

Borderline Justice

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Borderline Justice

by [LordMcCoveyCove](#)

Summary

Second Episode of Star Trek: First Duty!

In his first field mission since joining the JAG Corps, Leo Verde and his team are dispatched to investigate a suspicious death aboard the Starfleet Border Service cruiser USS *Detmer*. What appears to be a straightforward case of manslaughter unravels as Leo digs deeper into the events leading up to the incident, uncovering hidden motives and conflicting eyewitness accounts. With his own personal history in the Service coloring his perspective, and the political pressure of the ship's pending classified mission near the Neutral Zone, Leo must navigate through the hard evidence in order to determine the truth before time runs out.

Cover: Art by [Pundus](#), Lettering by Lord McCovey Cove.

Notes

This series takes place in the same shared fanfic universe as [Gibraltar](#)'s series, "[Starship Reykjavik](#)."

Historian's Note: This story takes place immediately after the events depicted in "[Trial of Transfer](#)."

In Media Res

NCC-2131 (USS *Detmer*)

Patrolling the Federation-Rihannsu Neutral Zone, Warp 2.5

Mess Hall

February 16, 2318 (Stardate 139166.3)

Boatswain's Mate Second Class (BM2) Leslie Sutton took her customary seat within the mess hall aboard the Georgiou-class light cruiser USS *Detmer*. She preferred the table with the least amount of overhead lighting in the corner, far from the bank of replicators. The table, along with the early hour, allowed her to avoid the crowds of enlisted personnel that clogged access to morning meals for the better part of an hour.

When the large double doors leading in from the corridor opened to admit a trio of familiar faces, Sutton grinned. "Hey, morning," she greeted them.

BM2s Michael Kawhena, Bromin, and Xosom waved at her from the replicators. Within a minute, all three carried their trays to sit with Sutton.

"Morning, Les," said Xosom, a Rigellian woman with bright red hair, golden eyes, and an athletically tall build. "Did you get enough sleep?"

Sutton looked down at her meal, allowing her dark brown bangs to fall down and obscure her eyes. "I guess so."

The stocky Bolian petty officer, Bromin, sighed. His luminescent blue skin almost shimmered under the lighting of the hall when he shook his head. "Rol bothering you again?" he asked her, already knowing the answer.

"Not.. directly," she continued to gaze into her breakfast, rather than meeting the eyes of her teammates. "He just called me down to the shuttle bay to inspect the gear."

Kawhena chewed his food slowly as he listened to Sutton explain the reason for her mood. "It wasn't your shift for small craft. It was Chief Loyola's. Why did he call you?"

Xosom scoffed. "Why else?"

"We don't have to talk about it," Sutton told them in a small voice.

"Les," Kawhena said as he placed his fork down on the tray. When she gave him her attention, he continued. "You do not need to put up with his bullying. Have you talked the Chief about it?"

She scowled. "I can handle him. I don't need to go running to the Chief every time someone is mean to me."

Bromin said, "It's more than that. If you want, we'll go with you to tell him."

Xosom agreed with a nod. "We all will."

"Well," Sutton said, softening her tone, "I have been talking with *a* Chief. During my last TAD in security, Sheriff Taki offered some additional unarmed training and I've been working with her the past few weeks."

The other three shared a grin. "Here we thought maybe you and Taki were enjoying some special private time," Bromin teased.

Xosom slapped Bromin's shoulder. "Don't be a jerk."

"What?" Bromin protested with his raised hands. "What did I say?"

Kawhena wondered, "While you were with Taki, honing your unarmed combat training, did you mention the reason?"

"Reason?" Sutton asked with a shrug.

"Why you were so keen to learn."

She shrunk in her seat. "No."

"Taki wouldn't care about the reason, anyway," Xosom said. "She thinks everyone should know how to defend themselves in case of a boarding action."

Bromin noted, "Right, but if Les had talked to Taki about Rol, then maybe..."

"What?" Kawhena asked Bromin. "Arrest him? You think Taki would really do that?"

"Taki'd go directly to the Gold Ring," Xosom said. "They're pretty tight." Her use of the slang "Gold Ring" referred to the ship's command master chief petty officer, Esumi Benten, the designated Senior Enlisted Member that reported directly to the ship's commanding officer. All designated command senior enlisted wore the gold-ringed rank insignia instead of the usual silver.

Sutton said, "I don't want that. Anyway, it doesn't matter. Last night, after we got done, Rol didn't... I mean, I noticed something-" She paused

The cover for First Duty #2



as the subject of their discussion made his own entry into the mess hall.

When she stopped talking, Kawhena glanced up and peered over his shoulder to see the new arrival. "Ah, shit."

Bromin and Xosom followed suit. Bromin grimaced while Xosom let out a curse in her native tongue.

"Well, well," said Damage Control Technician First Class (DC1) Rol Th'qilres. An Andorian with an intimidating muscular build approached their table with his usual arrogant swagger. "Petty Officer Sutton," he greeted her slowly. "I sincerely hope that I didn't interrupt your much-needed beauty sleep last night by asking you to assist me."

Sutton shook her head. "Not at all," she lied.

"Good, good," Rol said with a shit-eating grin. He stepped behind her and placed his hand on Sutton's right shoulder, squeezing hard. "Very good. Then you won't mind if you assist me tonight with another maintenance project, would you?"

She did not respond.

Rol applied more pressure to her shoulder, causing a wince on the young woman's face.

"Hey!" Kawhena shouted. "Get your hand off her, now!"

"Watch how you speak to me, Boats," Rol snarled. "I outrank you."

"I don't give a shit, *Snipe*," Kawhena got to his feet as he spoke, dropping his fork atop the table with a loud clatter. "She's in my section and my responsibility. Remove your hand."

Bromin and Xosom also stood up, ready to support Kawhena and Sutton.

Rol, seeing the three hostiles threatening to flank him, raised both hands up in surrender. "Fine, I will play nice."

"And she doesn't have to do shit with you tonight," Kawhena pressed his advantage. "Find some other snipe to help you."

The Andorian offered a friendly smile. "If that's what young Sutton wants. I was merely trying to broaden her professional horizons by helping her to-"

His words were interrupted by Sutton's tray hitting his throat near his collarbone. In a matter of seconds, she forcefully removed her tray, causing her omelet to splatter against the bulkhead. With a firm hold, she unleashed her full might, sending Rol tumbling.

Sutton got to her feet, tray still in hand. The sight of Rol on the deck, unable to move his throat after her attack, brought her great satisfaction. Despite witnessing his struggle to breathe, nobody offered help because of the collective shock of the violent escalation.

Rol attempted to kick her away by lifting his leg and foot, but she evaded the attack and forcefully stomped on his midsection with her sturdy boot. To protect himself, he turned over and gasped, "Wait!"

She expressed her disdain by sneering at him. "'Wait?' What are you telling me to wait for, you jerk?" Sutton retaliated by forcefully kicking him in the side. Feeling confident, she closed the distance to deliver another blow, but he surprised her by coming to a kneeling position.

Rol swiftly defended himself by twisting his core and delivering a backhanded blow to her face before she could react.

The backhand struck Sutton's lower jaw. He used his notable strength to propel her backwards into the table; the impact of the edge knocked the breath out of her. Each of them struggled to catch their breath, gripping different areas of their bodies as if it could somehow ease the immense pain.

Sensing the break in the action, Kawhena ordered, "Bromin, call sickbay, now. Xosom, help Sutton." He moved to determine Rol's condition, who had now laid prone on the deck, his arms tucked underneath the weight of his form.

"Sutton?" asked Xosom as she brought the woman to her feet. "Are you all right?"

The injured petty officer tried to open her mouth, but tears streamed from her eyes and moving her jaw caused her sharp spikes of pain running up and down her face, neck, and ears.

Xosom saw the lumpiness of her cheeks. "Oh, shit, Mike. I think he broke her jaw."

Kawhena did not respond, instead continuing to prod at Rol with his hand. "You all right, snipe? Or did you let a little girl knock the shit out of you?" Again, he prodded and added, "Get up."

Sutton moaned through the pain as she clung to Xosom for support. Blood dribbled from her lips as she tilted her head in the other direction.

"The corpsmen are on the way," Bromin said after closing the circuit on the intercom. He looked down at Rol and asked, "Is he okay?"

Kawhena chuckled. "I think she knocked him the fuck out."

Xosom said, "Hey, she needs a doctor. Look."

As both men turned, they witnessed Sutton's bloody mess on the deck. The doors then opened for a junior grade lieutenant and two corpsmen.

Lieutenant (jg) Soni Toer, M.D., took the lead and assessed the situation. Medical tricorder already in her hand, she waved it over Sutton, first.

"Mandibular fracture, right shoulder contusion, and an acute spinal cord injury. Immobilize her and get her to sickbay, stat." She shot an angry look at Xosom. "You shouldn't have moved her."

The shorter corpsman took Sutton from Xosom and gently placed her on the gurney. Within seconds, both departed for sickbay.

Doctor Toer had turned to scan Rol Th'qilres. A warning of impending death shrilled loudly from the medical device. "Cardiac arrest. No signs of respiration. Turn him over and begin compressions."

Kawhena assisted the remaining corpsman in rolling the heavy Andorian to a supine position. The doctor broke out another device from her kit. She began attaching the leads to the sides of Rol's forehead.

"Toer to Transporter. Medical emergency. I need a site-to-site transport to sickbay for three," Toer said, after a quick tap of her commbadge. "I've got a patient coding."

The doors parted once more and Master-at-Arms Senior Chief (MACS) Taki and a team of three similarly rated junior non-commissioned officers entered. Taki approached Xosom and asked, "What happened?"

"I don't know exactly," she admitted with a shake of her head. "One minute we were all having breakfast and chatting amongst ourselves, the next, Rol comes in and starts putting his hands on Sutton. She tried to defend herself, and he broke her jaw."

Taki glanced downward at Rol just as he, and the medical team, dematerialized. "And she did that to him?"

In a tone, Xosom sputtered, "No way. She got in a few good licks, but he broke her jaw!"

The senior chief pulled Xosom, Bromin, and Kawhena from the mess hall to clear the immediate area, and they both found themselves in the corridor. Finding a secluded spot, she instructed Xosom to start from the top.



In quiet confines of *Detmer's* wardroom, Executive Officer R'raia relished her mug of *kla'ah*; the processed grounds delivered via family members from her homeworld. Since graduating from Starfleet Academy, the Caitian officer spent the entirety of her nine-year career in the Border Service. Beginning from her time as a newly commissioned ensign, she mastered the art of restraining her craving for the creature comforts of home. After reaching a field-grade rank and following her appointment to her current billet, she allowed herself the luxury of enjoying a single mug of her favorite beverage in the morning. The chef prepared and arranged for daily delivery, ensuring freshness using R'raia's personal stores aboard.

While savoring her morning routine, Senior Chief Taki contacted her through the ship's intercom.

"Good morning, Sheriff," Lieutenant Commander R'raia responded with good humor. "How may I assist you on this lovely morning?"

Taki spoke solemnly, "XO, sorry to spoil your mood. Petty Officer Rol Th'qilres died a few minutes ago in sickbay. Doctor Saager has transferred the body to stasis pending a full autopsy."

R'raia set her mug down on the table and sighed. "An accident?"

"No, sir." Taki's contralto responded crisply. "There was a physical altercation in the mess that may have contributed to his death, according to witness accounts so far."

"Are you holding the other person or persons involved?"

"No, sir," Taki repeated. "Our lead suspect, Petty Officer Sutton, is in surgery. Doctor Toer has not yet released her from sickbay."

"Sutton? *Leslie* Sutton?" R'raia blinked in surprise as she failed to imagine the petite, introverted woman killing an Andorian twice her size. "She *killed* Th'qilres?"

"Allegedly. We've cordoned off the mess hall and are still gathering evidence. I presume a JAGMAN will be forthcoming."

"Almost certainly. We'll reach out to Starbase Ten, update them, and they'll dispatch a team."

"Understood," Taki said. "My team will be ready to assist them, sir."

"Thank you, Sheriff. I'll handle notifying the Skipper. If there are any developments, please report forthwith," R'raia ordered.

"Aye, sir."

"XO, out." As the circuit closed, she took a long quaff from her mug and tapped on her PADD to call up the commanding officer's present location. She lamented her need to gulp down the rest of her beverage briefly, then set herself to the immediacy of her duty. R'raia returned the empty mug to the bus tray for the ship's stewards and hastily exited the wardroom.

In minutes, she reached her destination and touched the left panel next to the hatch. A muted voice responded from within, "Enter." When the hatch slid open, she complied with the order.

Commander Straat, a tall and wiry dark-skinned Vulcan with dark brown hair and eyes to match, did not turn his head to greet the entrant to his cabin. He wore his botanist's smock over his departmental white turtlenecked shirt and uniform trousers. Before him, a small arrangement of flora and fauna hung underneath a series of specialized lighting. Said plants held his attention as he fed and watered each one meticulously.

The lack of visual confirmation of his guest's identity did not prevent him from greeting her properly, "What can I do for you, XO?"

R'raia said without preamble, "Suspicious death reported from the mess hall, Skip. Petty Officer Th'qilres died a few minutes ago in sickbay." She continued with her briefing, including everything disclosed by Taki in their discussion.

Straat immediately paused his ministrations. "An unfortunate incident," he noted in his bassy tones. "Have you informed the Command Master Chief?"

"No, sir, I felt it prudent to inform you first, as the convening authority," she replied, matching his solemn voice.

He turned his head partially and inclined his head. "Thank you. Please notify her presently. I shall contact Starbase Ten and request a field investigation."

"Aye, sir," she said. "I presume we cannot return to the starbase, given our orders."

"Correct," Straat confirmed. "We shall consider our options once the Judge Advocate General Corps responds."

She nodded, forcing a stoic expression. "Logical."

He faced her fully now. She saw only the barest hint of a twitch along his lips that she understood to be his equivalent of a smirk. "I am gratified."

She held no such repression and showed off her canines as she smiled. "A small bit of levity, under the circumstances." She offered thoughtfully, "I have a friend who recently transferred to JAG, but he's assigned to Starbase Eight."

"Given the distance between our present location and Starbase Eight, it is highly unlikely that they would dispatch him," he said as he returned his attention to his plants.

R'raia frowned. "You're probably right, Skip. Still, it would have been nice to see Leo again."

Acta Non Verba

Starbase 8
In orbit of Memory Alpha
JAG Complex, Level Four
February 17, 2318 (Stardate 139174.57)

Commander Leo Verde returned to the JAG Complex after meeting in the starbase's command conference room. Vice Admiral Pavel Chekov, the commanding officer of the starbase, had made sure to properly place Leo's new rank insignia on his uniform. As he entered the reception area, Captain Janeera Ch'charhat, a tall and lithe Andorian woman, greeted him with a Cheshire smile.

As he got closer to her, she greeted him with a near-singing tone, "Morning, Leo." Her ice-blue eyes drifted to the new rank insignia on his shoulder strap while her antennae twitched. She announced in a clear voice, alerting everyone in the office, "Congratulations on your promotion, *Commander*."

Everyone in the bullpen and a few officers exited the small break area. A burst of applause filled the air.

Leo's blush deepened. With raised hands toward the impromptu crowd, he addressed them, "Thank you, everyone. Back to work." He turned to his boss and smirked. "Thank *you*."

"Oh, it's my pleasure," Janeera giggled. Holding her smile, she added with a somber voice, "You really impressed Admiral Devereaux."

He blinked. "Well... thank you, Jan," he repeated, this time in a somber tone.

She leaned in and lowered her voice. "Tell me, before Admiral Chekov arrived, was Thelk deranged?"

With a slight shrug, he admitted, "Not quite. He was ramping up, but Colonel Sullivan held him back."

She considered that momentarily, with a quiet "Hmm." Her tone suggested disappointment.

Leo tilted his head in askance. "What?"

"I wish I could've been there to see his face when the admiral walked in and promoted you, is all," she said with a smirk. "Thelk's a pompous idiot. Don't worry about him."

"Xaraq said the same thing. Not to worry about him, I mean," he replied, referring to the starbase's shore patrol commander.

"Ah." Janeera added, "Yes, well, it's a popular opinion. He *is* of little consequence." She moved toward her office but called back over her shoulder, "Oh, and come see me after lunch. Bring Reter."

Leo grinned. "Understood. See you, then." He walked past the reception desk and offered a warm smile to Yeoman Lara Zenn. Several people acknowledged him with a nod as he entered the bullpen before he entered his office.

Lieutenant (jg) Barzel Timel, Leo's assigned paralegal, entered after him. "Good morning, sir. Congratulations."

"Thank you," Leo replied cordially. "It was definitely not how I thought my morning would go."

Timel grinned. "I can imagine." He switched gears and got down to business. "Major Bex's JAGMAN wrapped up, but *Valkyrie* got called away on a distress call. They provided a short-range shuttle to deliver them to Starbase Twenty-Three, and if they can catch a ride on a long-range shuttle from there, it'll still be a week's trip back."

"A *week*?" Leo furrowed his brow.

"There's a chance that they might transfer to another starship, but a week is a good estimate, for now."

Leo let out a heavy sigh. "I guess that can't be helped. I hope now that Captain Reter's part of the team, he can pitch in. Hey, is Angela in, yet?" he asked, referring to Corporal Angela Torres, the marine who transferred to JAG to act as Leo's orderly.

Timel checked his PADD. "She needed the morning to transfer quarters. Her time in the VIP suite is up, but Tom Maroni found her some NCO quarters on level seven. She should be back here after lunch."

"Could you help her out and make sure she's not missing anything? The paperwork can be a little daunting for someone who's not used to it." Leo divided his attention between the conversation and the information flowing across his screen.

"Certainly," Timel promised. "We're meeting up tonight to go over some prerequisites for the criminal investigator course. A little study session."

Leo looked up. "That's very kind of you. I appreciate that." He returned his attention to the screen and noted, "Hey, my afternoon appointments are gone."

"I should have started with that, sorry. Captain Ch'charhat asked me to push your interviews and personnel matters until further notice."

"Why?"

"She didn't say. But, I suppose you'll find out at the meeting," Timel surmised.

Leo sighed, feeling his heart sink into his stomach. "We were going to interview some candidates for the open roles."

"Oh, the captain said she would handle that."

"Ohhh-kay," Leo weakly drew out the words. "I feel like I'm being fired or something."

Timel grinned. "Definitely 'or something,' sir. No way she promotes and then fires you in the same day."

"I'm sure she wouldn't." Leo touched his chest and sighed. The painful memory of being relieved of his duties aboard *Hansen* flooded back to him. He calmed himself with a few deep breaths and admitted, "Just a little trauma response from the last time a captain took away all my duties just before a meeting."



Captain Reter, the Edosian officer recently transferred to the JAG Corps from the starbase's marine garrison, plodded along using all three feet to keep up with Leo as they walked together. "Did she inform, advise, or notify you as to the substance of the meeting?" he asked.

With a simple shake of his head, Leo replied, "Not a word besides bringing you." He glanced down at Reter's uniform front and noticed his new JAG badge under the commissioned officer's version of the Starfleet Marine Corps Delta, Star, and Anchor. "The new hardware looks good on you, by the way."

Reter peered down at his chest briefly. "Thank you, sir."

"Call me Leo," he reminded.

They passed by Yeoman Zenn's desk, and before he said a word, she nodded and pointed to Ch'charhat's door. "Go right in, Commander," said the yeoman quickly. "She's *eagerly* awaiting you."

Use of the word 'eagerly' turned his head toward Zenn in curiosity. "Oh, my," he noted without breaking his stride.

They passed through the doors. Leo noted Janeera had a report on the large viewscreen behind her, showing the progress of a shuttle on approach to Starbase Eight. When her attention turned to them, she waved them over with her right hand. "Come in."

Reter replied in the marine fashion, "Aye, aye, sir."

She wasted no time in getting to the key aspect of the meeting. "Starbase Ten has passed one of their JAGMAN requests to us and I'm sending your team out there to deal with it."

Leo tilted his head and cocked an eyebrow. "I have a team? Wait... Starbase Ten? Don't they have their own JAG office?"

Janeera sighed, "Last month, I mentioned we were too short-staffed to take on all the requests for field investigations. We'd been passing a majority of them to other sectors, and they did us a lot of favors in taking them on while we worked on our numbers."

"I recall," Leo said as he remembered all the paperwork associated with those favors.

"Well," she continued, "since adding the two of you, my esteemed counterpart on Starbase Ten, Captain al-Adel, has called in one of those favors."

Leo frowned. "Uh oh."

Janeera sighed. "Couldn't put it better myself." She pointed to the screen behind her. "I recommend taking at least a legal specialist and a yeoman to assist. Your team will catch a lift on the shuttle *Giamatti* when it arrives in just over an hour. It will take a direct course to the starship *Detmer*, presently on patrol near the Neutral Zone, awaiting your arrival."

"I know that ship," Leo said, perking up when he heard the name. "She's a Georgiou-class light cruiser assigned to the Border Service. The CO is a Vulcan named Straat."

With a wary eye, she asked, "Is your relationship with Straat going to cause a problem, Leo?"

"Uh, no. Never met him," Leo assured her quickly after sharing a glance with Reter. "But... his XO and I served together on *Decker* about six years ago. We keep in touch."

Janeera paused. "Sounds like a cordial relationship with their XO. But all the same, keep your attention focused on the investigation."

Reter asked, "Sir, might I ask the nature of the investigation?"

"Suspicious death," she replied, saying nothing more on the matter.

Leo nodded and shot a glance at Reter to stall for time as he considered his team. He decided, "We'll take Chief Saego. She's reputed to be amongst the best."

"You don't want to take Lieutenant Timel with you?" Jan's surprise was evident in her tone.

"Oh, I absolutely would take him with us. But, Barzel's helping Angela with her application and studying for the exams, and I'd like for her have the best possible chance at getting into the criminal investigators school."

"That's very kind of you."

Leo held up a hand to dismiss her praise. "Totally self-serving. I want Angela as one of my team investigators later." He then asked, "Would you be willing to part with Lara?"

She cast a sidelong glance at him, expressing her annoyance at the request. Certain she would deny him her lead yeoman, Leo blinked when she relented. "Fine, take her. She's overdue for some sea pay, anyway."

Leo grinned. "Thank you, sir. It'll be helpful to have *two* experienced NCOs to hold our hands out there."

Janeera's eyebrows jumped upward as she recalled an important detail. "An agent from SDCI will join you for the trip. They'll assist with the investigation and make the arrests if necessary."

Leo whistled. The Starfleet Division of Criminal Investigations typically appeared when JAG investigations of a high enough felonious nature required them. "Wow, SDCI... how did you manage that?"

She replied, "Everyone owes me a lot of favors just for taking this job, don't you know?" Off his smirk, she tightened her tone to admit, "*Detmer's* mission is of significance to Starfleet Command. They offered a lot more than an agent if we needed it. Several Admirals have informed me it is critical we close this quickly so they can resume operations."

Leo noted. "So, we'll be on the clock. Understood."

"On the clock and with many eyes looking over your shoulder," she added. "Including mine."

Leo leaned forward slightly, with his hands clasped behind his back. "And all of this pressure on our *first* field investigation."

She grinned and settled back into her seat, looking very comfortable. "I know. Get used to it."

He smirked and shook his head. "Fair enough."

"All right, you two. Have fun. Safe journey." Both officers expressed their thanks. With the same hand she used to usher them in, Janeera pointed to the exit doors. "Get out."



With their bags packed and resting on the deck of the shuttle bay. Leo stood next to Reter wearing his civilian jacket and trousers. Reter wore his uniform and cast a questioning glance without saying a word.

Leo looked down at his attire. With his hands sliding down the front of the jacket, he explained, "I like to travel comfortably."

"I see that, sir."

"I think if you try it, you'll appreciate comfort on long trips. It's going to take us eight days at high warp to get to the border."

Reter considered that. "You raise a salient, interesting, and excellent point, sir." He glanced down at his bag.

Leo asked, "Trying to remember if you packed any comfortable clothes?"

"Indeed. I believe the closest set I own is my physical training shirt and trousers."

"We've got about ten minutes before the shuttle's supposed to arrive. You want to run downstairs and grab a couple of sets?"

Reter hesitated once more. His center arm stroked his chin as he considered his options. He decided, "I shall endure without. Better to remain here and await our transport."

"I'd offer you some of mine if they'd fit you."

"That's very generous, considerate, and kind of you, sir."

Leo smiled. "We're partners. You can call me Leo."

"Excuse me, sir," interrupted a deep masculine voice. "Civilians need to have a proper escort while on the flight deck. You'll need to return to the passenger lounge."

Annoyed by the charge made, Leo spun around to face his accuser, only to look up into the smiling face of Commander Trael Xaraq, the Betazoid Shore Patrol CO. "Damn it," Leo stopped short of giving him a piece of his mind.

They chuckled and said to Reter, "I thought he was going to reach for his badge."

"I nearly did!" admitted Leo, joining in the laughter. "What brings you down here?"

Xaraq held his smile and said, "Admiral Chekov mentioned during this morning's briefing that he had met you. He also mentioned that he promoted you."

Leo reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his badge case, which also displayed his new rank insignia. "Yeah, when I woke up this morning, I thought I they were going to send me packing back to Spacedock. My day certainly did not go as planned."

They reached over and placed a gentle hand on Leo's shoulder. "I wanted to say congratulations and good luck. Y'know, before you took off."

Out of the corner of his eye, Leo saw Yeoman Zenn and the Saurian Chief Legal Specialist Saego approaching from the doors. With a quick gesture, Leo asked Reter, "Could you square away those two for me, please?"

"Right away, sir," Reter replied.

Leo opened his mouth to correct him, but Xaraq beat him to it. "Call him Leo," they said.

"Thanks," Leo said.

"For which?"

"For coming down here, seeing me off... well, everything you've done for me the past few weeks," Leo said, while blushing under Xaraq's scrutiny.

They replied, "You're very welcome here. Like I said, I know a good officer when I see one. We need more like you around this place."

The base computer intoned, "Shuttle *Giamatti*, registry One Stroke Four Seven Niner One, is on final approach and will land at pad eleven. Passengers, please stand by for boarding call in five minutes."

"That's my ride," Leo noted awkwardly.

Xaraq dropped his arm and smiled. "So it is. Have a safe flight, and please hurry back."



Giamatti descended smoothly onto the landing pad and the hatch to the rear slid downward to take on the role of a ramp. Leo, Reter, Zenn, and Saego all waited for the side hatch to swing open and when it did, a stream of personnel stepped down and walked toward the reception area.

The computer announced, "Shuttle *Giamatti* is now boarding all passengers."

Leo led the way, carrying his large duffel over his shoulder. He scanned the interior quickly before stepping in to clear the hatch for those behind him.

Zenn noted, "It's pretty empty."

"Mostly," Leo said as he saw one person sitting in the front row. He stepped forward until he loomed large within their view. "Hello, Urs."

Agent Ursula Onyango of the Starfleet Department of Criminal Investigations leaped from her seat and practically squealed as Leo said hello. "LEO!" she screamed excitedly.

Reter, Zenn, and Saego remained standing at the hatchway, witnessing the apparent reunion.

Leo allowed the expected tight embrace from the taller woman. As his eyes barely cleared her shoulder, they locked onto his team through the strands of her jet black hair. "Good to see you, too," he said warmly, returning her hug with one of his own.

They slightly moved apart to meet each other's gaze. Ursula said, "I thought you'd be on the border somewhere."

"Oh, I guess you hadn't spoken to Keena lately."

She shook her head and gestured for him to take a seat nearby. "No, not for months."

Leo beckoned the three to join him, and they all took seats in the first row of the passenger compartment. "I transferred to Starbase Eight about three weeks ago. I'm in the JAG Corps, now." Before she could say anything else, he introduced, "This is my partner, Captain Reter, our paralegal, Chief Saego, and Yeoman Zenn. They're my team for this JAGMAN."

Everyone exchanged brief words of greeting, then Ursula reached into her front pocket to retrieve her credentials. "Agent Ursula Onyango, SDCI. I'm assigned to this investigation." Then she slapped Leo's arm playfully. "But, I've known this guy for five years. We worked together on a case, once. Been friends ever since."

Zenn wondered, "*Just* friends?"

Ursula grinned. "Friends. But if you mean what I think you mean, then no. You're more my type than he is."

The long look of appraisal from Ursula caused Zenn to blush. "Oh. Understood," said the yeoman weakly.

"Stop, you're making her uncomfortable," Leo said. To Zenn, he assured her, "She's all talk. Don't mind her."

Reter asked, "Agent Onyango, am I to understand that you did not anticipate, expect, or envision Commander Verde joining you on this assignment?"

Ursula cast a puzzled glance toward Leo before responding, "Correct, Captain Reter. My supervisor spoke with Admiral Devereux while we were on another investigation at Starbase Six." She let Leo know, "Your mother sends her regards, by the way."

"Thank you," Leo took the information in stride, suddenly curious why his mother hadn't informed her of his change in station. He saved that question for later.

"Anyway, Devereux requested a single agent for this urgent-none-more-urgent assignment and, at first, I thought I drew the short straw, but now I think I hit the jackpot," Ursula said with a grin. "I haven't breathed the same recycled air as this guy in what... three years?"

Leo thought about it. "Two years, nine months, and a couple of weeks. The Rough-and-Ready thing on Thirty Nine-Sierra was the last time we saw each other."

"That's the one," Ursula said. She turned to the other three and explained, "Big dust-up between two transient marine companies at the largest pub on the base. Lots of injuries and specious claims from both sides. Took us two weeks to sort it all out, and since his ship was in port for repairs for a month, Leo volunteered his services since the local JAG office was short on lawyers."

Reter noted, "The commander often seems to find himself engrossed within interesting, riveting, and fascinating cases."

Ursula's lips twitched as Reter's style of speaking intrigued her. Another glance toward Leo, and he gave her a single shake of his head with a closed eyed smile. She chose not to pursue it. "Our present assignment supports that supposition. Speaking of, I don't know if your CO briefed you or not."

Before Leo could respond, a junior grade lieutenant peeked out from the hatch leading to the large shuttle's cockpit. "Sorry to interrupt. Uh, we've finished taking on supplies and are ready to launch whenever you are, Agent."

Leo scanned the passenger compartment and realized no one else had boarded. He asked Ursula, "Private flight?"

Ursula replied, *sotto voce*, "You bet. First class all the way." To the pilot, she nodded, "Proceed, Lieutenant. Thank you."

Audi Alteram Partem

NCC-2131 (USS *Detmer*)
Holding Formation with SD-1/4791 (Shuttle *Giamatti*) near Rihannsu Neutral Zone
February 25, 2318 (Stardate 139230.93)
Transporter Room Two

Detmer's second transporter room materialized into view as *Giamatti*'s transporter beam conveyed them over to the light cruiser. Leo's gaze fell on the trio of Starfleet personnel near the transporter system's control vestibule. A dark-skinned male Vulcan commander towered over the other two standing to his left; a female Caitian lieutenant commander with grey fur and tan highlights, and a stocky, muscular female human wearing the gold-ringed insignia of a command master chief.

"Permission to come aboard, sir," Leo spoke for his group as he stepped down from the platform, wearing his Class A uniform.

The Vulcan replied in a deep bassy voice. "Permission granted. Welcome aboard USS *Detmer*, Commander."

Leo transferred his duffel to the other hand, then offered the Vulcan salute. "Thank you, Captain. We come to serve."

Saluting in kind, Straat inclined his head. "Your service honors us." After they dropped their hands, he stepped back and introduced, "My executive officer, Lieutenant Commander R'raia, and Command Master Chief Esumi Benten."

R'raia beamed, showing her teeth. "Great to see you, Rally."

"You, too, Rai," Leo replied, fighting through the blush caused by the use of his lesser-known nickname. Instead, he reflected her elation with a bright expression. To Benten, he acknowledged her with a quick nod. "Command Master Chief," he greeted with respect.

Benten did not return his tone. Instead, she addressed him icily, "Commander." Then, turning to Straat, she asked, "By your leave, sir?"

Straat glanced at R'raia before replying to Benten. "Of course."

Everyone was puzzled by the cold welcome as Benten left. Leo changed the subject. "Forgive my lack of manners. Allow me to introduce our criminal investigator, SDCI Agent Ursula Onyango. My partner, Major Reter..."

With a concerned expression, Reter opened his mouth to correct him, but closed it as Leo continued speaking.

After Leo finished introducing the rest of the team, Straat gave a slight nod. "I am gratified that Starfleet Command agreed with our assessment and sent a full team to help us determine the truth." He gestured toward R'raia. "The XO will be your liaison while you're aboard. Anything you require, please inform her and she will accommodate."

"Thank you, sir," Leo nodded in the same manner that Straat had previously.

"If you will all excuse me, I must attend to ship's business." Before leaving, Straat added, "I would invite you, Commander, Major, to join us for the evening meal in my mess."

Reter opened his mouth once more. Leo replied, "We'd be honored to join you, sir."

"The XO shall guide you from here," Straat said, then left them alone in the transporter room, with only the three enlisted maintaining the equipment nearby.

R'raia grinned. "If you'll follow me, I'll show you to your quarters." She led them out of the room and they walked as a group toward the turbolifts.

As everyone else filed out of the room, Reter kept pace with Leo, dropped his voice to a low volume to speak with him. "Commander--"

"I'll explain in a moment," Leo promised.

Ursula took the lead, walking next to the Caitian. "Can I ask how long you've known Leo?"

"Since he transferred to *Decker* back in '12. We were in the same department; Operations," R'raia replied, animatedly. "I had just started the final year of my tour on the ship, and got assigned to him as his sponsor, which was weird because his rank was higher than mine."

"Not weird. *Decker* was my first assignment out of Starfleet Law," Leo replied from behind her. "Besides, Rai was the best sponsor I could have hoped for."

R'raia spun around and walked backwards to face Leo. "Aw, thanks." She then returned to walking forward as they all entered the lift. "Deck six," she spoke to the computer, once they all crammed inside. "I have the officers set up in the VIP staterooms, and Chief Saego and Yeoman Zenn down in the goat locker."

"Would it be possible to assign them to deck six?" Leo asked. "I'd prefer my team close by."

R'raia exited first as the doors parted to reveal the sixth deck corridor as it stretched down the center of the saucer. "Of course. I should have expected that, it's just the visiting NCOs are bunked with their colleagues."

Reter noted, "Because of the type of work we'll be performing, it would behoove us to pursue efficiency, effectiveness, and capability in our tasks."

The XO turned the corner and led the group down a curved corridor as they neared the edge of the ship's hull. "Of course, Major."

"Pardon me, Commander, but I am a Captain, not a Major," Reter finally voiced his objection.

Leo grinned as Reter spoke. He explained before R'raia could respond. "Aboard any ship, there is only one captain permitted by address. To avoid confusion, marine officers holding the rank of captain are brevetted to major for the duration of the assignment."

"Fascinating," admitted Reter. "I have never heard of this tradition, custom, or practice."

"Have you ever been assigned to a ship before?" wondered R'raia.

"No. This is my first time aboard a starship," Reter replied. Then, he reasoned aloud, "I received my promotion to captain a mere two weeks ago, so I had no prior opportunity, occasion, or chance to experience that of which you speak."

"Fair enough." R'raia slowed her pace and approached a hatch. She pressed the access panel, and the door slid open. "Agent Onyango, this is you. Stateroom Three."

Ursula passed through the open hatch and tossed her luggage on the couch within view.

"Leo, you're next door in number five," R'raia continued. "Major, you're one door down from him in number seven." She pulled a PADD from within her uniform jacket and checked it. "Chief Saego?"

Saego stepped forward and nodded her head.

"You and Yeoman Zenn will be across the corridor once I confirm—" R'raia paused and then grinned. "There we go." She turned and touched the panel to an interior-facing suite. "Chief, you're here in stateroom two. Yeoman, you're in number four, across from Leo."

Both NCOs said their thanks and accessed the assigned staterooms.

Leo asked, "One more thing?"

"Sure," said R'raia.

"Can I get a conference room nearby? I need it keyed to our access alone, and guards placed on the hatch," Leo requested.

R'raia turned her head in both directions. "Not on this deck, but up on deck four, there's plenty. I can reserve conference room five for you. That's closest to the lift from here."

"That'll work. Can you have them add a couple of desks and terminals?"

She smiled through her irritation. "Leo, you're fortunate we've been ordered to cooperate in every way possible. We'll get it done for you."

He smiled. "Appreciate it, Rai. We're going to need the surface area to put things together. The quicker we can get that done, the quicker we'll get out of your way."

Ursula added, "I'm going to want to coordinate with your local sheriff. Can you arrange for me to meet them?"

R'raia tapped her commbadge. "XO to Sheriff Taki. Please report to stateroom six-victor-zero-three. Find Agent Onyango of SDCI. She would like a word."

Taki's voice carried over the ship's intercom. "Aye, sir. On my way, now."

"Thank you. XO, out," R'raia brought her stare back to Leo. "Anything else?"

"One moment." He addressed Ursula and Reter. "Unpack in your quarters. We'll meet in our new digs in thirty minutes." Once they disappeared behind their assigned hatches, Leo asked, "The skipper's the convening authority, how often is he going to want updates?"

R'raia lost focus as she considered the best course of action. "A daily update to start. If you're pulling anyone from their duties, a heads' up would be best."

"Keep in mind that we weren't told anything about anything. So, if the Sheriff submitted any findings, we'll need you make those available to us. And I imagine we're going to question witnesses as soon as Urs is done with her conversation with security."

The XO tapped her PADD. "The report's been sent to you and your team."



Several non-rated crewmembers moved furniture into Conference Room Five when Leo approached the hatch. He carried his PADD in one arm and flattened himself against the bulkhead as more crewman approached and departed the room. They stared at him as they walked by.

An unfamiliar masculine voice offered an explanation. "They're not used to seeing an officer get out of their way, sir."

When the corridor cleared, Leo returned to the middle and saw the rank insignia of a chief petty officer on the shoulders of a tall broad-shouldered barrel-chested human male, with receding black hair, dark brown eyes, and dark complexion. "I suppose not," Leo agreed. "But they were doing a favor for me, so it seemed like the right thing to do."

"A 'favor,' eh?" the chief mused. "Around here, we call them 'orders.'"

Leo chuckled. "I suppose so." He extended his hand. "I'm Leo Verde."

"Oh, I know who you are, sir," the chief replied with a grin. He gripped Leo's hand. "Chief Boatswain's Mate Tanner Covington."

"Pleasure to meet you, Boats," Leo said. He smiled through the pain of the larger man's intense grip. When they released hands, he flexed his to make sure he got all his fingers back in working order.

As more boatswain's mates arrived with another desk, both men stepped aside. Covington noted, "I think that's the last one, sir."

"Well then, do you have a moment to speak with me?" Leo asked. "Or are you needed somewhere else?"

The chief grunted. "We've been ordered to provide full cooperation to you and your team, sir. I'm at your disposal." He turned his head and called out, "Bromin!"

The Bolian turned his head. "Chief?"

"Tell Chief Loyola I'm being interrogated by JAG until further notice, would you?"

Bromin huffed as he continued to carry his corner, then released when they reached the narrow hatch. He stepped back to allow the other two to continue, and nodded. "You got it, Chief." His eyes settled on Leo, drifting downward to the JAG badge on his chest.

Covington faced Leo while Bromin went to the conference room to assist with placement. "I'm all yours, sir."

Leo glanced down at his PADD and saw Bromin's name on the list of potential witnesses from Taki's report. "Excellent, Boats, I appreciate your time. As soon as your mates clear the room, we can have a proper discussion."



"I saw the JAG team," Bromin said as he entered the rear of the shuttle *Elk*. Kawhena and Xosom held PADDs in their hands as they went through the inspection checklist. His voice betrayed his agitation. "It's a commander, a marine captain, a civilian agent from SDCI, a chief, and a yeoman."

"A *full* commander?" noted Xosom. She shot a glance at Kawhena. "I guess they might send a high-ranking JAG officer out for a suspicious death."

Kawhena sighed. "Did they say anything?"

"No, but the commander was talking to Chief Covington, one-on-one," Bromin replied. "Is Leslie in trouble, do you think?"

Xosom shared a quick look with Kawhena. "Maybe. I mean... someone died by her hand."

"She barely pushed him up against the wall. No one dies from something like that, do they?"

Kawhena said, "Not... *typically*..." He wondered, "I don't recall him striking a sharp-edge or anything. All she did was push him back with the food tray and he hit flat against the bulkhead."

Xosom and Bromin exchanged glances. The Bolian asked, "Should we head down there and see what we can find? It could help Sutton."

"If we're just going down there to look, I suppose it wouldn't hurt anything to check it out. Right?" Bromin added his thoughts, but his eyes were on Kawhena.

"I don't know," Kawhena admitted. Then, after a moment of consideration, he added, "Maybe."



Leo sat at the head of the table, his workstation positioned behind him in the conference room. Team members had assigned desks, but could easily engage or disengage from discussions. After Zenn confirmed that their devices were air-gapped to *Detmer*'s network; secured to only communicate with one another in a closed-circuit.

"So, what do we know?" asked Leo, addressing the room.

Ursula spoke first. "Sheriff Taki brought me up to speed on her investigation. They gathered evidence at the scene, took a lot of holographs for me to view." She called up information on her screen and kept speaking, "We also have a witness list and it's short. Three other boatswain's mates were in the mess when it happened. Sending their names to you all, now."

"Bromin," read Leo. "He was one of the petty officers moving furniture in here."

Reter said, "I recommend, propose, and advise that we split up into pairs when interviewing the witnesses."

Chief Saego said, "I concur."

"One of them is going to have to be a trio, then," Ursula pointed out. "Unless I'm mistaken?"

Leo considered that. "I'll sit out the interviews for now. Urs, you and Yeoman Zenn. Reter, you're with the Chief. Questions?"

No one said anything.

"Chief, you'll portion out the balance of the witness sheet among the two teams," Leo ordered.

"Aye, sir," Saego replied. "I believe we should begin by approaching them in a familiar setting, Major."

Ursula nodded. "The enlisted mess. It's large enough that we could use the opposite sides if we have overlap."

Everyone agreed with her suggestion, which led Leo to volunteer. "I'll coordinate that with Rai and have it setup for you in an hour."

"While we're in interviews," Ursula said, "what are you going to be doing?"

Leo smirked. "Various administrative things."



Leo found R'raia on the bridge, standing at her normal watch. She looked up from the center seat and smiled.

He grinned back at her. "Might I have the privilege of the bridge?"

She raised her right hand and gestured for him to approach. "Skipper says you have full access, so I'm sure the bridge is part of that. What do you need?"

He moved closer to her so they could have a discreet conversation. "Now, why is it you think that I need something whenever you see me coming?"

"Because I know you well enough. You're too driven to just make a friendly call," she accused him with a clawed finger against the maroon fabric of his chest. "So, out with it."

"Aw, I missed you, Rai," Leo chuckled. "We're going to set up to do the interviews this afternoon. We need one more room for privacy. Is that going to be a problem?"

She whipped out a PADD to send written orders. "The office across from your conference room is yours for the duration. What else?"

He scratched his cheek. "You wouldn't have the visual record of the mess hall when the incident occurred, would you?"

"Sheriff Taki will have that filed away somewhere," she said. "Fair warning: it's pretty grisly."

Leo blinked. "You've seen it?"

R'raia nodded. "Kind of wish I hadn't." When the doors from the lift opened, her eyes tracked the visitor. "Hello, Master Chief."

He turned to see the hardened expression of Esumi Benten. As before, in the transporter room, his very presence worsened her mood.

"XO," greeted Benten. She locked eyes with Leo and, with the barest of respect, acknowledged him with a simple, "*Commander.*"

"Master Chief," Leo replied with a succinct nod. "How are you doing today?" He tested the waters a bit more.

Benten clenched her teeth as she flashed him a scornful frown. "Fine, thank you, *sir,*" she managed, before moving off without another word to either officer.

R'raia watched her move to a side station and begin talking to a petty officer standing watch. She then turned back to Leo and asked, "What the hell was that?"

"Okay, so it wasn't just me?" Leo asked, relief in his tone. "I have no idea. I've never met her before in my life."

"She wasn't on *Hansen* or anything?"

He shook his head.

She frowned. "Then, I got nothing."

Cui Bono

NCC-2131 (USS *Detmer*)
Patrolling the Federation-Rihannsu Neutral Zone, Warp 2.5
February 25, 2318 (Stardate 139232)
Office 4-S07

Chief Saego was the first to speak. "Walk us through what happened that morning, please." Seated across from their witness, she glanced at the PADD in her hand, ready to take notes. "Remember to only speak from your perspective."

Reter, sitting beside her, kept his piercing yellow eyes fixed on the Boatswain's Mate. His expression remained neutral, but there was a watchful intensity in his gaze.

BM2 Michael Kawhena gave a sharp nod. "Aye, Chief. We were all having breakfast in the mess, just like a hundred times before. That's when Rol came in—"

"Rol," Reter interrupted, his voice calm but direct, "That's Damage Control Technician First Class Rol Th'qilres, correct?" He leaned forward slightly, prompting for the record.

"Yes, Major," Kawhena confirmed with a sharp nod. "He approached us without even going to the replicator. We were talking about last night's shift, and then he moved in behind Sutton."

Chief Saego leaned forward, her tone steady but insistent. "Describe Boatswain's Mate Second Class Leslie Sutton's mood at the table before Petty Officer Th'qilres arrived. Was she upset or distraught?"

Kawhena frowned, considering the question. "Well... she was tired, understandably so. Rol called her in the middle of the night to inspect gear on one of the shuttles. She wasn't on duty, nor was she on call. Chief Loyola was the NCO he should have—"

Saego lifted her hand, stopping him mid-sentence. "Let's keep to the questions for now. We'll discuss Petty Officer Th'qilres' actions in detail shortly."

"Yes, Chief. Sorry, I—" Kawhena started, but was interrupted.

Reter's voice cut in, calm but firm. "From your account, there were prior issues between Sutton and Th'qilres. Please describe only what you witnessed. Refrain from adding opinion, sentiment, or bias."

Kawhena grimaced. "Aye, sir." He took a moment to gather his thoughts. "Um, so... every now and then, Rol had a habit of hazing new transfers."

Saego tilted her head slightly. "Hazing? What exactly does that mean in this context?"

Kawhena shifted in his seat. "Uh, well... when a new crewmember would transfer in, something about them would catch Rol's attention. I couldn't say what it was. Sutton transferred from another ship, and within two days, he had her marked for 'extra attention.'"

Saego's eyes narrowed. "Define 'extra attention.'"

He nodded, settling into his explanation. "Rol would personally contact her to assist on damage control projects. For instance, he'd have her pass him tools during routine maintenance—things she didn't really need to be involved in. One time, he had her doing airlock maintenance while we were underway, and they ended up standing around in EVA suits for hours."

"Airlock operations and maintenance fall under your typical duties, do they not?" Reter asked, his tone steady.

"They do, sir, yes," Kawhena confirmed. "But Rol would always bypass the on-duty chief and contact Sutton directly."

Reter exchanged a brief glance with Saego, who was busy taking notes. "Understood. Please continue. What other examples of Th'qilres' behavior toward Sutton did you witness?"

Kawhena exhaled, clearly frustrated. "Sir, there were just... so many. He'd order her to join him during drills, even when she wasn't scheduled. He'd interrupt her personal time to get her assigned to him for hatch maintenance. I tried stepping in twice, offered to take her place, but he always insisted on having Sutton specifically."

Saego leaned in slightly. "Did Petty Officer Sutton ever bring up her concerns regarding these extra assignments to her chain of command?"

"Chief, Sutton's not the kind to complain," Kawhena answered, his tone resolute. "She'd vent now and then, and it was clear to the team that —"

Reter raised his center hand, cutting him off. "Petty Officer Kawhena, refrain from speaking for others. Please continue from your own perspective."

"Aye, sir. Apologies, sir," Kawhena muttered, frowning deeply as he exhaled slowly, steadying himself. "Sutton doesn't like showing weakness, not in front of anyone. She told me once that she didn't want to take her concerns to the senior NCOs. She's proud of her independence, felt she could manage it on her own."

"Thank you," Reter said, his tone steady. "Let's revisit the events of that morning. For this question, I will ask for your opinion. When Petty

Officer Sutton struck Petty Officer Th'qilres, did you believe she was at risk of imminent injury, harm, or abuse?"

Kawhena's jaw tightened as he recalled the moment. "Rol already had his hand on her shoulder. I looked at her, and she looked like she was in real pain," he said. "I shouted at him to let her go, but he didn't even acknowledge me."

"One moment," Saego interrupted, raising her PADD. "Let's focus on Sutton's reaction. Did she say she was in pain, or did you interpret that from her expression? Did she groan or vocalize any discomfort to you or anyone else at the table?"

Kawhena shook his head slowly. "No... but—"

"So, her first response to his physical contact was when she struck him with the food tray?" Saego clarified, her tone firm.

Kawhena's scowl deepened, and his voice softened. "Chief... I know how that sounds—"

Reter raised his hand once more, cutting him off gently but firmly. "Petty Officer, please understand that neither Chief Saego nor I are here to pass judgment on you or Petty Officer Sutton. This line of questioning is simply to gather a clear picture of the events, including the factual context, circumstances, and background from your perspective."

"With all due respect, sir, it feels like JAG's already thrown the book at her," Kawhena said, folding his arms tightly across his chest. "And I'm no doctor, but there's no way an Andorian dies from getting hit with a food tray."

Reter leaned forward to respond, but Chief Saego placed a calming hand on his arm. She offered Kawhena a gentle smile. "We understand your frustration, Petty Officer. And we're not here to stop you from expressing how you feel. But we need to stay focused on the facts. So, let's shift gears. How did you feel when Petty Officer Th'qilres entered the mess hall and laid a hand on Petty Officer Sutton?"

"I was damned angry, Chief!" Kawhena's response came fast, his voice finally showing the emotion he'd been holding back. "Pardon my tone."

Saego nodded, her voice even. "It's all right. It was a direct question. Go on."

Kawhena exhaled sharply, blowing his bangs out of his eyes. "Look, I'm not Rol's biggest fan. I'm sorry he's dead, but the guy was a real piece of work. He used his rank to push people around, and I've been a junior NCO long enough to know he was a disgrace. He always got away with it by claiming he was offering 'extra training' to the crewmembers he thought 'deserved' it."

Chief Saego tilted her head slightly, her curiosity piqued. "Did others complain about Petty Officer Th'qilres' behavior?"

"Maybe. Honestly, I don't know," Kawhena replied with a heavy sigh. "What I do know is he was tight with his department chief. They were buddies. Rol knew exactly whose ass to kiss."

Reter shot a glance at Saego, clearly missing the implication. She waved him off with a quiet, "I'll explain later."



"The general sentiment toward Petty Officer Th'qilres from the witnesses was overwhelmingly negative," Ursula reported as the team gathered once more in the shared conference room. "Every witness we spoke to also considers Petty Officer Sutton a respected friend, so we may be dealing with some bias."

Leo, seated at the head of the table, leaned back thoughtfully. "It's possible. Starship crews tend to be tribal, socially speaking. Plus, there's the whole 'junior NCO syndrome' to consider."

Yeoman Zenn, herself a junior NCO, furrowed her brow. "That's usually more common in freshly promoted non-comms, though. Most junior NCOs are expected to outgrow it by the time they hit second class."

Saego nodded in agreement. "True, but that kind of behavioral adjustment takes solid mentorship and a lot of self-reflection. Without proper leadership training, that syndrome can carry well beyond their time as a third-class petty officer."

"I'm not looking to put the leadership of the chiefs on trial. That's for the ship's CO to address," Leo said quickly, raising a hand to keep the team focused. "Let's stay on task with the debriefing. Urs?"

Ursula nodded. "The witnesses were all very protective of Sutton. Both Xosom and Bromin hinted that Rol regularly mistreated non-rates and junior NCOs outside of his department. Sutton seemed to be his latest target, which caused friction with the Boatswain's department."

Reter added, "Our conversation with Kawhena confirmed as much."

"Chief Covington claimed he wasn't aware of any bad blood between Th'qilres and his department," Leo said. He then turned back to Ursula. "So, do you think we've gathered enough evidence to move forward with the charge against Sutton?"

"Circumstantial at best," Ursula replied, her fingers moving deftly over her PADD. "I think we'll have a much stronger case once we review the visual record and get the final autopsy report from medical."

"Fair enough," Leo agreed. "In the meantime, let's keep the momentum with the interviews. We should speak to the other chiefs, see what they know."

"Absolutely," Ursula said, nodding. "I'd also recommend including some of the damage control techs—petty officers who were close to

Th'qilres, and the chiefs he was supposedly tight with." She glanced at Saego and Zenn. "We'll arrange those for tomorrow."

Saego tapped away on her PADD, already moving forward. "I'll begin contacting the department officers immediately."

Leo shifted his focus to Zenn. "Yeoman, arrange the agenda for the next round of interviews. You four will handle it."

"Aye, sir," Zenn replied crisply.

Reter turned his head toward Leo, curiosity in his eyes. "While we're gathering statements, what will you be doing?"

Leo gave a slight grin. "I'll be combing through the forensic evidence, reviewing personal logs, and having a chat with the doctors..."

Zenn interrupted with a quick reminder, "Commander, Major, you have a dinner with the ship's CO in twenty minutes."

"Right. Thank you," Leo said, waving a hand to adjourn the meeting. "Let's wrap this up for now."

As Zenn moved closer, Leo lowered his voice. "One more thing, Yeoman—do me a favor and figure out what's got the Gold Ring so riled up with me?"

Zenn's eyes widened at the request, but she nodded with a determined look. "I'll do my best, sir."



"What did you guys say?" Kawhena asked as they sat in the boatswain's locker room, winding down and preparing to sign off shift for the day.

Xosom didn't bother turning her head. "We were told not to talk about our testimony with anyone else."

Bromin scoffed, shaking his head. "Oh, come on. It's just us. We were all there. I doubt they meant we couldn't talk about it amongst ourselves."

"Yeah," Kawhena agreed, leaning back. "They were pretty strict about sticking to the facts and leaving out opinions. If we start talking to others, and they go and mention it during their interviews, then..."

The Rigellian sighed heavily. "That Marine major... intimidating as hell. I don't want him finding out I disobeyed orders. Didn't even know Marines could join JAG."

"My cousin's best friend from the Academy is a Marine major in JAG too," Bromin said as he peeled off his working coveralls, switching to his everyday uniform. "Her name's Bex. I can ask her about these guys, see if she's heard of them."

"Not a bad idea," Kawhena agreed. "Let me know what you dig up."

"Count on it," Bromin replied. "By the way, either of you checked in on Sutton down in sickbay?"

Xosom exchanged a quick glance with Kawhena, and they both shook their heads. She sighed. "I tried a couple of days ago, but the Sheriff told me to stay away. Sutton's still under guard in the secure ward. One of the corpsmen mentioned they had to do some major surgery on her jaw. Rol severed some veins—that's why she was coughing up blood."

Kawhena cursed under his breath. "Damn it! It's complete bullshit they might charge her with murder. All she did was defend herself."

"Exactly what I said!" Bromin chimed in, his voice rising before he caught himself, looking around to make sure they weren't drawing any unwanted attention—especially from a chief or someone higher up. "I told them Rol had been hazing her for weeks."

"Same here," Kawhena said.

Xosom nodded in agreement. "Yeah, me too."

"That Major Reter, though... he's hard to read," Kawhena added, frowning. "Just stares at you while you talk, like he's reading your mind or something."

Bromin chuckled. "I wouldn't worry about that, Mike."

Kawhena sighed, crossing his arms. "Let me guess—it's because I don't have enough brain for him to read?"

"Nah," Bromin replied, deadpan. "It's because Edosians aren't telepathic."



The captain's mess aboard the Georgiou-class light cruiser, situated directly across the corridor from the wardroom on deck three, was a more intimate space. A dining table with six chairs occupied the center, and by the time Leo and Reter entered, five places had already been set, with the far end conspicuously left without a chair. Unlike the wardroom, the captain's mess featured large viewports that revealed the warp-distorted stars streaking past the starboard side of the ship.

Leo glanced over at the sideboard, which was already laid out with coffee, tea, and water. A steward, her sky blue departmental tabs standing

out against her uniform, approached them and offered a warm smile. "Something to drink, Commander? Major?"

"Tea, please," Reter replied promptly.

When she turned to Leo, he asked, "Hot cocoa, if you've got it. If not, iced tea will do."

The steward smiled warmly. "Hot cocoa, coming right up, sir," she said before slipping through a set of doors, likely leading to the private galley.

"It seems we're early," Reter remarked, his tone neutral as usual. With only one other steward waiting nearby, they both took their seats at the neatly set table.

Leo glanced at the chronometer and shook his head. "Not *that* early."

Before long, the staff returned to refill their tea and cocoa. Just as they finished, the doors slid open, and in walked Straat, R'raia, and a third officer, joining them for the evening's dinner.

Leo and Reter rose out of respect. "Captain, XO," Leo greeted. "The Major and I thank you for your gracious invitation this evening."

Straat inclined his head toward Leo, offering a small nod of acknowledgment. "You are our guests, regardless of the circumstances. All beings share a common need for sustenance," he said, his tone practical but warm. Gesturing to the officer beside him, he continued, "Allow me to introduce our operations officer and third-in-command, Lieutenant Isaac Grant. Lieutenant, this is Commander Leo Verde and Major Reter from the Judge Advocate General Corps."

Grant extended his hand toward Reter first. "Major, pleasure to meet you, sir."

Reter accepted the handshake with his usual composed formality. "Lieutenant Grant," he responded in his deep, measured voice.

Turning to Leo, Grant offered his hand again. "Commander, it's an honor. Your reputation certainly precedes you."

Leo accepted the handshake with a raised brow, shooting a quick glance at R'raia before returning his focus to Grant. "That sounds ominous. Should I assume you've been trading stories with Commander R'raia about my more *colorful* days in Starfleet?"

Grant offered a wide, toothy grin. "Among other things, sir. But actually, I know Alejandro Martinez—we went through OCS together."

Leo smirked, leaning back slightly in his chair. "Well, everyone seems to know everyone around here. Ale's a good guy. Any friend of his..."

"Likewise, sir," Grant replied smoothly, taking the seat to Straat's left while R'raia stood at her usual post behind the captain.

Straat took his seat with a measured nod. "It seems we've found common ground. I trust this will reflect positively on your time aboard *Detmer*, Commander Verde."

"Yes, sir," Leo agreed, settling into his seat as the others followed suit. "So far, my team's been well taken care of—everything handled efficiently and without issue."

Straat inclined his head slightly. "That is reassuring."

The chief steward stepped forward, poised. "Shall I serve, Captain?"

"Please proceed, Chief," Straat instructed.

The stewards moved efficiently around the table, setting down individual bowls in front of each person. Leo couldn't help but notice the details—each bowl bore the name and registry of the ship in sharp Federation Standard lettering on one side and flowing Vulcan script on the other, all neatly flanked by the Starfleet Delta. He appreciated the clean symmetry and thoughtful design.

With practiced ease, the stewards poured a steaming pale orange liquid into the bowls. The familiar aroma hit Leo instantly.

Reter, too, caught the scent. "Plomeek," the Edosian marine remarked, his three hands poised near the bowl. "A staple at the T'Pau Institute—common, popular, and always welcome."

The mention of the institution caused Straat's eyebrow to arch ever so slightly. "You studied on Vulcan?"

Reter nodded, bringing a spoonful of soup to his mouth. After sampling it, he replied, "Yes, sir. I hold a degree in legal letters, which led to my assignment with JAG."

"That is rather uncommon," Straat noted. "How did you find your time there, Major?"

Reter paused to take another sip of the soup, savoring it. "My compliments to your galley, Captain. The soup is delightful, balanced, and quite satisfying."

"I shall convey your kind words to the chief," Straat promised. "Plomeek often meets my dietary requirements, though at times, it brings back memories of evenings spent with my family."

Reter nodded. "As the only Edosian at the Institute, I appreciated not just the education, but also the opportunity to experience Vulcan culture for over three years."

Straat tilted his head slightly. "Edos is not a Federation member. It is rare for an Edosian to seek a profession in Starfleet."

"That's correct, sir," Reter confirmed. "I am the tenth Edosian to serve in Starfleet. Commodore Arex was the first. He has since retired, but he spoke at my commencement. His words inspired me to pursue a career in Starfleet."

Leo asked, "Why didn't you apply to Starfleet Academy?"

"Edosian education systems are quite different, Commander," Reter explained. "Our academic progression is based on triennial groupings—every three years, students advance to the next level. As a result, we complete what humans call 'high school' much earlier, typically by our fifteenth year. Starfleet Academy has age requirements based on emotional maturity for space service, and I was too young to qualify at the time."

Straat nodded, his chin lifting slightly. "I assume you enrolled in a Federation member world's university to meet the education standards."

"Precisely, sir," Reter confirmed. "As you know, the T'Pau Institute doesn't impose such restrictions on admission eligibility."

"Indeed, younger applicants are quite common," Straat replied.

Reter nodded. "Actually, one of my podmates was a Vulcan a year younger than me. We still keep in touch routinely, regularly, and consistently."

Straat tilted his head slightly. "I have observed that you favor a distinctive style of speech. If I may, I am curious about the reasoning behind it."

Reter mirrored the Vulcan's head tilt. "I'm afraid I don't fully grasp the nature of your inquiry, sir."

Leo grinned as he turned to Reter. "He's talking about how you use three synonyms to emphasize a point."

"Ah, I understand now," Reter replied. "When I was learning Federation Standard, I found it challenging. Universal translators were too bulky to rely on, so I decided to master the language myself, aiming to speak it fluently. I wanted to speed up, enhance, and refine my understanding, so my podmates helped create an immersive environment. One of them suggested that I expand my vocabulary by using epizeuxic or synonymic phrasing during conversations."

Leo chuckled. "Around the office, we call them 'Reter's trios.'"

Reter looked surprised. Leo continued, "It's said with affection, I promise. Your style has actually expanded everyone's vocabulary. Case in point, I had no idea what 'epizeuxic' meant until now."

Pleased with the explanation, Reter gave a slight bow. "I'm glad to hear it."

R'raia shifted the conversation. "May I ask what progress has been made in the investigation?"

Leo exchanged a quick look with Reter before responding. "We've done a first round of interviews with some witnesses. I'll be going through the forensic reports tonight and tomorrow."

"Did any of the interviews offer insight into whether Leslie Sutton is guilty?" she pressed.

Leo shifted in his seat, visibly uncomfortable. "With all due respect, Rai, I prefer not to delve too deep into our findings until we're closer to making a formal recommendation. Right now, it's still too early to say."

"Sorry, Leo," R'raia apologized softly, her gaze lowering to her bowl of soup.

Straat's voice was calm but firm. "A logical stance. Had you shared anything beyond a simple status update, Commander, I would have intervened to prevent prejudice toward the convening authority. Your adherence to ethics is commendable. Most humans would be tempted to curry favor with those in command."

"It was my question, Skip," R'raia said, gesturing toward herself.

Reter added, "I believe the Captain means he used this moment to evaluate, assess, and take stock of Commander Verde's integrity."

Straat's lips twitched in subtle approval at Reter's sharp observation. "Correct, Major."

Grant smirked at the exchange. "It's fascinating to watch two graduates of rival Vulcan universities sizing each other up."

Reter's eyes widened as he turned to Straat. "You attended the Vulcan Science Academy, sir?"

"I did," Straat confirmed. "I hold a doctorate in astrobotany and a master's in phytoecology."

R'raia, with a note of pride, added, "He's even cultivating quite the arboretum in his quarters."

"I'm sure he is," Leo remarked, leaning back in his chair. "But I'm still wrapping my head around the idea that Vulcans would indulge in school pride. Seems a bit... illogical, wouldn't you say?"

Straat shifted his attention from Reter to Leo. "All universities on Vulcan are committed to excellence, Commander. It's not about pride, but about advancing Vulcan society through meaningful achievements."

Grant then turned to Reter, curious. "Would you say that's your assessment as well, Major?"

Reter's gaze flicked between Leo, Straat, and finally Grant. "Out of respect, regard, and deference for those present, I will refrain from

commenting."

Leo exchanged a knowing glance with Grant and R'raia, a subtle smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth, before they settled into the rest of their evening.

In Flagrante Delicto

NCC-2131 (USS *Detmer*)

Patrolling the Federation-Rihannsu Neutral Zone, Warp 2.5

February 26, 2318 (Stardate 139240.2)

Conference Room Five

Leo glanced at the chronometer in the corner of his terminal. Seven minutes past twelve hundred hours. The hollowness in his stomach wasn't just from hunger—it was the product of five straight hours spent scouring visual records, dissecting reports, and taking meticulous notes. He sighed, the weight of fatigue settling into his shoulders. His mind still buzzed with details, but his body reminded him that even the best JAG officer needed to refuel.

He saved his work and powered down the terminal, finally leaning back in his chair and allowing himself a brief moment to stretch out the tension in his neck. He barely had time to shake off the weariness when the conference room doors slid open, and Reter and Chief Saego strode in.

"Commander, you're still here," Saego said, her voice carrying that straightforward, matter-of-fact tone common to senior enlisted personnel.

Leo smirked, standing and shaking out the stiffness in his legs. "Not for much longer. I'm hunting for some food—and, hopefully, decent company," he replied, the corners of his mouth tugging upward as he glanced between Saego and Reter.

"I'll compile the data from this morning once you've had lunch, sir," Saego said, her voice steady, professional as ever.

Leo nodded, appreciating the diligence. "No rush, Chief. You've earned a break or two."

Reter, still ever the precise marine, placed his PADD neatly on his desk. "May I join you, Leo, if that's agreeable, acceptable, and satisfactory?" His three hands folded in front of him, perfectly formal even when asking a casual question.

"Of course," Leo replied with a relaxed smile, gesturing toward the exit. "The more, the merrier."

He turned to Saego. "Chief, care to join us?"

Saego's lips tugged into a small smile, a rare expression of warmth from the Saurian. "I've been invited to the goat locker for lunch," she said, referring to the space reserved for senior enlisted personnel. "But thank you for the offer, sir."

Leo raised an eyebrow, an amused glint in his eye. "Dodging the mess, huh?"

She gave a slight shrug, still smiling. "Just weighing my options, Commander."

"You're always welcome," Leo said with a nod, as Reter approached the door. They both exited the conference room and made their way down the corridor on deck four.

Once the door closed behind them, Reter asked, "May I inquire about your progress this morning?"

Leo sighed. "I've gone through all the video footage they sent me. I was just starting on the medical report when you walked in. Next up are the forensic reports. But..."

"But what?" Reter asked, casting a brief glance in Leo's direction.

"I think I need to speak with the doctors back on the base. Something feels off in the autopsy findings... like we're missing a piece of the puzzle."

"That sounds like a commendable approach."

Leo grinned. "Thanks." He opened his mouth to continue, but the smile froze on his face, and he drew in a breath. As they rounded the bend toward the turbolift, Command Master Chief Benten came into view. Leo caught her gaze for a fleeting two seconds, then offered a warm smile and respectful nod. "Command Master Chief."

Benten flashed a scowl in Leo's direction before shifting her gaze away, quickening her stride. Leo noted the tension in her posture—more rigid than usual.

To give her space in the narrowing corridor, Leo instinctively stepped to the right, moving ahead of Reter in a single-file line. His intention was simple: allow her enough room to pass on the left.

But Benten didn't adjust her course.

Instead, she charged forward, her left arm coming up with deliberate precision. In the final moment before collision, Leo registered the intent—she wasn't making a mistake. Her arm struck him sharply, using her momentum to deliver the blow. The force sent him off balance, and he caught himself against the nearest bulkhead, gritting his teeth as pain shot up his elbow. His right hand instinctively reached to soothe the throbbing ache pulsing through his arm.

A quiet groan escaped Leo's lips. "Ow," he muttered under his breath, drawing air sharply between clenched teeth as the pain lingered.

Both he and Reter turned, watching Benten's retreating figure, expecting—perhaps hoping—for some acknowledgment of the collision. But

she walked on, her stride unbroken, her demeanor indifferent.

Reter's voice dropped into a deep, commanding tone, sharp with authority. "Command Master Chief," he called after her, the words hanging heavy in the corridor.

Leo lifted his hand from his aching elbow, gently resting it on Reter's upper left arm. His voice was low, measured. "Let it go," he urged, *sotto voce*.

But before Reter could respond, Benten froze in place. She turned on her heel, fixing Leo with a piercing glare before addressing Reter. "Yes, Major?"

Ignoring Leo's appeal, Reter's three legs moved swiftly toward her, his posture unyielding. "Stand at attention when an officer is addressing you."

Benten's expression tightened, but she snapped to attention, her back stiff against the bulkhead. "Aye, sir!"

Once Reter was level with her, he pivoted sharply to face her, his movements precise and deliberate. "You struck an officer in my presence. Regardless of your esteemed position as a non-commissioned leader aboard this vessel, we do not allow, permit, or tolerate any disrespect toward senior officers."

Benten remained silent, her posture rigid in perfect attention, as required by the drill. Her gaze fixed forward as Reter continued.

"You violated three articles, Master Chief," he stated evenly. "Assault, Disrespect toward a Superior Commissioned Officer, and Conduct Prejudicial to Good Order and Discipline under Article 134."

Still, Benten offered no response, her silence as unyielding as her stance.

"How long have you served in Starfleet, Master Chief?" Reter asked, his tone steady.

Without shifting her eyes, Benten replied crisply, "Twenty-two years, Major."

Reter's voice remained calm, but carried a weight of authority. "May I presume, Master Chief, that in your twenty-two years of service, you've upheld the standard of good conduct expected of someone in your position?"

"Yes, sir," Benten answered, her voice barely audible.

Reter leaned in slightly, his eyes locking onto hers. "Then I strongly recommend, advise, and counsel you to seek Commander Verde's pardon immediately. Otherwise, I'll be forced to bring formal charges against you for the violations I've mentioned. Do we understand one another, Master Chief?"

Benten's dark eyes flickered with defiance at his words but remained steady. "I understand you, Major. Permission to speak freely?"

"Denied," Reter said, straightening to his full height, his tone unyielding. "There is nothing you can say to justify your actions. Any further discussion should be with the Commander. You have twenty-four hours to consider your options. *Dis-missed.*"



Benten winced as she stormed down the corridor, her pulse racing with frustration. She clenched her fists at her sides, feeling the sting of regret wash over her. Rage had gotten the better of her, and she knew she'd just made a terrible mistake in front of the JAG officers. Once she was out of sight, she brought a hand to her brow, closing her eyes tightly.

How could I have been so damned stupid?! she silently berated herself.

Years of hardened service in the Border Service had taught her to maintain her composure, but this time, she'd let it slip—and the consequences could be disastrous. Worse still, the fate of her career now rested in the hands of the very officer who vexed her the most. The thought of humbling herself before him, of seeking a pardon, filled her with indignation.

As she neared her destination, her professional mask wavered. Her lip curled into a sneer, teeth grinding together in barely-contained anger. Her steps faltered just short of the door's activation sensor. Benten paused, drawing a slow, deep breath and counted to five, forcing the heat of her temper back down.

With her face once again a stony mask, she stepped forward, allowing the hatch to slide open, and disappeared into the compartment.



"Are you injured, Leo?" Reter asked, his tone low once the turbolift doors closed and they were alone.

Leo gingerly rotated his arm, testing the movement in his elbow. "Not really. Just sore. Damn, she hits hard."

"I observed her raise her arm deliberately to ensure the collision caused harm."

"Yeah, I caught that, too."

Reter tilted his head, studying Leo. "Then why did you ask me to stand down when her intent was clear?"

Before Leo could answer, the lift doors opened onto deck three. They stepped out and fell into a slow, measured pace, making their way toward the wardroom for lunch, allowing the conversation to continue.

"I guess it's because my father always drilled into me that commissioned officers have a duty to lead by example," Leo said, his voice thoughtful. "I've always believed it's more important to figure out the root cause of any problem involving our enlisted than to immediately drop the hammer. Their focus should be on solving the issue, not worrying about getting punished."

Reter paused mid-step, considering Leo's perspective. His two lower hands clasped behind his back, while the center hand gestured thoughtfully. "I admire, value, and respect your approach. However, I believe my method has given the master chief the proper motivation to find that solution."

Leo smirked, falling back into step beside him. "Papá would call that the 'carrot-and-stick' method."

"That idiom is unfamiliar to me," Reter admitted.

Leo smiled as he gestured with his hands, explaining. "It comes from horseback riding. Imagine two horses in a race. If a rider wants an advantage, they dangle a carrot at the end of a stick in front of the horse. The idea is the horse will run faster to try and catch it. Over time, it became a metaphor in leadership—using both punishment, 'the stick,' and reward, 'the carrot,' to guide someone toward better behavior."

Reter nodded in understanding. "The proverbial carrot. A fitting and suitable way to describe my approach with the master chief." He gestured down the corridor. "Do you think it will work?"

Leo shrugged, letting out a sigh. "It's hard to say without knowing her reasons. Normally, risking a long and honorable career in Starfleet would be enough to keep someone in line. But considering how deliberate her actions were, it tells me there's something she values more than her rank or status."



Bromin handed Kawhena his usual drink from the hidden servitor. Along with Xosom, the trio settled into the secondary cargo bay on deck seven. Typically used for long-term storage, the boatswains had claimed a quiet corner as their unofficial lounge—tucked among the large crates and out of sight from the rest of the crew.

Kawhena accepted the chilled drink, the sharp sound of the airtight seal breaking echoing through the dimly lit space. He took a long sip, then leaned back into the worn-out chair with a sigh. "Any updates on Sutton?" he asked.

"One of the nurses said she's still recovering," Xosom replied, holding her unopened drink between her hands. "They had to work on her jaw for three hours with a knitter and regenerator. Rol hit her hard enough to cause an impacted fracture.

Kawhena took another long pull from his drink and nodded slowly. "So, she can't even talk right now?"

"Not until the end of the week," Xosom replied, her voice tinged with concern. "They've got her jaw in a brace. I went up to check on her, see if she wanted some company. She ended up using her PADD to type responses, but after about an hour, she asked me to leave. Said she was too tired."

Bromin grimaced. "They must be feeding her through a tube or something, right?"

Xosom shrugged. "I'm not sure. But, you two could go see her, too, y'know? She could use the support."

Kawhena admitted, "I did. Three times. The nurses told me she was sleeping, so I figured I had bad timing or something."

"Well, *I* haven't. But, you know, we might think about putting together a welcome back party for her when she comes out of sickbay," Bromin said.

Xosom smirked at the idea, but nodded. "You can be in charge of putting that together, then. I'm sure she'll appreciate it."

"If she isn't under arrest by then. I just wish there was something we could do for her," Kawhena griped. "Even in death, Rol's screwing up her life."

"Maybe we should take it to the chiefs..." Xosom mused aloud, her voice trailing off.

Bromin shot her a sour look. "Yeah, and they'll just say it's not their problem. Same as they do with everything else around here."

"Too right," Kawhena muttered, shaking his head in frustration. "You think that's why Sutton decided to handle it herself?"

Bromin and Xosom exchanged a quick glance, silently weighing the thought.

Kawhena noticed the pause and pressed on, his voice a bit sharper. "Am I wrong?"

Xosom cleared her throat. "Well... I don't blame her. Getting the Sheriff involved is the most I've ever seen a senior NCO actually try to help fix anything."

"Yeah, the Sheriff and Chief Covington seem to be the only ones who give a damn," Bromin muttered.

"Glad to know I made the cut," came Chief Tanner Covington's voice from behind a stack of cargo containers. He stepped into full view, arms folded over his chest. His tone was firm as he added, "You three do realize you've got no privacy in here, right?"

Bromin straightened immediately. "Sorry, Chief."

Kawhena, unfazed by the chief's sudden appearance, asked, "Are we wrong, Chief?"

Covington let out a heavy sigh. "I wish you were. Hopefully, this JAG team can cut through the noise and make a solid recommendation to the Skipper. Because the Gold Ring sure isn't going to lift a finger to help."

"Wow," Xosom murmured, taken aback.

"What?" Covington's gaze sharpened. "Too much truth for you?"

Kawhena shook his head. "No, Chief. We just didn't expect you to confirm our worst fears."

Another deep sigh escaped Covington as he sat down, lowering his voice. "Listen, I'm going to say two things to you all. First, I'm not the only chief who feels the same way you do."

Bromin's eyes widened in surprise. "Seriously?"

Covington waved off the question, continuing. "Second, if you value your careers, steer clear of the JAG Corps and the Gold Ring. Either could make your life a living hell if you get in their way."

Xosom raised her hand, almost like a student asking a question. "Chief, what about Sutton? There's got to be something we can do to help her."

"Oh, absolutely, you can help her," Chief Covington said, beckoning them to lean in closer.

All three boatswains instinctively leaned forward, eager for guidance.

"LEAVE IT THE FUCK ALONE!" Covington roared, his voice booming like a drill sergeant's. They all flinched at the outburst. He pressed on, "Didn't I just tell you to stay out of JAG's way?"

"Chief, she doesn't deserve this," Xosom protested.

Covington silenced her with a sharp wave of his hand. "You don't know the full story, none of us do." He let out another weary sigh, shaking his head. "I get it. You want to help because you believe in her. You think she's getting a raw deal, and I respect that. You should believe in your teammate. But until we know the whole picture, we need to play this smart."

Bromin tried, "But—"

"But nothing," Chief Covington cut him off, his tone sharp and unyielding. "Your heart's in the right place, but if you go through with this, you could end up costing us not one boatswain's mate, but four. And as your chief, I can't let that happen."

"Sutton—" Bromin attempted again.

"—is going to have to face the consequences of her actions," Covington interrupted, his voice firm but not without sympathy. "I hate saying it like that, but right now, the best thing you three can do is let it go. Be there for her, spend time with her. That's how you support her."

Kawhena grumbled, his voice low. "I'm not happy about that, Chief."

Covington stood, his gaze hard. "I don't give a damn if you're unhappy, Mike. It's my job to look out for all of you. I can't have my entire team going off on some misguided mission. And since I know how you three think, let me make it clear: I'm *ordering* you to stay out of JAG's way."

The trio exchanged glances, grumbling under their breath at the chief's directness.

Covington raised his hand, his eyes narrowing as he looked at each of them. "The proper response to an order is...?"

"Aye, Chief," they muttered in unison.

Covington lowered his hand and took a breath. "You're welcome to disobey me if you like. Conveniently, we've got a boatload of JAG officers on board to help me press charges. So, trust that I'm doing this for your own good," he said, taking a few steps away from their makeshift lounge. He stopped at the junction, just out of view, and glanced back. "Enjoy the rest of your break."

Lex Dura, Sed Lex

NCC-2131 (USS *Detmer*)
Patrolling the Federation-Rihannsu Neutral Zone, Warp 2.5
February 26, 2318 (Stardate 139241.43)
Conference Room Five

On the small viewscreen within the conference room, the chief medical examiner, Captain Melissa Weilani, MD FAME, smiled at Leo from her desk at Starbase Eight. "Hey, Leo. I've reviewed the findings from *Detmer's* medical staff."

"We appreciate you helping us out. Reter and I feel like there's something missing given the witness accounts and visual records," Leo replied, with Reter seated next to him.

Doctor Weilani nodded thoughtfully. "I can see why. Now, while the chief medical officer's examination is thorough, I'm puzzled by the probable cause of death. There appears to be an anomaly they didn't detect—likely because of the limitations of shipboard equipment or maybe the rushed timeline."

Leo jotted down notes on his PADD. "All right. How would that be explained in lay terms, and what can we do here to better understand this 'anomaly?'"

She continued thoughtfully, "Well... in cases involving Andorians, especially with the subtle chemical imbalances we've seen in the subject's bloodstream, a forensic molecular scan would be key to identifying any irregularities."

Leo furrowed his brow slightly. "Would they have the tools to conduct that kind of scan aboard?"

"They should. They could run a multispectral analysis or a quantum resonance scan—either would help detect any rare or foreign elements."

Leo made a few more notes. "Got it. When I bring this up with their medical team, how should I frame it without stepping on anyone's toes?"

Weilani leaned forward, her tone shifting into a more clinical rhythm. "Tell their medical team this: 'Based on the nerve damage in the extremities and the latent electrical signatures near the heart tissue, I suspect exposure to an element Andorians are particularly sensitive to. This could explain the sudden cardiac arrest and the failure of the primary respiratory system. I strongly recommend conducting an additional molecular scan to identify any substances known to cause these specific symptoms.'"

Leo jotted it down quickly, nodding as he followed her words. Once he finished, he read the statement back to her for confirmation. Weilani gave an approving nod.

"Perfect. Thanks for that, Doc. We really appreciate you carving out time for us," Leo said, the gratitude in his voice genuine.

Weilani waved a hand dismissively, but there was a smile in her eyes. "No, thank you. I love a good puzzle, especially one like this." She paused, then added with a chuckle, "But do me a favor, will you?"

"Anything," Leo replied, leaning in, matching her grin.

"Keep me in the loop. I can't leave a puzzle half-finished. I'll be up all night thinking about it."

Leo laughed, shaking his head. "Wouldn't want that on my conscience. Don't worry, we'll keep you posted."



Ursula Onyango strode into *Detmer's* security center on deck five—the nerve center for the ship's law enforcement, overseen by the Sheriff, Senior Chief Taki. She had scheduled this meeting the day before, knowing it was time to dig deeper into the incident. The two petty officers stationed at the reception desk gave her a quick nod and waved her through, as if they'd been expecting her. Within moments, Ursula found herself outside Taki's office.

"Come in," a voice called out, clear and authoritative. Ursula entered to find a petite woman with jet black hair twisted into a pair of buns. Taki met her eyes with a sharp grin, one that seemed to say she'd been waiting for this. "Figured it was you. Take a seat, Special Agent."

Ursula mirrored the grin, settling into the offered chair with an ease that came from long experience. "Thank you, Sheriff."

Taki leaned back slightly, her eyes flickering with the casual confidence of someone who had seen it all. "Care for a drink?"

"Wouldn't say no to a coffee. Black as you can make it."

"Cop special, got it." Taki tapped a few commands into the console on her desk. "Tim, two coffees. Extra black," she ordered. With the pleasantries out of the way, Taki turned her attention back to Ursula, hands folded in front of her. "So, what can the SDCI do for me today?"

Ursula pulled out her specialized PADD, its smooth surface flickering to life as she navigated to the case file. She didn't waste any time, jumping right into her first question. "I reviewed the security footage from the mess hall. The angle of the pickup wasn't great—hard to see the full scope of what went down."

Taki's hands went up reflexively, a defensive gesture paired with a sharp exhale. "We can't always predict the perfect angles. Security cams

are for coverage, not storytelling."

"I'm not pointing fingers," Ursula reassured, her tone casual but focused. She was about to continue when a sharp knock on the door interrupted. A tall second class petty officer stepped inside, carrying two steaming mugs. He placed one in front of Taki, then turned to offer Ursula her coffee, the handle precisely aligned toward her.

"Thank you," she said, giving the petty officer a polite nod.

"Thanks, Tim," Taki added, taking a sip as the petty officer left them alone.

"Now," Ursula resumed, settling back into the chair as she cradled her mug, "as I was saying—no blame here. The footage is what it is. But let's talk cop-to-cop for a second. You know this crew better than I do. What's the real story with Rol Th'qilres? What kind of person was he?"

Taki exhaled, the weight of her thoughts hanging in the air. "I hate to speak ill of the dead, but he was a real piece of work," she admitted, her tone flat. "Always had to be in control. He liked to manipulate his teams—anyone he thought he could bend to his will. Never got himself into trouble, though. He was too smart for that, and political as hell."

"Ass-kisser?" Ursula offered, eyebrow raised.

"Amazing, right?" Taki smirked. "Not exactly what you'd expect from an Andorian."

"Definitely not," Ursula agreed, taking a careful sip of the coffee. Her eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Ooo, that's a damn good blend."

"Thanks," Taki said, clearly pleased. "Grown in the best hydroponics bay on Starbase Ten. I've got an in with the chief botanist—keeps me well-stocked whenever we dock."

Ursula chuckled. "Might have to beg you for an introduction."

Taki nodded, her smile tightening with impatience. "I'll see what I can do. Now, let's get back to business, shall we?"

Ursula tilted her head slightly, shifting back into focus. "Fair enough. So, narrowing it down—how would you describe the dynamic between Sutton and Th'qilres?"

"They didn't really have one," Taki said, her tone matter-of-fact. She paused, her brow furrowing as she recalled the details. "Th'qilres had her on extra duty assignments not even a week after she came aboard. Pulled her from her meals to help with stuff like airlock checks and shuttle repairs. Mundane tasks."

Taki's eyes sharpened as she added, "*None* of it was within her normal scope of duties."

"That's unusual. Did he have the authority to pull from other departments like that?" Ursula asked, eyebrows raised.

Taki shrugged. "On this ship, as long as you don't bother the chiefs and get the job done, no one asks questions."

Ursula blinked in surprise. "That's a hell of a way to run a crew."

"Tell me about it," Taki replied, voice laced with quiet frustration. "I don't like it, but there's one golden rule: you don't cross the Gold Ring."

Ursula's eyes narrowed. "Master Chief Benten?"

Taki nodded. "Benten's got a chip on her shoulder about something, and the Skipper and XO let her run the crew. As long as the chiefs report no problems, they stay out of it."

"That's not unheard of," Ursula mused. "Officers letting the goat locker handle things. But... given we've got a DB, it's pretty clear where that kind of hands-off approach can backfire." She paused, her voice shifting. "Have you ever raised that concern?"

Taki shook her head quickly, then leaned forward. "Off the record?"

"Unless it's material to the case, sure," Ursula replied.

Taki cleared her throat, glancing toward the door before speaking. "I've kept my mouth shut. Benten's not someone you cross lightly, and everyone on this ship knows it."

"You're kidding."

"Nope," the sheriff said, taking a slow sip from her mug. "She's got deep ties in the NCO Corps. Made Master Chief in near-record time because of it. She's in the Border Service because she *chooses* to be here."

Ursula sighed, already seeing the type. "Oh, one of those."

"Exactly. Benten places a lot of trust in her chiefs to run things. But when it comes to commissioned officers? She's got no faith. Anytime an ensign or a lieutenant's supervising a job, she's right there, breathing down their necks, triple-checking everything."

"That cause problems?"

"Plenty," Taki replied, leaning forward slightly. "She's driving a wedge between the non-comms and the officers. The junior NCOs feel like they're on an island. And some chiefs? They take full advantage, pushing their work onto the petty officers whether they're ready for it or not."

Ursula's lips tightened in distaste. "Doesn't sound like a healthy crew dynamic."

"It's not," Taki said bluntly. "And I've tested the waters. Brought it up more than once, and every time I'm told to 'trust the process'—let the chiefs handle their own. All it's done is give some of them license to ignore their subordinates, calling everything a 'trivial concern.' Feels like letting the inmates run the asylum, and I don't manage my department that way. Never have, never will."

"I can see that. Out of curiosity, do you have any allies who feel the same way?" Ursula leaned in, her tone casual but probing.

Taki paused, her eyes narrowing slightly. "A few."

"Names," Ursula pressed, her voice steady but firm.

Taki's gaze sharpened, studying the special agent for a beat. "You planning to act on this?"

Ursula didn't flinch. "I'd like to. This ship's situation is untenable." She held the sheriff's eyes. "Unless you don't want me to."

Taki hesitated, the weight of her decision clear in the silence that followed. Finally, she nodded, twice and deliberately. "Yes. Please. For the good of the ship."

Ursula tapped on her PADD, taking notes as she spoke. "Which chiefs share your concerns?"

Taki leaned back, ticking off names. "Chief Covington from the boatswains, Chief Lemmi in Ops, and Senior Chief Petrov over in environmental tech. They're just as fed up as I am."

"And no one's taken it to the XO?"

Taki shook her head firmly. "No one would dare cross Benten. One chief tried, and he's still paying for it. Last I heard, he's scrubbing conduits at the bottom of DS-Two, waiting for his career to catch up. The rest of us got the message loud and clear."

Ursula winced. Deep Space Two was practically a legend—a dumping ground for the misfits and troublemakers too difficult to keep on regular assignments. "Yeah, that'd be motivation to stay on Benten's good side. So, what about Sutton? Did she ever talk to you about Th'qilres?"

"Not directly." Taki took a longer sip of her now-cooled coffee. "Two weeks ago, she came to me for hand-to-hand combat training. I'd put up a notice about cross-training a month earlier, but no one really bites on those offers."

"Except Sutton," Ursula noted.

"Yeah. So, we trained—an hour every day before her shift. She was catching on fast, too, but never mentioned what was driving her."

"Okay. Did you sense something was off? Cop's instinct? Little hairs on the back of your neck?"

Taki paused, considering. "I had a feeling. She was pushing herself hard—really hard. Usually, when someone's that focused, there's something driving them."

"Right," Ursula agreed. "If you'd known?"

"I'd have stepped in." Taki's response was immediate, cutting off the thought. "I would've pulled Th'qilres and his chief for a little talk. It would've been handled." She smirked, her tone shifting. "But..."

"What?"

"I can't lie. There's part of me that's proud my student took down an Andorian three times her size."



In the hour before they would break for dinner, Yeoman Zenn returned to the conference room after a full day of asking questions and digging into Benten's background. Detmer's chief medical officer, Lieutenant Alexann Morris, MD FCOS, stood near Leo's desk, her body language stiff as they reviewed the finer points of forensic pathology.

Doctor Morris' irritation was clear. "With all due respect to Doctor Weilani's... *recommendations*, I'd like to remind you that my staff and I did the best we could with the resources at hand."

Leo responded with a warm, steady smile. "Doctor, no one's questioning that. You've done excellent work."

Morris' tone remained sharp. "Doesn't seem that way if you had to consult outside opinions."

"Not at all. It's standard procedure to consult a forensic pathologist during an investigation," Leo replied softly, keeping his tone reassuring. "If we don't have solid facts, the case could unravel. And, to be fair, during the discovery phase of a court-martial, there will be plenty of additional experts reviewing your work."

Doctor Morris frowned, her irritation giving way to realization. "I... hadn't considered that."

Leo offered her a patient smile, saying nothing further, letting the moment settle.

After a brief pause, Morris relented. "Very well. Let Doctor Weilani know I appreciate her input. I'll run the molecular analysis and the quantum resonance scans. My apologies for the misunderstanding."

"No apologies necessary," Leo said warmly. "It's good to see someone take pride in their work. I genuinely appreciate your professionalism and cooperation."

The doctor allowed herself a small, brief smile. "I'll have the results for you as soon as I can. By your leave?"

Leo rose and gave her a respectful nod. "Of course, Doctor. Thank you for your help."

As Doctor Morris exited, Zenn stepped aside to let her pass, then waited until the room was clear. "Seems like I walked into a tense moment."

"Doctor Weilani has a strong reputation as a forensic pathologist," Leo explained, glancing at Reter, who observed quietly. "I might've bruised Doctor Morris' ego by bringing in Weilani's blunt feedback on her autopsy."

Reter asked, "Doctor Morris' initial response seemed neither reasonable, impartial, nor sound, considering Doctor Weilani outranks her significantly and is a court-certified expert in forensic pathology."

"Rank aside, it's like starship captains—no one likes being second-guessed on their own ship," Leo explained. "Trust me, I've seen full commanders lose it when a higher-ranking officer steps in as an 'armchair quarterback.'"

"'Armchair quarterback?'" Reter echoed, his curiosity evident.

Leo paused, searching for a way to explain. "It's a term for someone who gives unsolicited advice or criticism, often without the proper expertise. Usually, they're not the ones actually in the game."

"Doctor Weilani can hardly be considered an amateur," Reter noted after a brief pause.

Leo smiled, raising a finger. "Nor was her advice unsolicited. But in this case, the one sitting in the armchair might be me."

Before Reter could press further, Zenn cleared her throat. "Sir, I think I've figured out what's going on with Master Chief Benten." She glanced toward Reter, uncertain.

Leo caught the hesitation. "Do you mind if Reter sticks around for this?"

"I'm fine if you're fine." Zenn pulled out a chair at the central table. Once everyone had settled, she directed her question to Leo. "Do you remember a case you worked on about six years ago, involving a petty officer named McCallum?"

Stunned, Leo opened his mouth, then closed it. He took a deep breath, trying to recover from hearing the name. "Yes," he admitted quietly. "I remember Patricia McCallum."

Zenn nodded. "Boatswain's Mate First Class Patricia Kimberly McCallum, USS *Nogura*."

"That was my first case after law school," Leo explained, his speech picking up speed as he recalled the details. "The Border Service ship I was assigned to, USS *Decker*, put in for repairs after we got into a firefight with two Nausicaan raiders. We docked at Starbase Two for about two months. Most of the crew was reassigned to help at the orbital facility. I was seconded to the JAG office... worked nine cases before the ship was finally fixed."

"What happened with McCallum's case?" Reter asked, his eyes locked on Leo.

Leo's voice faltered as he continued. "Patricia was referred for general court-martial from a captain's mast on the *Nogura*. The charges were conduct unbecoming, failure to obey a direct order, false official statements..." He trailed off, his tone softening. "Her father was Master Chief Patrick McCallum—Hero of the Second Battle of Archanis in the Gorn War. He served in my father's fleet."

Zenn shifted uncomfortably in her seat, taking in the new detail. She had questions but chose to remain silent, sensing Leo had more to say.

"Her father hired a famous civilian attorney, the type who guarantees acquittals," Leo continued. "I was assigned as trial counsel. I offered a plea deal—minimal rehab time and a bad conduct discharge. But Master Chief McCallum... he nearly lost it. Came at me hard, wanted to pull the 'I know your father' card. Expected me to give his daughter special treatment because of who he was—a bona fide Hero of the Federation. He even showed up to negotiations in his dress uniform, wearing every medal he ever earned."

Reter leaned forward slightly. "It sounds like he intended to use your familial ties to intimidate you."

"Exactly," Leo nodded. "But I wasn't budging. I told him flat out—his daughter needed to be discharged from Starfleet. The evidence was too damning. They pushed back, wanted time served and an administrative discharge instead."

Zenn scoffed quietly as Reter commented, "That's an entirely unreasonable expectation."

"The civilian lawyer must have thought so too because when I turned down their counteroffer, the master chief went from furious to livid. We hit an impasse, so I withdrew the plea and we went to trial. I spent a day and a half presenting my case, after selecting the members of the court. Then, the night after I finished my final arguments, that sharp-suited lawyer came back, asking for another shot at a plea deal."

He paused, his gaze dropping to the table, lost in the memory. Sensing his shift, Zenn softened her voice. "Sir?"

Leo sighed heavily. "During the negotiation, I played hardball. I was confident I had the conviction locked down. No matter what that lawyer offered, I wouldn't budge from having her serve the full rehab term instead of the reduced sentence I initially offered." He paused, flexing his

hands in his lap as if trying to shake off the weight of the memory. "The morning before the defense was set to present, I was woken up at 0447 by the Shore Patrol."

Zenn closed her eyes, arms crossing over her chest. She knew what was coming; she'd already read the case file.

Leo's voice dropped lower. "Because of the master chief's status, the lieutenant commander handling arraignments released Petty Officer McCallum on a personal recognizance release. The master chief had secured a set of staterooms as a courtesy from the base CO. That night, Petty Officer McCallum slipped into her father's quarters, took his phaser, set it to maximum stun, and... put it to her temple before pulling the trigger."

"That is highly disturbing, troubling, and dismaying," Reter admitted, his voice laced with concern.

"Indeed," Leo replied, his tone heavy. "When the court convened, with her passing, all charges were dropped. Master Chief McCallum, his family, and their civilian attorney took custody of her remains to bring her home. They gave her full Starfleet honors."

Zenn blinked. "You don't think—?"

"I don't know," Leo cut her off gently. "But let's just say I won't be getting a First Contact Day card from the McCallum family anytime soon."

"They blamed you?"

"I blamed me," Leo confessed, his hand rubbing his forehead as if to stave off the weight of the memory. "It was not my proudest moment, honestly. Rai even pulled me aside, said I might've been a little overzealous. That trial... it changed everything for me. Changed how I see duty, justice—everything."

His voice had softened, the edges worn by regret. Reter, sensing the shift, placed a hand on Leo's shoulder, a gesture of steadying solidarity. "Leo, the tragedy of her death lies with her choice. Not with your prosecution, however vigorous or thorough. It was never your burden to carry alone."

Leo gave a small, grateful nod, appreciating Reter's calm presence. But as he turned back to Zenn, a new tension shadowed his features. "Why bring this up now? What does any of this have to do with Master Chief Benten?"

Zenn hesitated for a moment, knowing the weight of what she was about to reveal. "Sir," she said quietly, meeting Leo's eyes, "Master Chief Benten is Patricia McCallum's first cousin."

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