water from a nearby pitcher, takes a drink, then continues, “For those of you too young to remember, Chef Rooblin was the cook on my first ship, the *Stubborn Mule*. That was during the time when we were lost in space when the jump drive failed. To this day, I cannot fathom how he did it, but Charles managed to keep us from starving while we spent three months at sub-light speeds travelling to the closest JWITN junction to get help. He eventually went on to become the Chef Executor of the Culinary Institute on Earth. This organization is self-chartered with preserving humanity’s food heritage while expanding the knowledge of food science throughout known space. They’ve done this for nearly three hundred years. In fact, most of the food handling techniques used in the fleet come from the Institute.”

The Guildmaster wearing the Research Wing patch speaks up, “The history lesson is all fine and dandy Elder, but what has that got to do with the Guild today?”

“Patience Jon,” the Elder says, “when a Chef of the Institute rises to the position of Chef Executor, a great feast of ascension is prepared for a select audience. It is considered a high honor to be invited to and I was fortunate enough to be present at his ascension feast. The feast represents all of the culinary traditions and techniques of humanity and is coordinated by the new Chef Executor as a demonstration of his or her understanding the field. Likewise, when Chef Executor is about to retire, they prepare a great feast of departure to demonstrate how they expanded the body of knowledge during their tenure. It is a once in a lifetime opportunity for those who are invited to attend.

“And you were chosen again?” says the large, muscled, dark skinned woman wearing the Procurement Wing patch; confusion obvious on her face.

“As a matter of fact Susan, yes; but that is not why I bring this up,” the Elder replies, “Each Chef Executor desires to make a mark on the history of food, so their great feasts are also great performances, each with its own twist to make it unique in history. That is where the Guild comes in.”

“Is this going to disrupt operations Elder Guildmaster? We finally broke the 80% on-time efficiency barrier. I do not want to jeopardize it,” says the thin, emaciated man wearing gold rimmed glasses and the patch of the Logistics Wing.

“Hopefully not too much Han,” the Elder grins, “The Chef Executor would like to re-create some of the conditions of our voyage on the *Stubborn Mule*. He has asked me, and by extension, the Guild, for the use of a ship to host the event. Unbeknownst to anyone outside his immediate circle of assistants, he has been planning this event for two years. So we must keep this a secret until the Institute announces it formally.”

“I’m sure we can give him a discount for being a friend of the Guild, but that still doesn’t explain why we need to have this discussion. There are more important matters to be attended to,” says the youngest of the Guildmasters, the only grey in his hair are his sideburns. The dark blue logo of the Security Wing rides his shoulder.

“Have we come so far that profit is all we concern ourselves with Juan? No, I came here today to announce that the Guild is going to allow the Institute the use of a ship, free of charge, and we ourselves will help with the planning and not delegate everything to our subordinates. It has been a while since we’ve done anything for the pure enjoyment of it, and this gives us the perfect opportunity. Besides, the public relations bump we get from this will more than make it worth our while.”

The other Guildmasters look across the table at each other, confusion present on each of their faces.

“Now then,” the Elder Guildmaster pulls up several lists on his vidcomp display, “Where shall we begin?”