

The Tragedy of Darth Panda the Pantsless: Based on a True Story **Seraine “Erinyes” Ténama**

For Fleet Admiral Howlader, Emperor’s Hammer Operations Officer, today was not a good day. The fleet’s Executive Officer, Sector Admiral Kawolski, had sent him *yet another* order for *yet another* medal commemorating *yet another* retired senior officer that Howlader had never actually met. The Corporate Division’s DirEx Board had informed him that the shipment of new uniforms being manufactured on Sahare would be delayed by several weeks, proving that despite their motto, they could *not* in fact deliver “anything, anytime, anywhere”. Then there was the ever-growing pile of recommendations to review, database records to update, the annual review of authorised decorations—

“Still with me, Howie?”

Howlader blinked himself out of his reverie and looked sheepishly across the table at his colleague, the Emperor’s Hammer Security Officer. “Sorry, I zoned out for a minute there. What’d you say?”

“I asked why you wear pants.” Howlader’s fellow Fleet Admiral took a gulp from his mug of lomin-ale. “I mean, I guess there’s no reason you *couldn’t*. It’s just not that common to see a species with fur wearing pants?”

“Because it’s my job as Operations Officer to ensure that the Emperor’s Hammer’s uniform regulations are being enforced, and the best way to do that is to lead by example,” the panda said, straightening and puffing his chest officiously outward. Then, after a moment, he sighed and slouched back into his chair. “Besides, we’re in space. You know how cold it is in space? Fur isn’t enough for this kind of cold.”

The Security Officer rolled his eyes. “Pants aren’t enough for that kind of cold either, unless they’re a spacesuit—” He frowned when his datapad began to beep, and retrieved the device from a pocket to see the source of the disturbance. “Dammit, someone tried to fake Ronin’s access codes and lock him out of the HoloNet again... I’d better go. Catch you later, Howie.”

“See ya.” Howlader lifted a paw to wave as the Security Officer hurried out of the *Sovereign*’s wardroom. A few minutes later, the bear sighed again and gulped down the rest of his own mug, head full of thoughts buzzing around like flies. Time to get back to work.

Halfway back to his office, Howlader felt his stomach clench. That was weird. Beer never made him sick, and while the mess hall on the *Sovereign* wasn’t always gourmet, they were at least edible... but then a communique he’d received that morning from the Fleet Medical Corps crossed his mind. Something about how one of the galley staff had come down with Bunkurd Sewer Disorder, and while they’d quarantined the crewman in question and disposed of any food that crewman had prepared, there was a small chance that some of the pathogen had been spread around the galley.

The panda wasn’t sure which upset his stomach more: the possibility of having a gastrointestinal bug, or the thought of so many probably-perfectly-good noms going to waste because of it. He was still trying to answer that question as he lowered himself into his office chair.

“Hi, Howl!”

Or at least, he'd *been* lowering himself into his office chair, until the unexpected female voice nearly sent him through the ceiling. Howlader whirled around to face the source of the greeting: a Human woman dressed entirely in white. White robes, white headscarf, white teeth gleaming in a maniacal grin. "Don't you recognise me? It's Ris!"

The panda froze. *Ris? Who the frak is Ris— wait, that Ris? Risua Darkfire Cantor, to be precise, a friend he'd known via the Holonet for several years but had never actually met in person. What was she doing here, where he worked? How had she found him? How did she even get aboard the Sovereign? The questions raced through Howlader's mind so quickly that each barely registered before it was replaced by another.*

And then, suddenly, Howlader had much bigger problems. The start that Risua had given him had set off a violent chain reaction in his already-agitated digestive tract. Something far more liquid than it was supposed to be exploded behind him, splattering the insides of his perfectly-creased Emperor's Hammer uniform trousers—and splashed off the remarkably resistant material and back into his fur and the skin beneath.

It burned.

It burned like nothing else that had ever come out of his body. It burned more than anything that came out of his body *should* burn, and after the noxious liquid splashed off the crotch seam of his pants, it burned in places that nothing should *ever* burn. Howlader struggled not to scream, tears welling up in his eyes as the caustic wave—contained by those damnably durable pants—seared down the backs of his legs.

Meanwhile, Risua's grin had faded into a mixture of perplexedness and concern. "Uh, are you okay, Howl?"

Refresher. There was a refresher attached to his office—a perk of being on the Command Staff. "Igottago!" The phrase was barely coherent, not much more than a wail, as Howlader sprinted for the door on the other side of the room.

Hours later, sitting atop a broken-off sink with his fur drenched and matted from the waist down, Howlader stared morosely at the garments that had caused him so much distress. Damn those pants. Damn his snarky Human comrades asking why bears needed pants. Damn their fluid-resistant fabric and the burns it had inflicted on his sensitive regions. Damn it all! Nothing, not even the Emperor's Hammer Uniform Regulations, was worth this.

Never again, the panda swore to himself. With a despondent sigh, he heaved himself up and emerged into his office—thankfully, Risua wasn't still standing there—in search of something strong to drink.